MAKING IDEAS HAPPEN = (THE IDEA) + ORGANIZATION AND EXECUTION + FORCES OF COMMUNITY + LEADERSHIP CAPABILITY

# Organization and execution

## Action Method

Everything in life is a project, and every project must be broken down into Action Steps, References, and Backburner Items. Prioritization should help us maintain both incremental progress as well as momentum for our long-term objectives.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Current focus level per project** | | | |
| **High** | **Medium** | **Low** | **Idle** |
| Project 1 | Project 2 |  | Project 3 |
| Project 6 |  |  |  |

1. **Action Items**

Are the specific, concrete tasks that inch you forward: redraft and send the memo, post the blog entry, pay the electricity bill, etc.

* Capture Action Items everywhere
* Separate urgent from important items
* List with items to get done today
* Break-down bigger items into smaller manageable action items
* Separate action items from emails, references
* Create follow-up action items for delegated items
* Actions are truly “delegated” only when they are accepted.
* Evaluate
  + What can be done quickly vs. what needs to be tracked over time by a project
  + What can be done by you vs. needs to be delegated
* Assign due date

1. **References**

Are any project-related handouts, sketches, notes, meeting minutes, manuals, Web sites, or ongoing discussions that you may want to refer back to. It is important to note that References are not actionable—they are simply there for reference when focusing on any particular project.

* Try to reduce # of references
* Keep only important items that are needed

1. **Parking lot items**

Things that are not actionable now but maybe someday. Perhaps it is an idea for a client for which there is no budget yet. Or maybe it is something you intend to do in a particular project at an unforeseen time in the future.

* Review items on a regular basis
  + Convert relevant into action items
  + Remove irrelevant items
* Keep general parking lot or per project

### Seek constraints

Brilliant creative minds become more focused and actionable when the realm of possibilities is defined and, to some extent, restricted. Of course, when you limit the realm of possibilities too much—by allowing too little time or budget—you will have to lower expectations for the outcome. The goal is to find the right balance, so that you can feed off the project’s parameters rather than feel frustrated or unduly constrained.

# Make us of the community

## Partner with people that complement your skills

Dreamer vs. Doer.

## Share your ideas

Sharing ideas significantly increases the odds of ideas gaining momentum and ultimately happening. Creative professionals and entrepreneurs alike claim that they become more committed to their ideas after telling people about them.

## Capitalize on feedback

While the value of feedback is high, the incentive to give feedback to others is low—and the actual desire to hear it is often nonexistent. After all, the work you do to pursue your ideas is a labor of love. The last thing anyone wants is to hear harsh truths about a loved one.

### Start/Stop/Continue

* Send an e-mail to each team member/stakeholder requesting a few feedback points for each participant under the headings START, STOP, and CONTINUE
* Each recipient is asked to share a few things that each of their colleagues and clients should START, STOP, and CONTINUE doing
* People then return their lists to the team’s leader (except for the feedback about the leader, which is redirected to someone else on the team)
* The points under each heading are aggregated to identify the larger trends
* Isolated points mentioned by only one person are discarded
* Common themes are then shared in a personal meeting with each member of the team.

This method not only serve to gather intelligence in the course of making ideas happen but also send a message to your community of collaborators and clients. The message suggests that you are open to feedback, that you are constantly improving, and that you are actively learning.

## Transparency Boosts Communal Forces

## Self-marketing in a good way

A good self-marketing strategy should start with intrinsic interests that can become personal projects—projects that demonstrate your strengths. As your strengths become utilized, people will start to respect you for something that is real—something that is earned.

**The ability to gather and present your past accomplishments visually in a “show, don’t tell” framework is much more effective than having a list of clients or distributing a resumé.**

**Identify your differentiating attributes.** Self-marketing should start with identifying the strengths that differentiate you from others.

**Develop a communications strategy.** Be introspective and advocate for the unique perspective that you bring to every project and problem. People will likely respect the efforts you take and the decisions you make when they understand the source of your strengths and ambitions. While at work, you might **consider volunteering for internal or side projects that will best showcase your strengths and take full advantage of your differentiating attributes.**

# Leadership

**Leadership is about instilling a genuine desire in the hearts and minds of others to take ownership of their work on a project. Only then can we act together, motivated by a shared purpose.**

Getting people excited about your idea, however, is just the first phase of sharing ownership. The second and much more challenging part is empowering team members to push the idea forward rather than micromanaging them every step of the way. Ultimately, truly sharing ownership of ideas means permitting your team members, the people you have entrusted with the fate of the project, to make meaningful decisions —even decisions that you might have made differently.

The best creative leaders are able to recognize that the cost of variation from their original vision is often outweighed by the benefits of shared ownership and the scalability that it provides. You want your collaborators to stay up at night thinking about how to execute the ideas at hand—in their own way.

**Different people will make different decisions. The question is: Did their alternate approach make a material difference? As long as the desired outcome is achieved, controlling how it is achieved shouldn’t be that important to you.**

## Self-Leadership

As you lead others in creative pursuits, you are your greatest liability. Self-leadership is about awareness, tolerance, and not letting your own natural tendencies limit your potential. Our best hope for staying on track is to notice when we stray and to figure out why—to be self-aware. Self-awareness is a critical skill in leadership, but it is deeply personal. It is not about our actions but about the emotions that trigger our actions. With increased self-awareness, we become better students of ourselves. When we make mistakes, we are able to identify what we could have done better more readily. When we receive feedback from others, it becomes more actionable as we come to understand its correlation with our emotions. The path to self-awareness never ends, but we must traverse it nonetheless. Emerging leaders in the creative world benefit from some sort of psychological development in their lives. An early commitment to developing self-awareness will yield better judgment. In turn, sound judgment builds lasting relationships and great decisions —the kind that garner the respect and confidence you need to lead bold pursuits.

**Previous knowledge is yours for the taking, often risk-free and time-tested. Today never feels like it will be history, but it will. And more likely than not, you will look back and realize that you should have known.**

## The creative process is also a process of engagement

Enabling new or less- experienced members of your team to share their ideas is how you can develop their reasoning and bring them onboard. Instead of overshadowing their ideas with your own brilliant insights, silence yourself and welcome fresh, though sometimes naïve, insights. Challenge yourself to ask questions before making statements. When you are not talking, you should be listening. Even those leaders who do recognize the value of talking last sometimes fail to listen while they are waiting to speak.

**Leaders should talk last**

After many years in an industry, visionary leaders become revered by others and convince themselves that they have seen it all before. As a result, these leaders are liable to talk first, act quickly, and fail to engage others.

## Unplug from the traditional rewards system.

## Stay engaged by setting up a system of incremental rewards.

Happiness is its own reward. At Zappos, happiness serves as a form of compensation without limits or tangible costs. Not only is it a core value of the culture, but it frees up financial resources that can be used in other ways—perhaps to lower prices for customers or pay for free overnight shipping. Happiness is the company’s most valuable currency. As you push ideas forward, you should make use of alternative rewards that keep you —and your team—engaged with your long-term pursuits. The traditional methods for acknowledging progress—financial rewards and celebrity am ong them—are unlikely tobe available to you in the early stages of making ideas happen. Putting an emphasis on happiness changes the types of goals you pursue as well as how you hire and manage people along the way.

## Recognize contribution of the team

Success is more than a personal reward for leaders; it is a valuable currency that can be distributed to the team. The only bank account that the shared credit depletes is the leader’s ego. Recognition is a powerful reward that, whether or not money is tight, can help further engage those who play a role in making your ideas happen.

## Hire people who exemplify initiation skills and intrinsic motivation

As you assemble teams around creative projects, probe candidates for their true interests—whatever they may be—and then measure the extent to which the candidate has pursued those interests. Ask for specific examples and seek to understand the lapses of time between interest and action. When you stumble across an Initiator —someone who has passion, generates ideas, and tends to take action—recognize your good fortune. Nothing will assist your ideas more than a team of people who possess real initiative.

## Provide an environment with flexibility for productivity

Rather than focusing on face time, creative teams should embrace transparency and strive to build a fundamental trust between colleagues. As leaders, we must create rules and norms for the sake of efficiency rather than as a result of mistrust. We should measure tangible outputs like actions taken and quality of outcomes.

**ROWE (Results Only Work Environment):** The ultimate goal is to empower employees to make their own decisions about when and where they work as long as mutually agreed-upon goals are achieved. This means that bosses stop watching employee calendars and paying attention to when people arrive and leave the office. There must be a shared level of trust and commitment to ensure that this autonomy is used for good purposes. More important, operating successfully in an autonomous environment requires that a concrete set of goals be established and constantly revisited. ROWE and other attempts at hands-off management fail miserably when objectives and goals are not mutually agreed upon and tightly managed. Many managers struggle to establish and repeatedly review goals with their teams. And, when a team falls short on goals, managers must confront it.

## Focus and staying on track vs. new ideas/innovation

The great challenge is to balance idea generation and relentless focus. While you don’t want to behave like a large company that locks down all creativity from the point of production, you also don’t want to act like a fledgling start-up that is always generating new ideas and features that saturate the project, ultimately getting in the way of execution. Finding the right balance requires allocating time for open idea exchange along with a healthy level of intolerance for idea generation during execution. One approach is to have a bias toward considering ideas during brainstorming sessions and killing ideas when they come up randomly during execution. Your resident skeptics can be helpful on this front. Of course, great ideas may still crop up unexpectedly, but when they do your bias should be to stay focused on the project at hand. With this approach, only the mightiest of ideas—those worthy of deep consideration—will risk getting you off track.

## Welcome friction and disagreement

Conflict is a common occurrence in any creative process. It is a good sign, a powerful opportunity to refine your ideas and processes. Despite the frustration that friction causes, it will serve you in the long run if you are able to manage it. The leaders of great creative teams value the friction that results when opinions vary among a passionate group of creative minds. If good chemistry has been cultivated, teams can use disagreements to foster valuable insights that would otherwise be inaccessible. Yet despite the opportunities that conflict provides, our tendency is to shy away from it. We will often completely disengage when a creative process becomes heated. Conflict happens very easily. For any problem, there are multiple possible solutions —some better than others. In a diverse team, there will be many different opinions. Fighting is uncomfortable, but consider the benefits of opposing perspectives duking it out. Imagine that the answer to a problem lies somewhere on a spectrum between A and B. The more arguing that takes place about both ends of the spectrum, the more likely it is that the complete terrain of possibilities will be adequately explored. By contrast, if the advocates for A just give up, then B becomes the default answer without any better solution being discovered in between.

**Some of the most admired creative teams share a common tenet—they are comfortable fighting out their disagreements and diverse points of view, but they always share conviction after the meeting. These teams recognize that the purpose of disagreement is to more fully explore the options. Fighting, as it turns out, is an asset for the teams that can stomach it. But the animosity is released when the exercise is over. Your team is more likely to conceive breakthroughs if its chemistry is strong enough to capitalize on conflict. Thoughtful leaders use conflict as an opportunity to align and strengthen their teams.**

## Feedback via appreciations

Appreciations is a technique that is used to improve students’ skills without any demoralizing consequences. It’s a unique form of feedback that helps to focus on developing strengths. Here’s the concept behind appreciations: having just shared a story (or, in other contexts, a presentation or idea), you go around and ask people to comment on the elements they most appreciated. The exchange of appreciations is meant to help you build upon your strengths, with the underlying assumption that a creative craft is made extraordinary through developing your strengths rather than obsessing over your weaknesses. **If our eyes are always looking for weakness, we begin to lose the intuition to notice the beauty. Institute a round of appreciation-based refinement with your team prior to your formal process of critique. Your projects—and the skills of your colleagues—will be refined more organically by doing so. This change in the process of feedback exchange will not only improve output but also enrich the team’s chemistry.**

## Think win-win without requiring 100% consensus

While most people might feel that incorporating two extremely different viewpoints (or features) into a project would call for an “either/or” decision that dispenses with one extreme, consensus can often be achieved by taking an “and/and” approach.

Leaders of creative teams should identify and highlight the noteworthy, memorable solutions at both ends of the spectrum that, in all likelihood, are not agreeable to all. Over the course of discussions, they should seek to identify the few of these outliers worth fighting for amidst the other inevitable compromises when dealing with other constituencies. These sacred extremes are the ideas that you want to hold on to amidst all of the other compromises you will need to make. Sometimes someone with a particular expertise should be empowered to vouch for the sacred extremes and make the final decision despite an uncertain team. We should be open to trying something new, especially when someone we respect is advocating for it.