Get More A-has From Hahas With Your Team
10 Simple Exercises To Speed The Path To Creative Collaboration
By David Horning

'How do we improve our problem-solving processes as a team?' is a question I get regularly when talking with both clients and prospects alike.

The easy answer is "We just met. Take me to dinner first."

The real answer to that (which nobody really wants to hear) is actually a question "How do you practice team problem-solving and how often do you practice it?"

I hear the same thing from new comedians "How do I get booked at your comedy club?"

My response – again, not one they want to hear – "How often do you get onstage and practice stand-up comedy?"

"Yeah, but I want to get booked *now*."

We want to be able to solve problems, come up with the next great innovative idea, and reach our goals *today*, but the reality isn't so simple – *especially* in a team setting.

There are a lot of moving parts, the cast of characters isn't always the same, and the world keeps moving, whether you're ready or not. You *have* to practice problem-solving with intention on a daily basis, and while you're doing this, you have to practice *how* you practice problem-solving like it's a problem-solving matryoshka.

"We don't have enough time to practice."

You don't have time to *not* have time, *especially* in today's innovation-driven market. *Not* taking the time to strengthen your collaborative muscles will lead to an inevitable maintaining of status quo, dissatisfied teams, and preventable turnover that can cost you *millions* of dollars in lost productivity. Daily reps of your team's creative, collaborative muscle will strengthen resilience, empathy, and curiosity in the face of uncertainty, disruption, and disagreement, will foster faster creative problem-solving, reveal unnoticed process flaws, build trust with one another, and provide the needed serotonin and oxytocin release to minimize the impact of stress.

Below are 10 repeatable activities to engage your team's creative and collaborative instincts you can use to kick off the workday or a meeting with momentum, rather than starting cold.

Keep in mind: you know your workplace culture and the cast of characters better than I. Adapt these to your specific team members and culture. (If you're not sure how, my contact information is at the bottom.)

1. **The Pattern Game**

This is often the exercise that improv classes and teams use to release mental barriers to creativity and teamwork because it allows for unexpected discoveries in a collaborative setting. Plus, it's *super* simple. Here's how it works:

- Pick out a random word or short phrase, that's what you're starting with.
- In a preset order (if virtual or hybrid) or in a circle (if in person), participants take turns calling out words and short phrases inspired by previous words and phrases.
- Don't think or try to remember what the player 6 moves ago said or what *you* said the past few turns, just say the FIRST thing that comes to mind based on the previous word or phrase spoken.
- Connections made during game moves allow players to discover different levels of meaning to ideas.
- Bonus points: bring full circle at around the five minute mark and see if you can naturally bring the game back to the first word or phrase.

2. **Say "Yes, And"**

Provide your team with an out-of-the-ordinary discussion topic that will initiate a non-work related conversation, then take turns building on that initial topic following the simple rule of "Yes, and," the act of listening to what the *previous* person says (building on the pattern game), accepting it, and adding to it.

For example, if the topic is the last Blockbuster Video, the first person may bring up a memory of rushing to Blockbuster on a Friday to pick up the newest release, the next person may add a memory of not getting there before that movie sold out, and the next person may remember the time they had to pick another, much worse movie instead, etc. This exercise will open your team up to collaborative storytelling that naturally deepens *human* connections through shared moments of discovery. This isn't corporate synergy, it's *human* synergy, and the more moments like these, the more barriers get broken down and the more productive your collaboration.

3. **Create an offbeat recognition program**

Studies show that anticipation of an event can trigger the same pleasure centers in our brains as actually experiencing the event. In a world where employees are leaving jobs due to not feeling recognized, go above and beyond to appreciate your team. Start a weekly knighting ceremony, buy some old bowling trophies from a thrift store and offer them to employees for going above and beyond the call of duty. A simple thank you works, but making that thank you fun (and customized to the specific person) can get your people inspired to push themselves just a little bit more.

4. **Play The Ad On Game**

Following the "Yes, and" example from earlier, challenge your team to create a fictional product and an ad around that product in 6 minutes or less. The only way to achieve this is by following these rules:

- Each group picks a scribe, or someone to write down ideas.
- The first idea pitched for each prompt is the idea you're going with.
- Emphatically appreciate the person who pitched the idea.
- Feel free to add to the idea pitched before moving onto the next prompt.
- "No" and "Yes, but" are prohibited.

This is best done in groups of 4-8 people, so split up if it makes more sense. Here are the prompts to help you move this along more effectively:

- Household product
- Unique quality that ONLY this specific product can do
- Product name
- Need it meets
- Specific target market (Cannot be "everybody." The more specific you are, the more fun scripting the commercial can be.)
- Spokesperson (Can be a celebrity, can be someone in your group, can be a generic example like "overwhelmed suburban mom with lots of kids")
- Script the commercial
- Close with a slogan and/or jingle

Once the 5 minutes are up, have each group present their ad campaign.

5. Make The Worst The First

Studies show we come up with more novel ideas when the stakes are low. This is one of my favorite exercises to do with clients because it creates a safe space for ideas. Here's how it works:

- Anonymously vote on a simple, benign workplace challenge to solve.
- Come up with the absolute worst, most illegal, asinine, or out-in-leftfield solution.
- The first idea pitched to solve the problem is the idea you're going with.
- Emphatically appreciate the person who pitched the idea.
- Then, add to the idea to make it even worse and keep escalating for 3 minutes.
- "No" and "Yes, but" are prohibited.
- Once you the *3 minutes* are up and you can agree that the idea is horrible, using a "yes, and" format, take *3 more minutes* to create a c-suite pitch for this terrible, no good, very bad idea as though it's the BEST idea. Answer questions like:
  - What are the short term and long term benefits?
  - How will it help your team? Your customers? Your community?
  - What other unintended positive outcomes might this create?
- Without using "Yes, but," what unintended negative outcomes might this create? Use *the remaining 2 minutes* to anticipate objections and questions from the c-suite.
- Pitch to the rest of the group as though they're the c-suite (*2 minutes*) and then open the floor to questions (*up to 2 minutes*).

When comfortable with the concept of this exercise, it can be applied to more significant challenges.

6. Find The Similarity

When new problems arise unexpectedly, the same thinking that created the problem cannot be used to create a solution. Often, our brains become overwhelmed in an attempt to come up with the perfect idea on the first try, which will cause more stress and shut down your creativity even more. A key component to a good joke is the discovery of an unexpected similarity between two dissimilar things.

- Use a random word generator to come up with two nouns.
- Take 5 minutes to free write or talk out (without interruption) in order to discover one or more common threads between the two. It may take all 5 minutes or you may make an immediate discovery. Either way, use all 300 seconds because there's ALWAYS more than what meets the eye.

Improving this skill lowers the internal pressure to solve problems, thus improving your intuition and ability to solve said problems. What a plot twist.

7. Don't Brainstorm, BrainSTEAL

Brainstorming as yourself every day can get pretty redundant. In this exercise, you and your team approach the problem and pitch your ideas as though you were someone else.

- Each person write the name of a celebrity or fictional character. It can be a personal role model, a celebrity, a fictional character – whoever you want.
- You need not personify or impersonate them, just see the problem how they'd see it and flesh out your ideas in journal entry format as though you *are* them. Chances are good Kevin from *Home Alone*, President Teddy Roosevelt, and your mom (gotcha!) would solve the problem much differently than you, which could generate some novel ideas you wouldn't previously consider.
- As an added bonus, share what you come up with and see if your teammates can guess whose brain you "stole."

8. Watch comedy together

Create an archive of funny videos (appropriate to your organization's values), and take 20 minutes a week (2 PM is the perfect time to get people's energy up before the end of the day) to come together (virtually or in-person) and laugh. A University Of Maryland study found that the simple act of laughing together as a team improves the rate of problem-solving by 28%. Make team trips to the local comedy club a regular unofficial outing. For bonus points: work daily on a video sketch or mockumentary to show at your team's annual kickoff or celebration.

9. Jerk of the week

Sometimes we have to deal with difficult clients and customers and could use some time to blow off steam. Give your team a stage to present a case as to why their particular client deserves the prestigious Jerk Of The Week Award. The only twist: you have to build up your jerk in a positive way. For example, maybe you have a client who doesn't listen to a thing you say.

Have fun brainstorming the amazing ideas they're generating in their own heads instead of listening to you.

10. Grateful, Not Hateful

Have your team share their pet peeve – something small that annoys them. Once everyone shares theirs, they then go around and share why they're grateful for it instead. (Imagine the difference in approach if your team's instinctual response to those bigger workplace issues was gratitude – this is a fun way to condition for new outcomes.)

Bonus: "No Ragrets"

Create a Slack channel, Facebook or LinkedIn group, or something similar where your team shares their foibles, follies, and f*** ups to the rest of the team. The only rule is that responses to these mistakes are ideas to help, empathetic responses, or stories about how they experienced something similar. Start with your executive team. Being open to sharing mistakes can open up new channels for connection and collaboration.

Each of these exercises can be facilitated by you, and with repeated practice, strengthen team resilience, trust, communication, collaboration, and productivity. These exercises are all part of my Think Like A Comedian program which is specifically tailored to your team's specific culture, challenges, goals, and cast of characters. For a specifically tailored program, set up a complimentary brainstorming call at https://calendly.com/watercoolercomedy/freeconsultation to see if working together fits your goals.