

## INTRODUCTION

# What Is a Creative Conspiracy?

Think about the most important project or task that is facing you at your job today. Ask yourself whether you are able to achieve your goal by working completely independently. If the answer is no, then list every single person you are depending on in some way—even if you have subordinates, you should list them and indicate how you depend on them. When I posed this question to several hundred people, no one said that they were completely independent. In fact, most people named at least three and sometimes one hundred people they rely on to achieve nearly anything.

Any time you cannot achieve your goals without the cooperation of others, you are collaborating. Collaborative teams realize that they are dependent on each other to achieve an important goal. *Collaboration* is the art and science of combining people's talents, skills, and knowledge to achieve a common goal. *Creative collaboration* is the ability of teams and their leaders to organize, motivate, and combine talent to generate new and useful ideas. Teams that conspire to commit creative and innovative acts are engaged in a *creative conspiracy*. When collaboration is conscious, planned, and shared with others, excitement builds and a conspiracy develops. The teams that can meet the creative challenges posed to them are the hallmark of the most successful organizations and the subject of this book, which contains state-of-the-art research on collaboration and innovation.

In my research investigation of over one thousand team leaders spanning over fifteen years, 41 percent indicate that leading the creative team is of paramount importance. And the trend appears to be rising. As recently as ten years ago, only 39 percent mentioned creativity as a key leadership challenge; this rose to 47 percent since 2010. Yet although the result of some collaboration is greater than the sum of the parts, at other times, it falls far short. Of the different types of work that teams do, the creative aspect is the least understood, the most elusive, the most costly, and the one that managers and leaders most often unknowingly sabotage. Thus, understanding how to optimally structure the creative team for success is essential.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of unfounded beliefs about creativity. When businesses and teams operate using faulty myths about creativity and teams, they hold their teams back in their effectiveness. This book introduces an approach and easy-to-implement best practices for optimizing team creativity and collaboration. These practical strategies enable collaborative teams and their leaders to avoid the pitfalls that well-meaning teams often fall into and instead, capitalize on what actually works with regard to creative collaboration.

### *The Group Versus Individual Paradox*

First, I need to warn you—there is a paradox that undergirds this book: although creative team collaboration is essential for companies and businesses, decades of research evidence clearly reveals that *groups are inferior to individuals* when it comes to creativity! Is there a solution to this paradox? I believe there is.

To illustrate this conundrum, I often challenge my clients and students with vexing teamwork simulations that require creative collaboration to succeed. However, the path to success is anything but obvious. Team members who are passive or overly controlling will certainly lead their teams to failure. Recently, I worked with a large group of executives and managers on collaboration skills. I divided them into four groups of about

twenty-five people each. Each group was challenged to complete a twenty-five-minute task in which they needed to solve a “who-dunit” puzzle. I gave each member a written clue on a small sheet of paper. If they assembled all the clues and eliminated the wrong choices, they could easily reach the right answer. There was just one hitch: no one could write anything down, nor could they physically exchange the written clues. Rather, they had to talk, listen, and verbally communicate with each other. They were completely dependent on each other for success. Collaboration was essential.

One group simply gave up in frustration, convinced that the puzzle was impossible to solve. Another group persisted but got the wrong answer because of a faulty assumption. Yet another group disintegrated as the minutes ticked on, with various factions forming in the corners of room, arms folded, and a look of defeat on their faces.

Afterward, a young man in the group that gave up told me that his key takeaway from the exercise was that he never wanted to work in a team-based organization! He admitted that he was frustrated because no one approached the task in what he thought was a rational, organized fashion. He later confessed that all his life, he had been the guy that believed if you wanted something done right, you had to do it yourself. If there was a class project, he not only took the lead, he did everything. Depending upon other people really bothered him. This was the first time he really needed to rely on others for team success. Obviously, that is not the takeaway that I was hoping for.

Another group embraced the goal, chose a leader, and physically organized the information using their bodies as props and symbols. They pushed the limits by creatively using candy, coffee mugs, keys, masking tape, and pens as contraband props to organize the information. They manufactured printed words using pasted-together nametags. In short, they sneaked around me because they had created a conspiracy to succeed! To be successful, this challenge involves a lot of collaboration skills—listening, a balance of roles, and a creative, rule-bending mind-set.

This challenge is not unlike one that many real teams face—dependence on one another for success, frustration, lack of clarity, time pressure, and ambiguity. My independent-minded manager could not solve the puzzle alone; he needed to depend on the group. Yet in his mind, the group was dysfunctional. Most of the time, we are in a similar position in our teams.

In this book, I argue that collaboration is anything but intuitive and that merely assigning people to teams and telling them to be good team players in no sense sets the stage for effective collaboration. Companies need to disentangle true collaboration from simply physically being in the same place at the same time. *True collaboration often calls for periods of focused, independent work interspersed with periods of intense, structured team interaction.* In this sense, teams need to embrace dynamic, hybrid collaborative structures rather than static, monotonous structures.

When teams do work together face-to-face, they need to engage differently and not rely on gut intuition. This is where the myth-busting comes in. Collaborative teams need rules, they need conflict, they need some healthy self-interest, they need serious stretch goals, and they need to take much more control of the physical and social environment than most of us are accustomed to doing. Ultimately, creative collaboration is like a good party—people prepare individually, the leader-host sets a good stage, and people arrive in party mode, equipped with essential props. People don't show up hours early or too late, under- or overdressed, and with nothing in hand—nor do they stay too long.

This book is going to challenge your notions of what collaboration actually is. It is not 24/7 team cohabitation, it is not a long weekend retreat, and it is certainly not shared office space. Creative collaboration is characterized by thoughtful stage setting, complete with changes of scene, acts that open and close, and connection with the audience. It is not an anything-goes process. Unfortunately most organizations are not experts when it comes to creative collaboration; I'll start chapter 1 by exposing the most common myths about creative teamwork. I'll also reveal how to dispel faulty beliefs that give rise to ineffective strategies and introduce strategies and practices that will lead to creative success.

## Setting the Stage for a Creative Conspiracy

While it might seem heretical to present data that teams are not nearly as creative as individuals in a book on creative collaboration, I can't ignore the scientific facts. Just as surely as cigarettes cause lung cancer, *groups are less creative than individuals*—at least when left to their own devices. Stated another way, when the stage has not been properly set for a creative conspiracy, groups will most assuredly underperform.

Some background explanation is in order here. To meaningfully compare groups and individuals, researchers have devised the perfect “control” group—the *nominal group*. A nominal group is a group of people who never actually interact. For example, say we wanted to compare whether a real, interactive group was more or less creative than the same number of people working independently. The people working independently are the nominal group. To make sure there would be no systematic bias in terms of the people in one configuration being smarter, younger, more attractive, or politically different than the other group, participants would be randomly assigned to work with a team or a nominal group. Hundreds of studies have been conducted using this very simple, yet very powerful design. In these studies, duplicate ideas created by the nominal groups are not counted. Furthermore, an independent panel of judges evaluates the output and the judges are “blind” with respect to whose ideas they are evaluating. And the findings? Virtually all of the studies unambiguously reveal that individuals outperform teams in terms of both quantity and quality.

When team members are working independently rather than together, there is obviously a much greater likelihood that they will duplicate one another's ideas. For this reason, teams and their organizations are often quick to criticize the wisdom of nominal teamwork. However, this concern may be overinflated or perhaps even a nonissue. Researchers Laura Kornish and Karl Ulrich measured undesirable repetition of ideas when teams generated ideas in parallel. In a substantial data set of over thirteen hundred opportunity spaces—ideas for an innovation that may have value

after further investment of resources—they found little incidence of redundancy of ideas generated by aggregating parallel efforts, even in narrowly defined domains. Thus, this study suggests there is little reason to be concerned about team members working in parallel.

My point, however, is not that teams and individuals are mutually exclusive or should be pitted against each other, but rather that there needs to be an understanding of how teams and individuals operate and how individuals operate optimally within teams. By using hybrid, interactive meeting structures—characterized by periods of autonomous work punctuated by periods of intense collaborative work; clear goal setting and goal striving; a focus on quantity rather than quality; spirited and vigorous debating of ideas; and less talking and more doing, via brainwriting rather than brainstorming—teams can start reaching their creative potential.

### A Word on What's in This Book and How to Use It

This book contains two things: (1) a lot of concrete examples of collaboration (the good, the bad, and the ugly) based on my colleagues' and my research and experience working with managers, leaders, and team members over sixteen years, as well as studies of creativity and teamwork conducted by the broader management science community; (2) a lot of prescriptive advice based on scientifically tested methods and strategies. Some of this will square with your intuition; much of it won't. This is partly because scientists don't do a good job of disseminating their research outside of the ivory tower. As a card-carrying member of the ivory tower, I see it as my duty to sift through the mass of research findings and bring the breakthroughs to the business world. Consequently, in this book, you will see some unsettling data and read about studies that suggest that we need to seriously rethink our creative team processes.

Besides the fact that, left to their own devices, teams are less creative than individuals, the body of research on collaboration has yielded many other surprising and counterintuitive findings, including:

- Teams that have “no rules” are less creative than those that have rules.
- Striving for quality results in less creativity than striving for quantity.
- Unstable membership enhances team creativity.
- Most companies cannot articulate, and routinely violate, the four cardinal rules of brainstorming.
- Most leaders cannot articulate the rules of brainstorming.
- Distrust can increase creative cognition.
- Thinking creatively leads to more dishonest behavior.

Some of the best practices I suggest might seem straightforward; however, some will be at odds with common wisdom. So, we will let the data decide. Bottom line: this book is heavily research based. I present empirical facts to support the best practices it outlines. This is what is known as *evidence-based management*. What does this mean exactly? Just like the hard sciences (e.g., chemistry, biology, genetics), the *data* should answer questions—not superstition, hearsay, or personal beliefs. In this regard, I encourage leaders and managers to treat their organizations like a scientific laboratory. Collect evidence. Do experiments. And choose best practices based on hard evidence. For example, in one of my courses, the managers were skeptical that groups are less creative than individuals. So, we designed an experiment in which we compared the creativity of managers, consultants, and investment bankers working alone versus in groups. We randomly assigned

people to work alone or in groups. The individuals generated more ideas, and more unique ideas.

Before you are tempted to read this book cover to cover, consider doing the following:

1. Decide which chapter topic is most relevant to what you are struggling with this month, this week, and today with your team. Go directly to that chapter. For example, one of the leaders who we worked with was building a new team. The leader was concerned that group members establish a systematic way of providing feedback to one another, so he used a version of the peer feedback system presented in chapter 4 with his team.
2. After reading that chapter, make a personal commitment as to what is going to be different about your leadership going forward. Do at least one thing different today at work. Why? Active learning increases the likelihood of actually applying what we learn. People who learn passively (by watching others) are less creative than people who learn actively (by doing).
3. Then, have the resolve to announce your plan to the people you care most about. Tell them you are on a mission. And that you are open to accepting feedback.
4. Hand those people this book and ask if there is anything that they want to focus on—and tell them that you willing to collaborate with them.

By following these four steps, you have just engaged in the art and science of collaboration!

### A Word About Me

When I joined the Kellogg School of Management in 1995, I was not experienced in executive education. So, during my first thirty days, I slyly inserted myself into an executive education classroom

and seated myself in the last row, ready to take the pulse of the leaders and managers in the room. The fellow to the left of me apparently did not realize I was an undercover professor when he nudged me and said, “Do you think that anyone is going to actually use the stuff we are talking about in their company?” His innocent question launched me on a fifteen-year research program on knowledge transfer from the classroom to the real lives of managers, leaders, and executives. I made a pledge to myself that day to never do any research project unless I could bring the results back to the classroom and help managers and leaders derive meaningful best practices to use in their actual business situations.

Today, I am the director of the Leading High Impact Teams course and codirector of the Negotiation Strategies for Managers course at the Kellogg School of Management. I work with more than twenty-five hundred executives, leaders, and MBA students each year. They come from around the globe—Hong Kong, Germany, Israel, Latin America, Canada, and the United States. In any given week, I spend two to four days in the Kellogg executive center and engage in dozens of spirited conversations about the challenges of teamwork, creativity, conflict, and collaboration. It is these conversations that have shaped my research and this book.

When not in the classroom, I’ve conducted hundreds of research investigations inspired by the questions and dilemmas that managers bring to the classroom. The main thing I have learned from these managers is that leading teams is the most complex and the most important part of being a leader, and leading creative teams is challenging, risky, but ultimately the most rewarding. I’ve also learned that some of our intuitions about creative collaboration are valid, but many are not. Of all topics, creativity is the most elusive because our intuitions don’t seem to square with the scientific studies. Consequently, the research questions I have investigated have focused primarily on collaboration, team creativity, learning, and win-win negotiation.

I should mention that when I’m not in the classroom, I am on my bike. I started training seriously in 2007 with the goal of doing

local time trial races. Let me be honest—until 2007, I would have never referred to myself as an athlete. I certainly did not play any sports in high school or college. So my goal of becoming a bike racer at my age was somewhat preposterous. Once I did some local time trial races, I set my racing goals higher. In 2008, I won the USA Cycling Masters National Time Trial championship in my age category, and in 2010, I won the UCI World Masters Time Trial Championship in my age category. None of these things would have been possible without my coach, John Hughes, who set the stage for me through intense workouts that brought me to the point of physical and psychological failure, yet inspired me to keep training and collaborated with me on the building of a dream.

Until recently, I used to think that that cycling was a far stretch from the executive classroom. However, eventually the lightbulb went on for me, and I began to see the relationship between managers' work goals and their extracurricular goals. The managers who simultaneously want to be better parents, triathletes, and neighbors are also the ones who want to be better mentors and leaders in their own organizations. My coach helped me realize that no one ever achieves anything without three key things: (1) a clear goal; (2) passion; and (3) discipline. When you read this book, you will notice that it is extremely goal-focused and it will go deep in terms of exploring your passion and testing your discipline. The pace will be fast. The questions will be blunt. But I promise you will find strengths in yourself that you never imagined—just like I did on the bike and in the classroom.

Now, on to chapter 1, in which we'll debunk some common creativity myths—and where you'll do a Creative Collaboration Assessment to gauge your current team competence.