

SCHOOL

TOP TALENT
Elevate your
team in three
simple steps.

A Creative Peek

Trying to find the next great idea? Look here.

BY LEIGH THOMPSON

WITH MY oldest child applying for college this year, I realized that this upcoming spring break might very well be our last with the family intact. So, on a recent night, I invited the three kids—Anna, a candid 13-year-old; Ray, a 10th grade World of Warcraft guru; and Sam, a high school senior whose favorite phrases are “I don’t know” and “I don’t care”—to *think big* about spring break. “I’m not promising anything, but if you could go anywhere, where would it be?” After 10 minutes of blank stares, the best idea the kids could muster was a repeat of last year’s trip to Jamaica.

My failed family brainstorming session was unsettling because, as a business school professor and author of a book about creativity, I should know how to get my kids to dream. I work with companies big and small and teach everyone from salespeople to counterintelligence experts how to tap their creative brain trusts for imaginative solutions to complex problems.

It was ironic that I made the exact mistakes in my family brainstorming session that I have seen countless well-meaning leaders make in their own organizations. I had put emphasis on *quality* ideas rather than simply going for quantity, and I had asked for verbal suggestions rather than written ones. But that was only the tip of the creativity-killing iceberg.

Like the leaders I work with, my instinctive plan on how to ignite creativity was not working. To get results, I needed to set the stage—in this case, the table—using research-proven methods that, at first, seem like terrible ideas.

In 2004, I showed a class of MBA students the results of a study that demonstrated individuals are superior to teams when it comes to generating innovative ideas. But my students were not convinced. In fact, they scorned the data. My researcher horns came out of my head. *How dare you question peer-reviewed scientific studies!* So I challenged the students to prove me wrong. Together we gathered investment bankers, business consultants, and other MBA seekers, and asked them to brainstorm either in groups or alone. In the end, they proved the study's findings to be spot-on: Individuals who brainstormed alone generated 21 percent more ideas, and their ideas were 42 percent more original than those that originated from groups.

I've been putting that lesson to use ever since. Recently, I worked with leaders of a motor oil company who wanted to increase sales. They planned a round-table discussion, but I intervened. Instead, I distributed hundreds of note cards, placed a large clock on the table, and gave them 10 minutes to write down every idea they could muster. After the buzzer sounded, we posted the ideas on the wall and gave everyone five chances to vote for their favorite. We quickly saw five or six pockets of excitement, and then we broke off into small groups armed with a flip chart, a marker, and a mandate to make the ideas better. By the end of the day, we'd generated 228 ideas and refined several that would go on to boost sales for the company.

Even if your company isn't wasting hours in large brainstorming

sessions, I've identified three other creativity-killing myths that creep into every organization and developed some clever strategies to combat them. These myth-busting steps will put you on your way to developing the next great idea.

1. FIND YOUR ANTI-SOCIAL SELF.

Somehow, we've come to the conclusion that to not be actively

engaged with another person—either in real life or online—is indicative of a mental health issue. Practically, this means team members are constantly engaging in either a politeness ritual—being too accommodating and agreeing too much—or are locked in a battle for who should have the floor. (My opinionated daughter managed to monopolize our brainstorming

session, while my apathetic 16-year-old son drifted out of the room.) During an afternoon I once spent with a Chicago-area hospital group, the CEO managed to create a wall of stone-faced silence around him. His admonitions to “please be brief” and “remember that everyone needs to be heard” didn't work, but what *does* work is a technique called “brainwriting.” It asks people to independently write down ideas. Practically, this meant my daughter could not railroad her taciturn brother—and the hospital CEO could not dominate the brainstorm.

2. HAVE A (CREATIVE) AFFAIR.

Let me be clear: I'm a happily married woman, but my advice when it comes to creative teamwork is to fool around! Most teams like to stay intact, thinking such creative marriages lead to a string of successes. In one of my classes, someone asserted that team members develop higher levels of trust the longer they work together. To test this, we set up an experiment in which members of teams had the equivalent of one-night stands with one another—quick brainstorming sessions—and then moved on. My colleague Hoon-Seok Choi and I poured through the data, and, sure enough, it made sense for teams to love 'em and leave 'em. We found that the presence of a newcomer makes the old-timers more creative: There was a 22-percent increase in the total volume of ideas and a 31-percent increase in the range of ideas. Another group of researchers developed a technique known as “speedstorming” to exploit this creative boost. The idea is simple: Pairs work together for three to five minutes, then one person moves to the left, and new groups are formed. The results are impressive. Ideas generated during speedstorming are proven to

be more technically specialized and relevant than those coming from traditional roundtable discussions. The takeaway: Creative teams are best served when they mix things up.

3. (DON'T) PUMP UP THE JAMS.

I love my iPod as much as the next person. In a study my Ph.D. student Brian Lucas and I conducted, we fitted two groups with headphones; one enjoyed their favorite tunes, while the other was tortured with boring political speeches. Then we tested their creativity and found that those who listened to the speech were much more creative. Why? They were annoyed, edgy, and mentally agitated—which, as it turns out, is a near-perfect recipe for thinking differently. The message: Keep active, stay alert, and learn to embrace the annoying coworker who sits two cubicles down. His incessant fingernail tapping might be the key to your next big insight.

It's been three weeks since my kids and I first sat down to pick a spring break destination, and I've learned my lesson. Last night, I again gathered my family, this time prepared with some familiar props: note cards, pens, and the timer on my iPhone. I shut myself up and simply asked for ideas. I encouraged silly ones and their pie-in-the-sky, "mom would never go for this" ideas. We considered everything from luxury camping and river rafting to spa treatments and foodie tours, but it turns out that dear ol' mom went for the wildest trip of them all: a week of cycling through Spain. Now that's an idea worth waiting for.

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