

CHAPTER 1

Debunking Myths About Creativity

Several years ago, I made a research presentation to a group of scholars and a few consultants. My opening statement was, “Several decades of research have unambiguously found that teams are demonstrably inferior to individuals when it comes to brainstorming and idea generation.” I thought that such a statement in the presence of academics would not cause too much commotion. I was wrong. One of the scholars was a lead consultant for a major Silicon Valley company that prided itself on creative idea generation, particularly in teams. This led to a spirited debate between the two of us that lasted through the evening and the next couple of months. I eventually dug up more than fifty peer-reviewed articles and put them on his desk. Every single article indicated that teams were inferior to individuals when it came to brainstorming.

I’d like to say I won the debate. However, companies do not want to stop brainstorming, even in the face of the evidence. Studies have included sophisticated methods for ruling out the effect of different personalities, differences in intelligence, and differences in industry experience. Further, the results have been replicated several, if not dozens of times and they show a

clear causal pattern. To summarize succinctly in the words of organizational psychologist Adrian Furnham, professor of psychology at University College London, “The evidence from science suggests that business people must be insane to use brainstorming groups.” But the research evidence—as powerful as it is—is not well disseminated.

When I work with clients, companies, and students, I find that they often operate with very specific beliefs about human creativity—some of which are correct. But many are wrong—at least according to scientific studies. In this chapter, I expose several of these key myths about creative teamwork. As you read, think about which of these myths is central to the way you work with your creative team and how you might better structure your team so as to capitalize on the strengths of the team members. Many of the messages in this chapter downright contradict common practice in organizations and even common sense. So I’ve been careful to provide data to back up these assertions.

Once upon a Time . . . Creativity Mythology

There is probably more mythology surrounding creativity than nearly any other topic in social science. Many companies have constructed fairy tales about what sparks human ideation that are completely misguided. Here are a few beliefs about creativity that have been endorsed by people in the business world. When you read these statements, think about whether you believe each is true or false.

1. Teams are more creative than individuals.
2. If you want to enhance creative teamwork, get rid of rules, guidelines, and norms.
3. Striving for *quality* is better than striving for *quantity*.
4. Active brainstorming is necessary to generate ideas.
5. Brainstorming teams should work closely together and tear down boundaries.

6. Team members should first brainstorm as a group to get the creative juices flowing, then work alone.
7. People who are pro-social (team-oriented) are more creative than those who are pro-self (individually oriented, or just downright selfish!).
8. Deactivating moods (e.g., peaceful reflection, relaxation, serenity) lead to more creativity than activating moods (e.g., anger, fear, happiness).

When Myth Becomes Pseudo-Science

If you are like most people, you have probably agreed with about 75 percent of the statements above. In fact, all of them are false. At this point, you may be ready to throw this book on the floor and get back to running your business. Before you do, pick the statement above that you hold closest to your heart and read the research. (I'll point to some of this.) You can test your creativity competence by reading the rest of this chapter, where we'll delve into each of the myths above—myths that have morphed to become pseudo-science in the business world—and which I do my best to debunk.

Myth #1: Teams are more creative than individuals.

As I touched on in the introduction, the assertion that groups are more creative than individuals has been scientifically tested more often than a great many claims in social science. We know that it is controversial to argue that teams are less creative than individuals. There is not a person who has ever been on a team who has not had the feeling or the experience that creative magic has indeed happened in their group. Yet, the data are painfully clear on this all-important question. So, why are so many teams and their companies under the powerful illusion that they are more creative? Well, for most of us, it just *feels good* to be part of a

team, and so we think that magical things like creativity must be present when we are working with our team.

This myth of team creativity all began when an enterprising businessman named Alex Osborn published a book, *Applied Imagination*, in which he coined the term *brainstorming*. Osborn was a staunch believer in the power of teams. He was convinced that if teams did four simple things—express ideas openly, not criticize others, focus on quantity, and build on the ideas of others—they would easily outperform individuals. Apparently, this sage advice was enough for most organizations to adopt his belief and institute it into their best practices.

Sometime later, the academics asked for proof. Since Osborn did not have data, much less conduct controlled experiments, a flurry of research programs were launched on the question of whether teams or individuals were more creative. As I noted in the introduction, hundreds of studies were conducted that compared intact, face-to-face brainstorming teams with the same number of people—nominal groups—working completely independently. Nominal groups outperformed real groups in terms of quantity as well as quality.

Many executives and managers reject these ideas outright. But as previously observed, this is akin to dismissing the surgeon general's report that smoking causes cancer. In one recent simulation my colleagues and I conducted, the nominal groups generated over 20 percent more ideas and more than 42 percent more original ideas! It is nearly impossible to not get this effect.

The reason people think teams are more creative is that they believe in *synergy*. They believe that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. But this does not appear to be the case—at least under typical conditions. It is certainly possible that synergy can take place in teams, but more often than not, it does not. For example, teams that build on each other's ideas don't create more ideas, and the ideas are not better.

What are the implications? Well, on nearly a daily basis, leaders and their companies make decisions as to whether to assign group projects or individual projects. This raises the question of

whether we are efficiently using the talents of people in companies or whether we are falling far short of our potential by insisting that people work in groups when they might be well advised to work individually on a problem—at least for some period of time.

The solution, however, is not to dismantle teams, which are essential to reach organizational objectives. Rather, we need to rethink and restructure how teams work creatively. Left to their own devices, teams are usually poorly structured for the creative process. However, with a few key insights and simple best practices, teams can dramatically improve their performance and generate a creative conspiracy.

Myth #2: If you want to enhance creative teamwork, get rid of rules, guidelines, and norms.

Let's face it. Most adults don't like rules. We got fed up with them in grade school and looked forward to the day when no one would tell us what to do or when to do it. We embraced the idea that no rules freed our minds. Well, unfortunately, we were probably better off in grade school—or at least more creative in grade school. The data in this case are unambiguous. Groups that don't have rules or guidelines are distinctly less creative than those that have rules and guidelines.

How do we know? Paul Paulus and his team at University of Texas, Arlington, contrasted teams that followed guidelines with those that were set free to guide themselves. Teams with instructions and rules humbled the laissez-faire teams when it came to creative output.

There is also evidence that groups have difficulty functioning without rules. So, they often respond by making rules. For example, in one provocative field investigation, James Barker conducted a long-term study of the effects of removing rules and regulations in a team. The well-meaning CEO of ISE Communications made a commitment to restructure the organization into self-managing teams. Literally overnight, he reconfigured the physical workspace and created several work teams called Red,

Blue, Green, Orange, and so on. Before the change, three levels of managerial hierarchy existed between the vice president and the manufacturing workers. After the restructuring, the reporting rules were removed with the idea that this would empower workers and ideas. However, over the following four years, a curious thing happened: the teams spontaneously developed more rules similar to ISE's old bureaucratic structure (e.g., if you are more than five minutes late, you're docked a day's pay). The social rules were even more rigid. And workers nostalgically recalled the good old days of bureaucracy. Barker's groundbreaking study points to two simple truths about rules and creativity: first, removing rules in no way liberates people; and second, some rules are actually adaptive for groups.

The principle seems to hold for individuals, as well. Lilach Sagiv and colleagues compared how "intuitive" people and "systematic" people behaved under "structured" versus "free" conditions. Structured conditions involved presenting people with a form and challenging participants to find a creative way to use it; in contrast, others were given complete freedom to generate a creative form. Overall, creativity was higher under "structured" task conditions.

Myth #3: Striving for quality is better than striving for quantity.

We've been told all our lives by everyone—teachers, employers, friends, and family—that quality trumps quantity. To test this assumption, one study examined four different types of instructions: no stated goal, a quality goal, a quantity goal, as well as a joint quantity and quality goal. The results? Those who had the quantity goal generated more ideas and better ideas than any other goal.

What's the problem with focusing on quality to the exclusion of quantity? Several. First, quality requirements lead to *self-censoring*—people do not suggest ideas because they worry that the ideas don't meet the imposed quality criterion. They fear others will ridicule their ideas—this is known as *jeering*. We've all seen how this creates an uncomfortable silence and can also

be demoralizing. So, people play it safe and don't say anything. Instead of ridiculing or badgering others, team members must find ways to stimulate and encourage others. Team members don't need to be criticized, rather they need ideas to stimulate the next idea, and so on. This is called *priming*: the act of stimulating new ideas and thoughts with a phrase, suggestion, picture, or idea. For example, the other day, I was facilitating a brainstorming session, and the group came to a grinding halt after about five minutes. With five more minutes left to work, they were at a loss for how to reinvigorate themselves. So we decided to look for inspiration in the environment. We raided briefcases and found various items—magazines, iPhones, personal photos, and so on—that the team spread out on the work table in front of them. Suddenly, new ideas started sprouting! Priming is like social popcorn—it stimulates others to suggest ideas.

A strict, or even loose, quality focus narrows the options. Quality requirements create smaller sets of ideas from which to choose. The smaller the set of ideas from which to develop and choose, the less likely it is that a truly great idea will emerge.

A related problem is the *primacy effect*: the strong tendency to be attracted to the first option that is suggested. There is a pervasive belief that the first idea is mission-critical for the creative enterprise—a misguided view of creativity that exaggerates the importance of the initial idea in developing a product. But Ed Catmull, president of Pixar and Walt Disney Animation Studios could not disagree more. According to Catmull, it is important to generate and sort through a mass of ideas—“it's like an archaeological dig where you don't know what you're looking for or whether you will even find anything. The process is downright scary.” For that reason, I often try to get companies to avoid choosing the very first idea that is brainstormed.

Myth #4: Active brainstorming is necessary to generate ideas.

Idea exchange is a crucial part of creativity, and we sometimes lose sight of the fact that there are two key elements. First, people need to carefully process and understand the ideas in the

group—this is known as *attention*. Second, they need to reflect on the ideas—this is known as *incubation*. *Incubation* refers to how our unconscious mind often works on a problem when we just can't think about it anymore. This is why sometimes people think of a solution to a problem when they are in the shower or taking a walk—they are not thinking consciously about a problem, but unconsciously, they are solving it. This is important, because incubation gets shut out by another dynamic that affects brainstorming—*fixation*. This is the tendency to focus on a limited number of domains or kinds of ideas. Fixation is thinking *inside the box*! Unfortunately, the very act of brainstorming with other people tends to lead to fixation, as compared with brainstorming independently. Indeed, over time, the quality, variety, novelty, and quantity of ideas starts to decline in a group. However, *taking a break* can stop this slide.

Engineers Paul Horowitz and Alan Huang were both facing extremely vexing problems concerning designs for laser telescope controls and laser computing. After struggling with the problem for months, they both visualized a solution in their sleep. Similarly, in the 1950s, Don Newman, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was trying to solve a troublesome math problem. “I was . . . trying to get somewhere with it, and I couldn't and I couldn't and I couldn't.” One night, he dreamed of the solution in his sleep and turned his dream into a published paper.

Studies of problem solving and incubation reveal that temporarily putting a problem aside and returning to it later can lead to more breakthroughs and superior performance than continuing to actively focus on the problem. Why? Steven Smith and Steven Blankenship of Texas A&M University argue in their *forgetting-fixation* hypothesis that correct solutions are made inaccessible during initial problem solving because we keep retrieving incorrect solutions. Thus, forgetting about a problem and focusing on something else can make correct (but dormant) solutions more accessible.

*Myth #5: Brainstorming teams should work closely together
and tear down boundaries.*

Private space and solitude are out of fashion. In some companies, requesting private space might even raise concerns about your teamwork ability or whether you are a “team player.” Nearly all US workers spend significant time in teams, and 70 percent of us inhabit open-plan offices. Furthermore, in recent decades, the average amount of space allocated to each employee has shriveled—from five hundred square feet in the 1970s to two hundred square feet in 2010. When I went to primary school, our desks were in neat rows, and all my gear was loaded into my own space and sacks that hung on my desk; today, primary school classrooms are arranged in pods and rotated regularly. Yet, working physically close to others and removing all boundaries is in no way conducive to creativity.

Susan Cain notes in a 2012 *New York Times* article that Backbone Entertainment, a video game company in California, initially used an open-plan office, but soon realized that its game developers—the creative think tank of the organization—were not happy. So Backbone converted to cubicles, and those nooks and crannies soon allowed the game developers to think creatively.

Consultants Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister studied the Coding War Games, a series of competitions that test software engineers’ abilities, and compared the output of more than six hundred computer programmers at ninety-two companies. DeMarco and Lister discovered that the enormous performance gap between highly productive companies and less-productive companies was driven by how much privacy, personal workspace, and freedom from interruption that programmers had. Statistically, 62 percent of the best performers described their workspace as private, compared with only 19 percent of the worst performers. And 76 percent of the worst programmers said they were often “needlessly” interrupted, compared with only 38 percent of the best performers.

For all these reasons, the *cave-and-commons* workplace design may be ideal for team-based companies. In the cave-and-commons setup, people have common space to meet when needed and necessary, but they have their own private “caves” that they can retreat to for creative idea generation, which usually happens in solitude. This hybrid structure perfectly reflects the fact that the creative process is a fine orchestration of individual and group work. Let individuals think in their caves. Then let the team debate which of the ideas is the most valuable (this is when to bring the teams into the commons).

There is also a widely held related notion that the more time groups spend together, the more they will bond and perform well together. Think again. Karen Girotra, professor of technology and operations management at INSEAD, examined hybrid teams, in which individuals first worked independently and then together, and compared them with teams that worked only together. She found that hybrid structures led to more ideas, better ideas, and increased ability to discern the best-quality ideas.

Myth 6: Team members should first brainstorm as a group to get the creative juices flowing, then work alone.

People are under the mistaken impression that being in a group will supercharge idea generation and motivate them to think creatively. In fact, the opposite is true! It is nearly always better for people to work independently before moving into a group. Paul Paulus and his research team put this idea to the test by training people in several different modalities. Some people worked alone on a brainstorming problem and then moved into groups. Other people worked with groups and then moved to independent brainstorming.

The results were quite clear: those who worked independently before moving into groups had much better group brainstorming sessions! Why? The people who were alone initially in their own thoughts before moving into a team experienced much greater

group creativity. When we are brainstorming alone, we are in a state of thought, not in a state of action. Conversely, when we work in teams, we start getting busy, making plans, and setting agendas—and this does not serve us well. By brainstorming alone first, the individual is not under the peer pressure of others. Moreover the individual does not have to pay attention to social cues or for that matter even listen to others. Rather, that person can think in a completely unfettered fashion.

Myth #7: People who are pro-social (team-oriented) are more creative than those who are pro-self (individually minded or just downright selfish!).

I warned you that some of the ideas in this book would not be politically or organizationally correct. This is one of them. For years, we've been told to act more like team players and put self-interest aside. In fact, that advice does not make sense for creative teamwork. People who are pro-self and have a high concern for their own interests are actually more creative than people who are pro-social.

How do you know if you are pro-self or pro-social? Well, as a start, do you resonate more with the statements like, "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects" or statements like, "Even when I strongly disagree with group members, I avoid an argument"? Are you more likely to state, "I do my own thing, regardless of what others think" or "It is important to maintain harmony within my own group"? What about, "I prefer to be direct and forthright when dealing with people I've just met" versus "I usually go along with what others want to do, even when I would rather do something different"? If you tended to agree with the first statement in each pair, chances are you are primarily pro-self. If you tended to agree with the second statement in each pair, chances are you are primarily pro-social. Don't misunderstand me—being pro-social is very advantageous in many, if not most, of life's situations. It is just not conducive to thinking creatively.

However, this book doesn't advocate creating a culture of self-centeredness. Rather, it points to ways of temporarily putting pro-social, communal concerns aside during a focused brainstorming session in order to activate or ignite a pro-self orientation for increased creativity. In my research with social psychologists Wendi Gardner at Northwestern University and Elizabeth Seeley at New York University, we've used a technique to temporarily engage pro-self views. To prompt people to be self-absorbed, we have them write or read statements that contain a lot of personal pronouns such as *I*, *me*, and *mine*. Conversely, to get people to focus on others, we have them read or write statements that contain pronouns such as *we*, *us*, and *ours*. We find that this simple mind exercise can temporarily activate either pro-self or pro-social concerns.

Myth #8: Calming, relaxing, peaceful deactivating moods lead to more creativity than activating moods.

There is a widespread belief that creativity is best served through inner peace, serenity, and calmness. One of my colleagues was convinced that her own creative writing was best when she had no distractions, quietly sipping tea in a peaceful setting. However, after three months of such languid writing days, she produced nothing that she was proud of. Shortly thereafter, her first baby was born and her schedule went from long, open, peaceful, unstructured days to tightly orchestrated, minute-by-minute slots, punctuated by extreme activity. The result? She became prolifically productive. In her words, she was "wired." The way she put it to me was, "I have ninety minutes when Sam is napping, and I run to the computer and write like crazy. I'm totally focused." Turns out, my colleague is onto something. In fact, it is better to be aroused when attempting to think creatively.

In my research with Brian Lucas, we interviewed people about how they structure their environment when they want to be creative. Common responses included doing yoga, meditating, taking a nature walk, and looking at pleasant art. So, we put this to the test: we had some people listen to their favorite music, but we

made others listen to a (boring) political speech. As you might expect, when people were listening to the speech, they became annoyed, frustrated, and agitated. Those listening to their favorite songs grew more relaxed and serene. We then examined their behavior in a creativity challenge and found that those who had listened to music dramatically underperformed in comparison with those who had been frustrated by the annoying political speeches!

Assess Your Team's Creative Know-How

Now that we've poked holes in some of the big myths surrounding creative collaboration, what can we do to make sure our own teams don't get ensnared by practices that limit their creativity? First, we need to set the stage by seeing where you are in terms of creative collaboration competence.

Think about the last meeting you had in which the task called for creativity. What did you do to set the stage? If you are like most people, you did not do anything different—or maybe you brought in the doughnuts! Most teams run every meeting the same way, no matter what the business at hand is. High-performance teams, however, constantly change gears so as to optimally meet the challenge of the day. If that challenge involves brain surgery or a SWAT mission, then clearly defined roles, top-down leadership, and a strong prevention focus (i.e., focus on what can go wrong and avoiding bad outcomes) is necessary. However, if the challenge of the day calls for brainstorming a new product idea or new ways of engaging customers, then the team must organize itself to be at its creative best, which will call for a different set of norms and behaviors. Establishing the ground rules that allow these norms and behaviors to occur is the part and parcel of the creative conspiracy.

Most people float into meetings and conference rooms that look strangely similar to one another, no matter what the true business at hand is. Why? In the Creative Collaboration Assessment that follows, we ask you to think about how your team conducts itself. Where do you meet? What are the spoken

and unspoken rules of engagement? And how about these questions? Does anyone facilitate the meeting? Are any special props or materials brought in for the meeting? Are ground rules discussed? Sadly, most of the time, the answer is no, no, and not really. This suggests that leaders are not making most efficient use of their scarcest resource: people's time.

I developed a Creative Collaboration Assessment that invites you to examine your team's creative meetings—which, if your organization is like most, absorb at least 25 percent of your time, and often up to 50 percent or more. Once you have taken stock of just how you are using your own and other people's meeting time, turn to the scientifically tested best practices for optimizing the creative meeting contained in the assessment below. I suggest that you begin by completing the assessment yourself and then conduct an open-ended conversation among your team's members. Does everyone see the group's process in the same way? Where are the points of agreement? Disagreement? What works well in terms of your group's process? What does not work? What practices should be added? What processes should be abandoned? What needs modification?

The Creative Collaboration Assessment contains twenty items. As you consider them, imagine that a team psychologist is observing your team's every move through a one-way mirror. The psychologist is well trained and has studied thousands of teams. How would that psychologist describe your team? In short, take an objective look at your team.

The Creative Collaboration Assessment

1. With regard to ground rules and norms in our creativity sessions, my team . . .
 - operates with dysfunctional rules and norms (0)
 - really does not have any clear rules or norms (1)
-

-
- has knowledge of effective ground rules, but does not regularly use nor enforce them (2)
 - regularly operates with at least the four cardinal rules of brainstorming (i.e., expressiveness, no evaluation, quantity focus, and building on ideas of others) (3)
 - regularly operates with the four cardinal rules of brainstorming as well as additional rules that we have found to be particularly impactful (e.g., no storytelling, no explanations, encouraging those who are not making a contribution to contribute, etc.) (4)
2. With regard to conflict, my team . . .
- is not very nice; we engage in openly rude behavior—venting frustrations, jeering, personal attacks, and harsh criticism (0)
 - is too nice; we actively avoid conflict (1)
 - sometimes expresses conflict, but we try to separate the people from the problem (2)
 - routinely engages in open, spirited debate, much as scientists do who hold different theories; we passionately attack the problem, but we respect our people (3)
3. With regard to a group facilitator, my team . . .
- has attempted to sabotage an outside (or inside) facilitator (0)
 - has never used, nor is open to, using a facilitator (1)
 - has used an untrained facilitator (2)
 - has used a trained facilitator practiced in the art of creative teamwork (3)
4. In terms of external memory and recording aids (e.g., whiteboards, flip charts, cameras, videos, etc.) my team . . .
- meets in a room that is largely impoverished (no whiteboards, no flip charts, no note-taking, etc.) (0)
-

-
- meets in a room that has blackboards, flip charts, writing surfaces, etc.; we may occasionally use them but not regularly (1)
 - actively uses the blackboards, flip charts, writing surfaces, in an attempt to memorialize ideas (2)
 - in addition to actively using our space, we create a boneyard or repository of the ideas created that members can easily access before, during, or after meetings (3)
5. With regard to mental stimulation and things to keep us thinking, engaged, and invigorated, such as props, videos, games, primes, objects, pictures, stopwatches, toys, film clips, etc., my team . . .
- does not provide or encourage any kind of external stimuli such as pictures, toys, objects, etc. (0)
 - has on occasion attempted to “liven up” our creative meetings through the use of props, humor, etc. (1)
 - actively imports props, such as toys, devices, gadgets, as triggers for discussion (2)
6. With regard to mood, my team . . .
- looks like a bunch of grumpy men and women (0)
 - is largely neutral (not happy, not sad—just there taking up space) (1)
 - is often positive and upbeat (2)
 - is consistently positive and upbeat (3)
7. With regard to goal setting, my team . . .
- has not set a goal as long as I can remember (0)
 - sets safe/weak goals (1)
 - sets definite goals (2)
 - sets goals based on meaningful criteria and scientifically based benchmarks, and revisits those goals on a regular basis (3)
-

-
8. With regard to diversity, my team . . .
- has demographic or gender diversity that falls along fault lines (e.g., all women are in HR; men in engineering, etc.) (0)
 - is largely homogeneous, with people having similar points of view, personality, and background training (1)
 - has demographic and/or gender diversity that does not fall along fault lines (2)
 - has deep-level diversity (based on skills, training, background, education) (3)
9. The size of my team is . . .
- unclear, since we have never specified who's on the team (0)
 - consistently over 10 people (1)
 - 8–10 people (2)
 - 5–7 people (3)
 - fewer than 5 people (4)
10. In terms of incentives, rewards, and consequences, the following best describes my team:
- many more sticks than carrots; underperformance more scrutinized than exceptional performance (punishment-focused) (0)
 - no meaningful rewards or punishments (no consequences) (1)
 - more carrots than sticks (reward-focused); exceptional performance noted more often than underperformance (2)
 - meaningful process and outcome rewards (3)
11. The leader of my team is best described as . . .
- milquetoast: uninvolved and passive (0)
 - transactional: gets the job done; acts like a manager (1)
-

-
- relational: nice, likeable, but not particularly strategic on tasks (1)
 - transformational: consistently articulates goals and vision for the team (2)
12. If my team were having a brainstorming or creativity session, we would most likely . . .
- not do anything different than in any other meeting (0)
 - hope that people share ideas (1)
 - go around the table one by one and invite people to share ideas aloud (2)
 - engage in brainwriting (the simultaneous writing of ideas) (3)
 - engage in brainwriting for part of the time; and perhaps electronic brainstorming (4)
13. With regard to membership change on my team . . .
- there has been no membership change for five or more years (0)
 - there has been no membership change for at least a year (1)
 - new members have been added and some members have left in the past twelve months (2)
 - we have planned membership change and rotation; and often invite people on a temporary basis (3)
14. With regard to office space, my team or company . . .
- is marked by closed doors and very few meeting spaces (0)
 - has a largely, or completely open floor plan (1)
 - is a careful balance of cave and commons, with private spaces and common meeting spaces (2)
-

-
15. With regard to time pressure in our brainstorming-creativity sessions . . .
- we meet for the same amount of time every week (0)
 - we meet until we are finished (1)
 - we strategically plan the length of the meeting and set goals (2)
16. The future-oriented mind-set of my team is largely . . .
- prevention-focused; the team worries about what can go wrong and attempts to avoid disaster or bad outcomes (0)
 - promotion-focused; we focus on goals and think about success (1)
17. With regard to people skills (emotional intelligence skills) . . .
- plain and simple: my team does not have them (0)
 - some members have people skills, but not everyone (1)
 - several members have people skills and they coach others (2)
 - the team has people skills; we actively coach each other, and the organization appreciates the value they bring (3)
18. With regard to free riders on our team (e.g., people not doing their share of the work, yet expecting credit) . . .
- free riders exist on our team and they get away with it (0)
 - free riders exist on our team and we make weak attempts to confront them (1)
 - we take proactive steps to discourage free riding (2)
-

19. In terms of outsiders, my team . . .

- does not trust them and does not involve them (0)
- may consult with them occasionally (1)
- regularly involves the input of outsiders (2)
- regularly involves the input of outsiders who are devil's advocates (3)

20. With regard to social networks, the members of my team are . . .

- disconnected from the rest of the organization (0)
- very closely connected to one another (1)
- closely connected to one another, yet have good working relationships with others outside of the team (2)

SCORING. After taking the Creative Collaboration Assessment, add up your answers across the twenty items. The points for each answer are in parentheses. Note that the minimum score is 0 and the maximum score is 55. We rarely see such extremes. An average score is around 28. The higher your overall score, the more creatively healthy your team is:

0–10 (Low): Scores this low should be an immediate call to action. Scores in this range are usually due to one of three things: (1) the team has not been taught the best practices of creative teamwork; (2) the team does not take the time or does not feel accountable for modifying the structure of the group; or (3) someone is actively sabotaging the team. The first two are easy to fix. Reading this book will undoubtedly improve your team score. Making even *one* change to your weekly team creativity meetings will have a marked effect on your creative output.

11–21: (Medium-low): You have much room to improve. We suggest focusing on two to three best practices to implement

in your team. Be sure to introduce each practice by itself and build in new best practices incrementally. Ask for feedback and keep modifying.

22–32 (Average): This range is actually the danger zone because it is the zone of complacency. “We are OK. There is nothing to worry about. We are about average for our industry. Others are worse than us.” If you find yourself in this range, make it a point to locate a team in your organization with a significantly higher score and invite them in for an informational session. Barrage them with questions. Ask whether it was worth it. (No doubt it was!). Find others in your team who are not satisfied with mediocrity and introduce one new best practice every month.

33–44 (Above average): Congratulations! Scores in this range are rare, and mean that someone on the team really is committed to the success of the team. Make sure you affirm this person’s efforts. Ask how you can be an active contributor to the team’s continual evolution. Celebrate your best practices. Offer to coach other teams.

45 and higher (Extremely advanced): You are a black belt creative conspirator. Because of you, your team is already functioning at an elite level. Find areas to continue to improve. Offer to coach other teams. Conduct smart experiments within the team to discover which practices had the biggest effect. Publish your findings and share with other teams in the organization.

A Look at What’s Coming . . .

The guts of this book—the chapters that follow—speak closely to the questions on the Creative Collaboration Assessment. What’s the bottom line on each one of the questions you just answered?

Here's a lineup of some of the key issues and themes I'll cover in the rest of the book, mapped to the chapters in which they'll appear.

- *Who needs ground rules?* It is a common fallacy to believe that creative teams should throw out all the rules. The right rules and norms actually liberate groups! However, not all rules are conducive for the creative conspiracy. The right brainstorming rules catalyze the creative effort and improve performance. The wrong rules lead to self-censoring behavior and frustration. Another problem is that teams often violate the very rules that they sought to put into place! I call this *team drift*—the tendency for organizations to slowly revert back to business as usual. This book is about staying on course and sometimes that means going into a headwind. This is why meeting facilitators are key. Chapter 7 provides a review of the original four rules of brainstorming and then supplements these with additional rules.
- *Conflict: can't live with it, can't live without it.* On the one hand, most people don't like conflict they seek to avoid it, and associate it with dysfunction. But teams that avoid conflict don't get a lot of creative work done. On the other hand, teams that embrace the wrong kind of conflict—engage in open confrontation, rudeness, or take-no-prisoners battle—have their own problems. Chapter 6 distinguishes two types of conflict in teams: conflict about the task (what should be done) and conflict about the people, often referred to as task conflict versus relationship conflict. The key is to be hard on the problem, not the people. This chapter teaches teams how to have a good fight.
- *The who and how of group facilitation.* Most team meetings are either facilitated by no one in particular or a leader who may have his or her own agenda. People who may not have group facilitation skills may do more harm

than good. That's a waste of the group's time. It is important that someone take control of the process and engineer the meeting in a way to suit the goal. Creative teamwork is one type of work that teams do and setting the stage for creativity is anything but intuitive. Chapter 7 reviews the best practices for the creative conspiracy.

- *Aids, props, stimulation.* Somewhere along the line, someone decided that business meetings should be dull and people should not have fun. These same people decided that an eight-point font and a seventy-five-slide PowerPoint deck is also good for meetings. So most meetings take place with people seated around a table in a room with blank walls. Most people don't realize how much of their behavior and mood is affected by the environment, for example, by color. Seating behavior influences who emerges as a leader. Teams that have committed to the creative conspiracy carefully design their meeting spaces to invite and capture ideas. In Chapter 7, the challenge is how you would allocate a significant budget to organize the optimal creative retreat.
- *Mood.* Team leaders are extremely contagious. Mood is a temporary state that is either positive or negative and either high in energy or low in energy. Mood can be affected by a number of factors and mood strongly influences creativity. Chapter 5 discusses mood in detail and describes its role in motivating the creative team.
- *Goal setting.* Goal setting is hugely important for creative teamwork. Alex Osborn, the father of brainstorming, wisely realized that quality goals can stymie a team; in contrast, quantity goals liberate a team. Chapter 7 discusses the importance of setting stretch goals.
- *Diversity.* Diversity is like an onion, meaning that on a very superficial level, we might diversify, say, on skin or eye color or dress. On a deeper level, we might diversify on the basis of education and experience. And still deeper,

there are differences in values and morals. There's a lot of evidence that diverse teams are more creative, but also experience more conflict. Chapter 3 takes up the question of diversity and how to build a heterogeneous team.

- *Team size.* Most team leaders make their teams too big, often by a factor of two or more! Consequently, meetings are often a waste of time, difficult to schedule, and hard to manage. As a general rule of thumb, I like Richard Hackman's advice: keep the team in single digits. I discuss team size in our chapter 3.
- *Incentives and rewards.* Incentives and rewards form part of the discussion in chapter 5, on how to motivate the team. Most people regard themselves to be intrinsically motivated but think others are in it simply for the money. This disconnect creates problems when we work with others.
- *Leadership.* Who should lead the creative team? Chapter 4 considers the characteristics of the ideal leader.
- *Brainstorming.* Brainstorming is such a common practice that there is scarcely an organization that does not purport to use it. However, most companies cannot articulate the rules of brainstorming, much less follow them. In chapter 7, the four cardinal rules of brainstorming are reviewed, along with the evidence that supports their effectiveness today. The chapter also reviews new research that further improves brainstorming effectiveness. It is imperative to structure the brainstorming session differently than other meetings. Failure to do so will mean that people may remain in the same passive-aggressive mind-set that they take into other meetings. Part of the creative conspiracy is to set the mood so that people are lured into engaging in thoughts and behaviors that, quite frankly, will not be appropriate in other contexts, but that will pave the road toward success in the creative context.

- *Team membership.* Teams that have masterminded the creative conspiracy are marked by high levels of efficiency and productivity, but there is also a special character to their boundaries and membership. They're very, very aware who's part of the team and who's not. They often have their own mystique—special names, inside jokes, and phrases that are usually not transparent to outsiders. However, nothing is forever and therefore, there is membership change in the creative team. The arrival of new members and departure of founder members instigates a self-reflective process in the team. Said simply, when people come and people go, that leads people to think about what the team is about. In chapter 7 I review some of my own research findings on the benefits of rotating team membership.
- *Where does the work get done?* The open floor plan was supposed to be a sign that we were team players and we could benefit more by socialization than by holing ourselves up. The open floor plan soon moved from the office space to the educational space. However, it just may not be the best thing for creativity. Groups who have crafted a creative conspiracy have private hideaways, and doors may be shut allowing individuals on the team to do what they need to do. Chapter 2 makes an argument for some degree of what might be viewed anti-social behavior in teams and chapter 7 focuses on the importance of hybrid meeting structures that balance team-time and alone-time.
- *Time pressure.* Is supposed to be bad, right? Lots of research suggests that groups simply work to fill their time. And whether teams meet for 1 hour, 90 minutes or 2 hours, there are no appreciable differences in group performance. Groups in the creative conspiracy meet without being bound by the meeting start and stop time. Chapter 7 presents evidence that as time pressure increases and the clock starts, creativity increases.

- *Social networks.* One interesting thing about creative conspiracies is that they often involve far-flung others. Thus, creative groups may very well not be pods of tightly knit friends; in fact, they may have little or no history of a working relationship. They are likely to be characterized as people who have disparate connections—clandestine ties to others who can help them. Chapter 3 focuses on how to compose the creative team and argues that odd bedfellows—as opposed to similarly minded buddies—make for the best creative teams.

⚡ Chapter Capstone

There are a lot of popular ideas on how to ignite creativity in teams. This chapter identified several plausible-sounding ideas that have gained popularity as best practices in organizational teams. These beliefs are so commonplace that they have achieved pseudo-scientific status. However, there is very little (or in some cases, absolutely no) scientific evidence to suggest that they work. In fact, some of these myths may even thwart creativity. The good news is that there are straightforward ways to fix most of the pernicious “best practices” that have crept into our organizations.

I hope this chapter has shaken the very foundations of how you think about creativity in your team. I’ve done my job if you are feeling somewhat rattled. Remember that complacency is the nemesis of the creative conspiracy. This chapter has challenged you to take a hard, critical look at the day-to-day practices of your creative team. If your score on the Creative Collaboration Assessment is low or lower than you desire, don’t despair. There are several steps you can take to dramatically improve the creativity of your team. After all, that’s the point of this book—to speak to the questions that the Creative Collaboration Assessment has raised and introduce the skills needed to spark a creative conspiracy. The next chapters introduce several best practices that are quite different than business as usual.