

# Creative Problem Solving in Teams

By Chrissie Webber

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Chrissie Webber  
info@life-shapers.com

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## A Few Observations on Creative Problem-solving in Teams

Creative problem-solving is about finding unusual or unexpected answers to problems. Sometimes called elegant solutions. In organisations the context of creative problem-solving usually takes place within team situations.

Individuals and teams have to be careful of one thing, above all else, when it comes to solving problems. That is "jumping to solutions". Managers are most prone to this because many are prey to the belief that they are there specifically to solve problems .... everybody's problems.

### The first step

The first step in all problem solving is defining the problem. Here are a couple of simple rules, which can make that step easier.

Always state a problem in the present tense (happening now) and as a negative or lack or failure. Also stick to one problem per statement. For example: "Department often unable to send customer invoices on time". True problems are real, immediate and important.

However, you have to be careful NOT to pre-empt the solution into your problem statement. This will unleash the temptation of jumping to solutions. An example will suffice: "customers do not buy our product because the price is too high" pre-supposes that all that is needed to fix the situation is price-cutting. Yet, there may be other reasons for the downturn in customer interest. A better way to frame the problem might be: "customers have become less interested in our product ..." Why their interest has declined is still a mystery, but at least in describing the problem this way, you are maintaining an open mind. Creativity is about keeping an open mind for as long as possible.

### Teams & problem-solving

An old adage here is relevant: A problem shared is a problem solved. In fact good teams will always get a more creative solution to a problem, than will an individual, working alone. The reason is synergy: Many heads are better than one.

A good team is one where the purpose is clear and understood by all, everyone contributes and everyone listens. When this happens, someone will offer an idea and others in the team will build on it, refine it, adapt it or maybe even just use the original idea as a trigger to set the team off in a new

direction. What is important are two things. Firstly, the building process. Secondly, the retentive process. When you have a team or group of people working on an idea, there is always a new aspect being generated and also a safety net provided by others picking up lost details or giving insights into unexpected consequences of actions or identifying new opportunities. In these situations teamwork is both motivating and supportive.

## Visualisation

If we want teams to be creative AND we want to maintain / encourage the involvement of all individuals on the team, we have to find ways of rendering the problem-solving process visually. This goes beyond simply creating a "picture". It is fundamentally about how people share information.

A team or group of people sitting around a table only discussing a problem verbally is much less likely to solve it and solve it creatively, than a similar team / group where the process of discussion is supported visually. The reason is obvious when we think about it. Most verbal discussions devolve into one or two vocal people "holding the floor". Their opinions dominate and other people in the group either lose interest or never get the chance to contribute.

However, as soon as a visual dimension is added to the discussion process, ideas become captured in the team domain. Everyone then owns them. Individuals will focus on what is objectively in front of them. For example: charts, cards, post-it notes that describe or high-light issues / problems / suggestions are always more encouraging of participation, when they are where people can get at them, as opposed to the same issues / problems / ideas when they are spoken only and seen as "owned" by a specific, articulate, individual. The nub of effective visualisation, is to get whatever is under discussion captured and available where everyone participating in the group / team can see it and can add to it.

## Closure

Creative problem-solving in teams follows three distinct phases. First there is the ice-breaking , context-setting, warm-up phase. This is where the problem is defined and the process discussed / explained / agreed.

Next is a phase of brain-storming, encouraging wide ranging contribution from all involved. This is usually the most exciting, noisy and fun stage. This is the stage where visual techniques are important to capture everything and get everyone involved.

The final phase is closure. At some point (pre-arranged or agreed), it is necessary to narrow down options, terminate brain-storming and focus on practical steps, action plans or concrete recommendations. Here too it is important to represent, what is finally agreed or suggested as a result of the consensus, visually, so that everyone remains engaged and involved. It also will ensure commitment in the long run.

Finally, it is important to high-light one important downside to teamwork - TIME. All team problem-solving takes time. If you want the team to work effectively, the time as well as the space has to be available and other distractions removed or minimised as far as possible. Creativity, not only takes teams, it takes time too.

Chrissie Webber

Life-Shapers

e - [info@life-shapers.com](mailto:info@life-shapers.com)

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