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ICMA Career Compass No. 72: How Do We Generate Creative Ideas?

Creativity requires experimenting, learning from mistakes and failures, and ultimately the courage to act.

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I'm the capital projects manager for the county's Flood Control District (a special district which is part of the county structure). One of our county's creeks is increasingly prone to flooding, which results in property damage and threats to public safety. We need to enlarge the creek channel and cement and harden it.

The problem is that we neither have the several hundreds of millions of dollars in funding nor do the neighborhood groups and environmental stakeholders support the enlarging and hardening of the channel.

My engineering team wants to move forward with its recommendation that the district board approve the flood control improvements, increase property taxes to fund the project, and then issue the necessary bonds. However, there is little support for this approach, and the district general manager has told us to go back to the drawing board.

My engineering team has thrown up its hands in frustration and has not generated any new creative ideas. I, too, am stumped on how to proceed.

How do we generate some creative ideas and options that we can test out with the affected neighborhood groups, environmental stakeholders, other agencies, and our district board?

Many of our big challenges in local government seem intractable and require creative ideas. However, our local government organizational structures and cultures often inhibit creativity. For instance

- Our department or agency silos create blinders given our subject matter expertise and training.
- In our heterogeneous and sometimes contentious communities, there are always stakeholder groups that can block or “veto” any creative solution.
- Many local governments are risk averse, which undercuts creativity. In practice, creativity requires experimenting, learning from mistakes or failures, and ultimately the courage to act.

Recognizing these constraints, here are some approaches to promote creative thinking by your team.

Tips to Promote Creativity

1. Broaden and diversity the team

Innovation is often created at the intersection of disciplines. For instance, Frans Johansson revealed in his book *The Medici Effect* how the innovation of the cochlear implant was devised based on the insights of an audiologist, a computer scientist, and an engineer.

Therefore, you should invite some non-engineers (such as librarians, police officer, HR staff) to join the team. You should also ensure different genders are represented (teams of both men and women outperform single-gender groups), as well as those with different life experiences. To diversity the group in the brainstorming phase, you should also include representatives from neighborhood and environment groups.

2. Avoid naysayers

In the idea generation stage, wherever possible, avoid naysayers. (A “naysayer” is one who always finds why an idea won’t work.) Ask nay-saying staff to critique key ideas after they are formulated (this is a good role for naysayers) but don’t include them in the brainstorming process. They tend to undercut the expression of creative, even far-out, ideas. If it is difficult to exclude a naysayer, schedule the meeting when they are busy with another project or on vacation.

3. Ensure “psychological safety”

Google’s Project Aristotle concluded that the number one determinant of team effectiveness is “psychological safety.” Psychological safety in a team is when group members feel safe to express

themselves. In a team characterized by psychological safety, team members:

- Feel that they can give voice to their ideas and perspectives without fear of reprisal or rebuke.
- Believe that if they make a well-intentioned mistake, others won't penalize them or think less of them.

To promote psychological safety, the team leader must model positive behaviors, such as curiosity. To do so, the leader can ask certain questions, such as “How might we . . .?” (For example, “How might we improve the channel in order to minimize flooding, yet enhance the natural environment?”)

Another technique is to request that several team members each come up with a divergent idea in advance of the brainstorming meeting and then briefly present their solutions before others jump in.

(See [Career Compass #69 “Psychological Safety—The One Determinant of Team Effectiveness.”](#))

4. Set ground rules

Certain discussion ground rules can support creative problem solving. For example

- There are no “bad” ideas.
- We don't critique the ideas until we've completed the idea generation phase.
- We withhold or suspend judgment on the effectiveness or feasibility of the idea until we generate a lot of ideas or possible solutions in different categories.
- We try to identify or challenge our assumptions.

5. Get playful

It is very helpful if team members get playful at least in the idea generation stage. Creativity is inhibited in an environment of deadly seriousness.

Therefore, you might want to start the brainstorming by asking each team member to identify at least one “wacky” idea. For example, if you are brainstorming alternatives to traditional probation, a team member might suggest that the County Probation Department create a “Foster Offender Program” that would offer unemployed parents the opportunity to bring offenders on probation into their families and supervise them for a monthly stipend. Or, let's hold a public workshop on creek redesign at a microbrewery after everyone first does a tasting of new releases.

Wacky ideas (with a few modifications) are often not-so-wacky and can lead to creative solutions.

Another way to promote “serious fun” is to do a creative game before the real brainstorming begins. One example is to start the meeting by having people brainstorm the various uses of bricks. For

instance, a brick can be used as a construction material, a weapon, a design element, or a door stopper.

6. Generate a lot of ideas

The leader can use a round robin brainstorming exercise. On a sheet of paper featuring a light bulb in the middle of the sheet, each team member writes an idea inside the light bulb. Then the idea sheet is passed on to three or four other team members at the table, each of whom writes comments reacting to the idea on the outside of the light bulb, adding to the idea or modifying it. The idea sheet is then returned to the person originating the idea who shares the idea and all the comments with the whole group. All of the idea sheets are then posted or otherwise documented for eventual discussion and critique.

As the writer Anna Quindlen once suggested, “Ideas are like pizza dough, made to be tossed around.”

7. Build on the ideas of others

A team member’s good idea often becomes even better and more elegant as people modify the idea or combine it with another idea. Therefore, encourage people to take the ideas of another person and build on them.

The smart phone combined a telephone, email, text, Internet, and entertainment. A smart phone is now even a health monitoring device. As Steve Jobs famously stated, “Creativity is just connecting things.”

8. Be persistent in generating different ideas

Because we are so action-oriented, as well as busy, we often go with the first good idea that is proposed. There are many creative ways to solve a problem. Oftentimes, the first “sensible” or “reasonable” idea is not the most creative idea. Consequently, it is necessary to persist in generating more ideas in one category and different ideas in another category. For instance, the group leader or facilitator might ask the group

- What is an entirely different approach?
- What are we missing?
- What would an environmental group suggest?

By persisting in generating different ideas, the team might propose a combination of ideas, including

- Increasing creek capacity by regularly removing debris and vegetation from the creek channel.
- Diverting flood waters via a natural channel upstream.

- Using the downstream golf course as a flood water storage area.
- Changing construction standards upstream, such as requiring the use of permeable materials to construct parking lots.
- Raising the foundations of homes in the flood-prone areas.
- Promoting green infrastructure, such as bio-retention gardens.
- Using “soft armor” techniques (such as transition mats with vegetation) to strengthen the sides of the channel.
- Restoring marsh lands to absorb some of the periodic flood waters.

Given the constraints, there may not be one perfect solution. However, these diverse ideas often lead to a hybrid solution that may be practical and acceptable.

Of course, in the longer term, the district might need to work with the county and other jurisdictions to create a structure-free zone along the channel and promote climate protection strategies.

9. Engage all members of the group

To the extent that all team members are engaged, the team will create more and better ideas. As mentioned, round robin brainstorming is one approach to engage all team members. Another technique is to call on the least senior (or least influential) engineer to come up with the first idea, or better yet, one of the non-engineers.

10. Dramatically cut the funding or resources

To generate more creativity, dramatically cut the funding available for the solution. If the enlarged and hardened channel costs \$250 million, ask your team to brainstorm flood control solutions that would cost a maximum of \$50 or \$100 million. This resource constraint forces the team to come up with completely different (and creative) solutions.

11. Reverse the assumption

Our creativity is often hampered or limited because we accept assumptions. Therefore, the group can first practice “reversing the assumption.” For example, we assume that a restaurant uses a menu, serves food, and charges money for the food. To reverse the assumption, ask three subgroups on the team to brainstorm a creative yet practical restaurant. One subgroup would brainstorm a creative restaurant that does not use a menu; the second subgroup would brainstorm a restaurant that doesn’t serve food; and the third subgroup would create ideas for a restaurant that doesn’t charge money for the food. Once the three subgroups report on their ideas, the full group would combine ideas for a very creative restaurant.

In local government, we can reverse the assumption and brainstorm a library that doesn't offer books. In the case of the creek, we would reverse the assumption that the Flood Control District would enlarge the channel and harden it.

12. Promote learning

To promote creative problem solving, engage the group in learning activities that might inform your ideas or generate new ideas. Some learning activities might include:

- Taking tours of other unique flood control projects.
- Investigating how non-Western European societies have addressed flood control or prevention.
- Reading a provocative book (such as *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered* by E.F. Schumacher) to identify a small or simple concept or solution.

An “Empty” Mind

The Buddhists suggest that we need to relinquish our “expert’s mind.” As a subject matter expert, our minds are “full.” There is very little room for new or different ideas.

Buddhist thinking encourages us to adopt a “beginner’s mind,” which is an “empty” mind. In an empty mind, there is room for new or different, often creative ideas.

Get Creative!

Recognizing that there are significant obstacles to addressing the big adaptive challenges of the day (e.g., homelessness, traffic congestion, affordable housing, climate protection), local government professionals need to get creative with stakeholder groups.

To do so, we need to put aside our subject matter expert “blindness,” engage non-experts, and be open to wacky and not-so-wacky ideas.

(Thanks to Ed Everett, former city manager of Redwood City, California, for many of the ideas presented in this column. Ed and I teach a course on generating creative ideas and then making those creative ideas come to life.)

Readers:

What is a big challenge that you face requiring new and creative responses?

What are one or two obstacles in your organization limiting creative approaches?

Whom do you need to engage outside of your expertise?

To answer these questions and be part of the conversation, join us in the ICMA Coaching Facebook Group



Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *Career Compass* is a monthly column focused on leadership and career development issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA’s Liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a leadership or career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com

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