

Forget Brainstorming

What you think you know about fostering creativity is wrong.
A look at what really works.

by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman Newsweek July 12, 2010

How Creative Are You?

Brainstorming in a group became popular in 1953 with the publication of a business book, *Applied Imagination*. But it's been proven not to work since 1958, when Yale researchers found that the technique actually reduced a team's creative output: the same number of people generate more and better ideas separately than together. In fact, according to University of Oklahoma professor Michael Mumford, half of the commonly used techniques intended to spur creativity don't work, or even have a negative impact. As for most commercially available creativity training, Mumford doesn't mince words: it's "garbage." Whether for adults or kids, the worst of these programs focus solely on imagination exercises, expression of feelings, or imagery. They pander to an easy, unchallenging notion that all you have to do is let your natural creativity out of its shell. However, there are some techniques that do boost the creative process:

Don't tell someone to 'be creative.'

Such an instruction may just cause people to freeze up. However, according to the University of Georgia's Mark Runco, there is a suggestion that works: "Do something only you would come up with—that none of your friends or family would think of." When Runco gives this advice in experiments, he sees the number of creative responses double.

Get moving.

Almost every dimension of cognition improves from 30 minutes of aerobic exercise, and creativity is no exception. The type of exercise doesn't matter, and the boost lasts for at least two hours afterward. However, there's a catch: this is the case only for the physically fit. For those who rarely exercise, the fatigue from aerobic activity counteracts the short-term benefits.

Take a break.

Those who study multi-tasking report that you can't work on two projects simultaneously, but the dynamic is different when you have more than one creative project to complete. In that situation, more projects get completed on time when you allow yourself to switch between them if solutions don't come immediately. This corroborates surveys showing that professors who set papers aside to incubate ultimately publish more papers. Similarly, preeminent mathematicians usually work on more than one proof at a time.

Reduce screen time.

According to University of Texas professor Elizabeth Vandewater, for every hour a kid regularly watches television, his overall time in creative activities—from fantasy play to arts projects—drops as much as 11 percent. With kids spending about three hours in front

of televisions each day, that could be a one-third reduction in creative time—less time to develop a sense of creative self-efficacy through play.

Explore other cultures.

Five experiments by Northwestern’s Adam Galinsky showed that those who have lived abroad outperform others on creativity tasks. Creativity is also higher on average for first- or second-generation immigrants and bilinguals. The theory is that cross-cultural experiences force people to adapt and be more flexible. Just studying another culture can help. In Galinsky’s lab, people were more creative after watching a slide show about China: a 45-minute session increased creativity scores for a week.

Follow a passion.

Rena Subotnik, a researcher with the American Psychological Association, has studied children’s progression into adult creative careers. Kids do best when they are allowed to develop deep passions and pursue them wholeheartedly—at the expense of well-roundedness. “Kids who have deep identification with a field have better discipline and handle setbacks better,” she noted. By contrast, kids given superficial exposure to many activities don’t have the same centeredness to overcome periods of difficulty.

Ditch the suggestion box.

If you want to increase innovation within an organization, one of the first things to do is tear out the suggestion box, advises Isaac Getz, professor at ESCP Europe Business School in Paris. Formalized suggestion protocols, whether a box on the wall, an e-mailed form, or an internal Web site, actually stifle innovation because employees feel that their ideas go into a black hole of bureaucracy. Instead, employees need to be able to put their own ideas into practice. One of the reasons that Toyota’s manufacturing plant in Georgetown, Ky., is so successful is that it implements up to 99 percent of employees’ ideas.

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