

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE IDEA COMMUNE

**Working (and playing) with
others to come up with ideas.**



Communes are happy places where everyone pulls together with a common goal in mind, whether it's growing vegetables or sleeping with one another. (We shouldn't mention that Charles Manson, who with some of his followers in 1969 slaughtered seven people at the home of actress Sharon Tate, ran a commune on a Spahn Ranch. Manson, by the way, was an aspiring songwriter and according to musician Neil Young, who knew Manson, a record company executive had told Neil, 'This guy, you know, he's good. He's just a little out of control.'¹)

The traditional creative process can be, unlike the free and easy spirit of communes, very competitive, with each person trying to hold on to and own his or her idea at the expense of any others. Where's the harmony in that? **Actually, a bit of healthy competition can sometimes help – people like to be recognised by their peers and rewarded for the things they create – but sometimes you just have to chill and get into the communal spirit of sharing and collaborating for the common good.** After all, coming up with ideas can be a lonely occupation. Many creative geniuses are solitary figures driven by a self-belief and passion that leaves them isolated and cut off from the outside world. Many end up not washing for days, eating cat food and withdrawing from society (Dave's wife is always telling him his trousers are on back-to-front or that he has nothing on). We salute them, but move away from them on the bus.

For businesses to be truly creative they need to embrace the spirit of collaboration, not only by tapping into internal resources and those of hired hands, but by working in partnership with other businesses (once thought of as competitors) that share similar goals and have

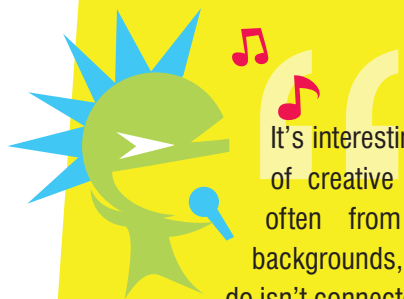
¹'Peace, Love and Charlie Manson', Anthony DeCurtis, *The New York Times*, 1 August 2009.

complementary skills. Gone are the days when a silo mentality of total ownership and control was possible or even desirable. Technology has changed all that and the power has shifted into the trigger-happy hands of the masses (the trigger being a computer or mobile phone key, a button on a remote, or whatever other device they might be holding that zaps their attention to something bigger, better, faster). And yet, this same technology has made it possible for businesses who understand the new regime to play, so that the collaborative whole can be greater than the sum of the parts and for ideas to emerge and blossom that no single entity could have created.

What would life be like without Wikipedia, for instance, the online encyclopedia consisting of millions of articles written collaboratively by thousands of volunteers all over the world?

As we mentioned in Chapter 2, creating an ensemble isn't always easy and it isn't always effective, so you need to use some simple techniques to make it work. Try this as an ice-breaker. Start by setting a clear creative goal (e.g. *we need ideas for a healthy instant snack food*), then gather your brethren around you and ask each one to write down ideas on cards and – here's the sharing bit – put the cards in the middle of the table. They can write as many as they want in the set time (but hey, this is a commune, who needs watches?), then others can pull from the idea pool and add to them and build on them (see the game at the end of the chapter for another fun technique).





It's interesting to get a group of creative people together, often from very different backgrounds, when what they do isn't connected. Mahler's wife used to host these dinners in Vienna to which she'd invite an architect, a composer and a writer and gradually Vienna became a creative capital.² So many things come from people with completely different skills and mindsets sitting down at a table together and discussing a problem that's not connected to any of their skills and abilities, and so they're looking at it in a completely different way. I sometimes call that a 'talent brothel'. It's very important for people in business to include outsiders, and not always confine discussions to the insiders who are thinking in the exact same way and are on the exact same railroad track. They need to have some of these diverse people with weird ideas inside the company at every meeting.

I helped create a place in London called 'The Hospital Club' with my friend and Microsoft co-founder, Paul Allen, as a creative members club. We used to joke about it as we are both have slight tendencies to be hypochondriacs, so we would say 'Uh

oh, now we have a whole hospital,' which was because when Paul bought the building it was St Paul's Hospital and it was such a derelict mess. It had been abandoned for eight years but it still had the most gross and weird stuff left behind which I will spare you from reading about! It's in the heart of Covent Garden and on seven floors. It has a TV studio, art gallery, recording studio, screening room and restaurant. But, most importantly, it has about five bars and lots of room to sit around and talk one to one or have group conversations. The whole place is run really well and has a calendar of events like Creative Capital, lectures or Writing Salons.

I often wonder why a lot of these giant corporations don't have places like this and why everything has to be so stuffy and uptight – it's so anti-creative an atmosphere. Of course, there are some companies like Pixar or Google, etc., that have realised work and play go good together and they have basketball courts and hang-out places like cool cafes, etc., on site, and I'm sure it helps everyone exchange ideas freely as opposed to everything is a meeting with people sat around an oblong table. Yuck!

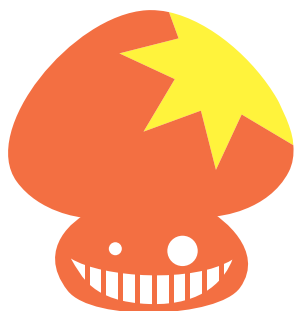
²Mrs Mahler had all sorts of affairs with the artist community of Vienna over the years. Before marrying Mahler she'd had affairs with artist Gustav Klimt, theatre director Max Burckhard and composer Alexander von Zemlinsky. When married to Gustav she had an affair with architect Walter Gropius, who later became known for his Bauhaus school (they later married), and after Mahler's death, with artist Oskar Kokoschka, then writer Franz Werfel (while still married to second husband Gropius), who she later married. Quite an entertainer that Mrs Mahler.

THE LEADER OF THE PACK

Most people work in businesses in teams in one form or another and, according to the authors of one study on creativity in the workplace, 'Of all of the forces that impinge on people's daily experience of the work environment in these organisations, one of the most immediate and potent is likely to be the leadership of these teams – those "local leaders" who direct and evaluate their work, facilitate or impede their access to resources and information, and in myriad other ways touch their engagement with tasks and with other people.'³ **To be effective, people running teams of people who are tasked with using creativity to solve problems need certain skills – they need to be good communicators.** They should be able to keep tabs on the progress of projects and use their interpersonal networks to gather information relevant to it. And they should be open to others' ideas and empathetic to the team members' feelings.

OK, so duh. It might seem pretty obvious that how the boss behaves is going to have an impact on our work. But there's more to it than that. Using a questionnaire sent out daily to hundreds of employees across three different industries, the researchers found that *negative behaviours had a more extreme effect than positive ones*. In other words, a bad boss is 'more bad' than a good boss is good, and cutting out destructive behaviours is at least as important as exhibiting positive ones. The dangerous boss behaviours are these: giving out assignments without understanding who has the capabilities needed to do them, or not considering other responsibilities they might have; micromanaging employees' work; and not dealing properly with technical or interpersonal problems. Sound familiar?

³'Leader Behaviors and the Work Environment for Creativity: Perceived leader support', Teresa M. Amabile, Elizabeth A. Schatzel, Giovanni B. Moneta and Steven J. Kramer, *The Leadership Quarterly* 15 (2004), pp. 5–32.



The researchers concluded, after their exhaustive study, 'At the broadest level, our study suggests that leaders who wish to support high-level performance must pay careful attention to the details of their own everyday – and seemingly mundane – behavior toward subordinates. What this study has demonstrated, we believe, is the power of ordinary practices.'

It's not just a case of making jokes and giving employees a pat on the back (or a hug around the neck or a kiss upon the lips), good leaders of creative teams need to help individuals move forward with their work and treat them decently as human beings.⁴

According to the conclusions⁵ of a two-day colloquium at Harvard Business School with the leaders of companies whose success depends on creativity (we think that's pretty much every company, by the way), good leaders don't attempt to manage creativity, they manage *for* creativity, by providing a working environment and culture that allows creativity to flourish.

Leaders should not think of themselves as wellsprings of ideas that employees execute, but as the champions of others' ideas.

In fact, it's a mistake to assume creativity will flow from one source: the founders of Google, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, tracked the progress of ideas that came from them and those that came from others within the organisation and discovered that a greater success rate came from the ideas that came from elsewhere in the organisation and not from the two founders.

Leaders in businesses need to decrease the fear of failure, which means celebrating it as much as celebrating success. Creating a culture where happy, or serendipitous, accidents can happen is vital for innovation to thrive. In fact, former Time Warner chairman, Steve Ross, thought that people who didn't make enough mistakes

⁴'Inner Work Life: Understanding the Subtext of Business Performance', Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer, *Harvard Business Review*, May 2007.

⁵'Creativity and the Role of the Leader', Teresa M. Amabile and Mukti Khair, *Harvard Business Review*, October 2008.

shouldn't be rewarded for not screwing up, they should be fired for not taking enough risks! (See Chapter 12 for more on why accidents should be encouraged at work.)

Matthew Warchus, the film and theatre director, talked to Business Playground about how when directing a production he tries to create an environment where the fear of failure is reduced: 'I've learnt there are two kinds of bad rehearsal rooms,' he says. 'One is with too much thinking, and one is with too much play, and because the strange thing about my job and putting a show together is that it requires an equal amount of play and thought, one can't move forward without the other stepping in. What you have to do is zigzag between thought and play. In a conventional rehearsal room, for a week or two people would be sitting around a table discussing and then you'd reach the inevitable point when you'd have to stand up and start staging some of these things. That's a point that causes a lot of anxiety for people crossing that threshold, a lot of tension.'

'People get too secure with the idea of just talking and thinking, and not with the idea of playing.'

But, instead, I always make sure that we stand up on the first day. So we'll talk for maybe two or three hours about working on the script and the ideas for it, but before that day is finished we've stood up and just played with one of the scenes, or an idea or a song or something like that, because it removes the threat of that moment. The longer you put it off, the more daunting it gets. But also it puts fluidity into the rehearsal room, it puts mercury in. You get flow, an energy. Obviously you can do that by just people standing around and laughing, but you get a much more important thing which is people just feeling a freedom to get things wrong, to make a fool of themselves, to just go off at a tangent. It becomes a chaotic space, which is much more creative than a formal space.' The lesson for business is to not wait too long before trying out, or prototyping, in some form an idea or innovation you're working on before the fear of failure gets too daunting.

Matthew described to Business Playground how he keeps the process moving when large numbers of people are involved. 'There are a lot of things that I do at the beginning of rehearsals that could be done by anybody in any situation. The thing about talking to lots of people, it's a difficult thing. If I'm doing an opera, or a musical or a movie, there'll be occasions when I turn up and I need to speak to 200 people at the same time and get them to do something, and at times like that you can't allow a democratic thing to take place. Whereas when there are three people in a room, each of them can come up with 10 ideas in the space of the meeting, if there are 200 people involved in making a movie,

by the time they'd all said their one idea you've run out of time to make the movie. I try to make sure I've expressed whatever my vision is about that scene or about the thing we're trying to do, the scene change, or whatever it is. I get on a microphone and talk to everybody as if I was just talking to one person to say, "Inside my head, this is what I see, and hopefully this will explain why I'm asking you to try this. But, if this doesn't work I'll ask you to try something else in order to try and get the same thing in my head." So I've found that when people know what production they're in, when they know what the vision is for the thing, they're happy. It bonds them together.'

BUILDING BLOCKS

There's usually something positive to say about every idea.

Try doing this: whenever you hear an idea, start by saying, 'What I like about this idea is ...' and come up with at least one thing that is good about it. The left side of the brain, the cold analytical half, is often too keen to jump in and start editing and thinking of practicalities before the right side has had a proper chance to do its mojo. So, finding positives first means the left side will have to wait a while, drumming its fingers on the table. It gives the idea a chance to breathe and also makes the person who came up with the idea feel good and willing to share ideas in future.

Hi Dave,

Eventually tracked down your email address. I was surprised but delighted that you invited anyone to email you with an issue and this one is probably a corker, given the subject matter of my business. I sell a garden mulch called Strulch! Four years later I am trying to think of new ways to promote it. I started by recruiting 'champions' who would recommend it; it has been on garden TV and in the press and sales are growing slowly but surely. There is only me in the business on a daily basis. Any suggestions would be great.

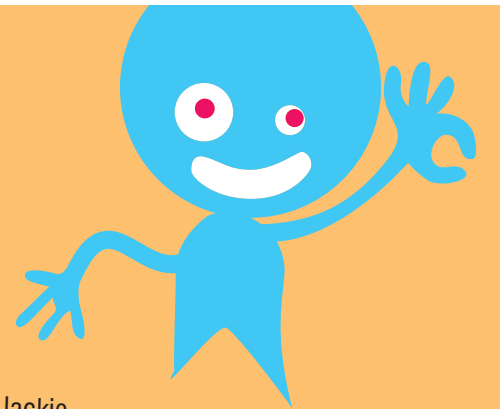
I enjoyed doing the song and you were very different to what I knew about you. It was a great session, thank you.

Kind regards

Jackie Whiteley

Strulch Limited

(Silver Award Winner Business Link
Bucking The Trend Competition 2009,
Yorkshire Woman of Achievement 2009)



Dear Jackie,

How about shooting a time-lapse (very speeded up) two-minute film of stuff growing rapidly from nothing to beautiful greens and bright colours? Then add in a sexy, sultry female voice-over voice saying: 'What you are witnessing is the magnificent effects of blah blah blah making everything grow and blossom etc ...' Then the voice changes and says in a giggly playful voice, 'All this because I used Strulch!' You could do this for less than a few hundred pounds on video camera and edit it on a laptop. Just make sure the voice is sexy and warm and rich and recorded really well in a good studio. At the end of the little film drop a bag of Strulch into the shot and include your website info. Put this as any embedded link on every gardening blog in the UK and, of course, on YouTube, etc., with as many tag lines as possible on the theme of sexy gardens, tools, growth, flowers, etc. It should be sexy and funny and will get the point across with humour and get people talking about it.

Cheers

Dave

Ideas can be built up so the positives from each one are combined through a technique known as *successive element integration*,⁶ but being simpler folk we're going to call it *building with blocks*. Here's how it works. You start with a bunch of small ideas and add them together to create a more interesting, and developed, bigger idea. Take one idea and add it to a second idea to form a third idea. Then add another idea to the third idea to form a fourth, and so on. For example, to alleviate traffic congestion in LA:

IDEA 1

Make all lanes car pool lanes.⁷

IDEA 2

Build more roads.

Add ideas 1 and 2 together to get a third idea:

IDEA 3

Build whole roads, not just lanes, for people who car pool.

Take another idea from the bunch, such as:

IDEA 4

Improve public transport.

And add this one to Idea 3, to make a new idea:

IDEA 5

Charge people who don't car pool and use the money to fund better public transport.

OK, now the stack of blocks is getting pretty high, but let's see if we can add one more from the pile before it topples over.

IDEA 6

Ask businesses to incentivise employees to car pool.

And add this to the previous idea:

IDEA 7

Suggest businesses put on luxury minibuses for employees to travel to work in the car pool lane, that have wi-fi and coffee so they can start work before they even get to the office.

**MOVE ONE SPACE FORWARD
TO THE NEXT CHAPTER ...
OR ROLL THE DICE**

This last idea ended up being an idea that combined the best bits of lots of ideas, such as how to encourage car pooling and the role businesses can play in this. We might have got to the same solution in other ways, but by accepting that each idea plays some role it means it is a collaborative process that all participants will feel ownership in. Time for a group hug.

Trying to be creative without the help of others is not only lonely but also, in a world in which technology has broken down the walls, being able to play well with others is a necessary part of business life.

Granted, coming up with ideas through groupthink isn't always easy but, if there is the right spirit of collaboration, the results can be worth it. Having the right team leadership makes all the difference between the good and the plain ugly when it comes to creative collaboration (in fact, a team leader's negative behaviours have way more impact than any good behaviours can ever have and can knock the creative stuffing out of you). Good leaders, like theatre and film director Matthew Warchus, know when to look for new ideas and when not to, in which case they communicate a vision and help their team understand their role in making it happen. Now we've talked about the benefits of a bit of collaboration to create and build ideas, let's take a look ways to expand the possibilities of our thinking, far, far out ...

⁶www.mycoted.com/Successive_Element_Integration

⁷Traffic lanes for vehicles carrying two or more passengers.

