Teamwork Makes the Dream Work! Or Does it? Creativity in Virtual Teams

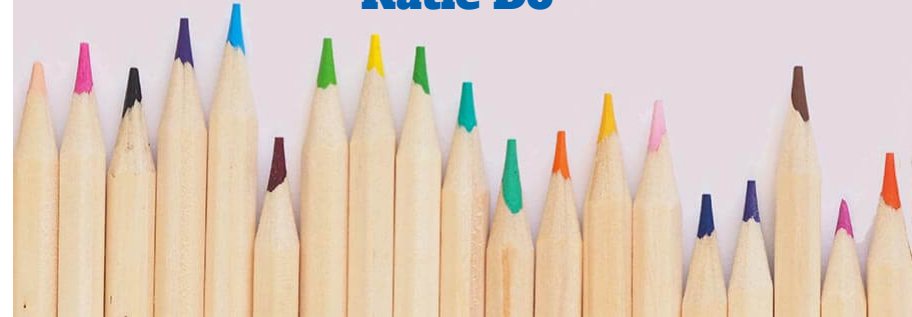**Mustafa Brown**

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INTRODUCTION

The inception of virtual work has been one of the most impactful development of this day and age. Thanks to advancements in digital media and technology. We are no longer confined to your run-of-the-mill office space working a 9-to-5. Instead, we have the freedom of working remotely, and with a flexible schedule. As a result, virtual teams have become increasingly common. But as with any new development, comes its share of doubts and setbacks. There are a multitude of concerns with virtual teams in not only their ability to do work efficiently but to collaborate and cooperate effectively. The goal of this e-book is to address creativity in virtual teams, and to hopefully shed light on some aspects of creativity in the virtual space.

Chapter 1: What is Creativity?

So....what exactly is creativity?

Put simply, creativity is our ability to think outside the box.

It is our ability to come up with brand new ideas from scratch.

Creativity isn't a talent, but a skill. It can be developed over time.

"What is Creativity?" by 'What Is' on YouTube.

Creativity stems from our desire to be unique. Our distinctive personalities shine through our creative works, allowing for each and every person to lay their individual handprint upon the world.

That crazy drawing you did back in kindergarten? Yeah, that was you being creative.

That insane lego building you made out of leftover pieces during middle school? Yeah, that was pretty creative, too.

This book you're reading? Yeah, it took a little bit of creativity as well.

"*Think of the creative process like a river, starting with the upstream generation of ideas, often seemingly outlandish ones; proceeding to the testing and refinement of certain ideas midstream; and eventually moving downstream to the full development of chosen ideas*" (Thompson, 2020).

By the way, you can thank creativity for a lot of the recent advancements in digital technology as well. From smartphones, to artificial intelligence, every one of these technologies started out as a simple idea that some person happened to come up with. Be that person a Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, or Elon Musk, the individuals who fostered the realization of these ideas all had something in common. They wanted to make their imprint on the world, and they did so the best way they could; by being themselves.

That's what creativity looks like in the real world. What about in the virtual world? Can it be just as effective?

Let's find out.

Chapter 2: Pros and Cons of Creativity in Virtual Teams

Yes, we all love the virtual space. It probably doesn't require as much effort as being in the office, and yet the job can get done just as well, if not better. But not everything is gung-ho in the virtual workplace. The same goes for creativity in virtual teams. Let us weigh some of the most impactful advantages and disadvantages so we can determine whether or not we are fully bringing out the full potential of our ideas in the virtual realm.

ADVANTAGES

- **More ideas!**

This one was a bit obvious. The more people you have, the more ideas you can create, right? When working in a virtual team, if all members are able to put their heads together and brainstorm, they can generate tons (if not hundreds!) of ideas for how to complete a task or accomplish a goal.

- **Diversity**

As we have been alluding to up to this point, one of the beauties of creativity is that it is unique for each and every individual person. Chances are my idea isn't the same as yours. But this is a good thing, especially when working with a team. "*Even within the mind of an individual, diversity enhances creativity, according to a study by Jeffrey Sanchez-Burks, a professor at the University of Michigan, his Michigan colleague Fiona Lee, and Chi-Ying Cheng of Columbia University*" (Amabile & Khaire, 2014).
When you have many different ideas converging, it brings the opportunity to create something amazing that benefits everyone.

- **Socializing**

Anyone can be creative. It's totally possible to come up with something tremendous by yourself (and that *might* be the best method, as we'll learn shortly). But we as human beings are wired to connect with each other. It wouldn't be ridiculous to find some people more comfortable in a group setting to do their brainstorming rather than on their own.

DISADVANTAGES

- **Individualism Rules!?**

Remember when we said that creativity is unique for each individual person? "Although many believe that groups of people are more creative than individuals, there is no research to support this. In fact, in-person groups can stifle voices while amplifying others" (Gaertner 2022). Because of this, it is *probably* easier to come up with ideas on your own than with a group, depending on the context.

- **Conformity**

To build upon the last point, another issue that may arise with creativity in virtual teams is the same issue that any kind of team is prone to; conformity. There is a fear of being the odd one out and being rejected by the majority that causes members within a team to sometimes with hold their own ideas an opinions, which can actually hinder the team's overall performance. There is a lot of potential that those individual members are leaving on the table.

- **Environmental Constraints**

While the virtual space may provide for a more "comfortable" and effective work environment, there are some elements of virtual platforms in general that can actually restrict the thinking of virtual workers and virtual teams, diminishing their creativity (Gaertner, 2022).

Final Verdict

There are obvious setbacks to utilizing creativity in virtual teams. But it would seem that these issues are same ones that have existed for the virtual workspace in general. "*Virtual collaboration does provide benefits that many of us didn't realize or pursue in pre-COVID-19 times. Our creative output may be all the better for it.*" ~ Leigh Thompson in "Virtual Collaboration Won't Be the Death of Creativity" (Gaetner, 2022). Only time will tell, but as we continue to grow into a more digitalized environment, we must continue to learn to take advantage of the tools and benefits that virtual work has given us and use it to enhance the creativity of virtual teams.

Chapter 3: How To Apply Creativity to Virtual Teams

We know what creativity is, we know how creativity can be advantageous, as well as disadvantageous to virtual teams, but how do you actually apply creativity to virtual teams?

This can be the most intimidating part for a lot of people. Let's break down how we can apply creativity to virtual teams. You will see that it is not as hard as you may believe!

There is no "I" in Team!

When applying creativity to a virtual team, one may think that it takes an already creative person to get the ball rolling. That is not the case!

It is important to note that there may be some restrictions on creativity in general as we discussed earlier. Going at it alone completely might not give you the absolute best output, but blindly just putting heads together won't be the most effective route, either. There is a process and a few key house rules that must be followed in order to ensure maximum creativity in a virtual team.

"The Power of Deliberate Creative Teams" Ted Talk by Amy Cline.

Individual Brainstorming

As discussed previously, individuals are actually most creative on their own. For the sake of working in a group, however, there must be some kind of compromise so that it is not only the creativity of a singular team member that is being used to its full potential.

"*In a brainstorming situation, this might mean having group members take time to generate ideas on their own (not in the immediate environment of other group members). Individuals can then come back together to share their ideas and discuss how their individual contributions relate to the task at hand*" (Walton, 2016).

By allowing each individual team member to first go and brainstorm by themselves, the potential for creativity isn't minimized. Once they go back to their team, they can now address each idea individually and possibly combine some of them into something far greater.
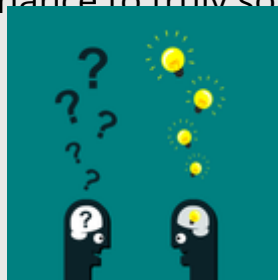
Minimize Production Blocking

After individual brainstorming, the virtual team comes together. This is the most crucial stage of the process, because it can make or break the overall creativity of the entire group. One important key here is to minimize production blocking. Production blocking can happen because of a variety of things.

"*Conversation itself, which involves having to politely listen to others, is an example of production blocking. Virtual collaboration requires less pressure for constant conversation so people can more easily focus on generating ideas*" (Gaertner, 2022).

When brainstorming as a team, opt for less criticism and more open-mindedness. This gives your team the chance to truly soak in all possibilities.

Another issue that can cause production blocking is conformity. This is problem that exists with teams and groups in general. The fear of being the odd one out or deviating from the majority is what compels some team members to stay quiet, when they're ideas could be some of the most beneficial for the team as a whole.

"*Virtual collaboration usually results in less pressure to conform since many of the politeness rituals of in-person communication, such as vocalizing agreement and engaging in small talk, are no longer present*" (Gaertner, 2022).

When engaging in virtual team brainstorming, do not be afraid to speak up and voice your ideas. They could be the difference between success and failure, or the difference between a good job and a great job by the team overall.

Quality over Quantity

The last point of emphasis when applying creativity to virtual teams is to focus on quality over quantity.

Let's face it, with multiple brains working to come up with ideas, there is probably going to be more than enough samples to work with.

Though it is important to keep an open mind to all suggestions, it is just as crucial that you choose only the best ones from the pile of raw imagination.

"*Now more than ever is essential to keep your team fresh by enhancing the multidimensional power of creativity through regular trainings and workshops to solidify your team's resilience and openness to change and come up with solutions and innovative ideas to boost business and organization performance*" (Molendowska-Ruiz, 2021).

Chapter 4: Real-life Accounts of Creativity in the Virtual Space

Interviewer: Jasmine Garcia
Interviewee: Brenda Alvarez

When interviewing Brenda Alvarez, a financial counselor at Rutgers Cancer Institute, she gave me plenty of insight into the ways her team uses creativity. She and her team work with their patients to find ways to pay for their cancer treatment, whether it is out of pocket or working with insurance companies to get treatment covered.

The biggest way her team uses creativity is actually in an attempt to get treatment and medication covered by insurance. It may seem like creativity would not be necessary in any terms when it comes to insurance, but Brenda showed us why that isn't the case. Brenda stated, "*Many times insurance companies will find various reasons not to cover the cost of certain treatments... My team (*including physicians, nurses, etc.) *works to find loopholes we can execute to get the insurance company to pay*".

She emphasized that this process can be long, and that treatment plans sometimes have to be changed in order for these loopholes to work. It takes creativity on her part, as well as her patient's care team. Brenda conveyed how creativity is necessary even when you least expect it.

Interviewer: Mustafa Brown
Interviewee: Zakariya Rehman

Zakariya is a senior at the Rutgers Business School. He holds a lot of experience with product and strategy on Instagram. I had a chance to sit down with him to talk about some of the experiences he has had in the virtual space. I want to relate some of these experiences to our current discussion about creativity in virtual teams.

One of the biggest takeaways from my discussion with Zakariya was his input on communication with information communication technologies (ICT)s:

"*The most common [ICT] we used was Slack, a server similar to Discord that has different channels for all team members and managers. This gave us the ability to see what was going on throughout the day. When we would collaborate on a project or presentation, we made use of Google Drive, which allowed us to see who was making contributions or edits in real-time.*"

In the virtual space, Zakariya believed that ICTs actually made it easier to communicate efficiently "in real-time" with his team on a day-to-day basis. Sure, it made sense to have some days where they would actually have to be in-person in the office and retain that medium of authentic, face-to-face communication. But the amount of flexibility that was provided from working virtually actually allowed for even more collaboration among team members. And as we have learned thus far, virtual collaboration can actually enhance team creativity. There are less production blockers that may otherwise be present in an in-person setting, and the virtual space allows for team members to quickly and comfortably brainstorm their own individual ideas.

Interviewer: Michael Stefanowitz
Interviewee: Andrea Stefanowitz

Andrea is a front office worker at a school. Once covid hit back in 2020 all schools were shut down so everyone at school had to work virtually. So naturally the people in the front office had to find creative ways to communicate with each other. One of the ways they were able to communicate was through Zoom. Also, they didn't do this but an option for them could've been having a discord for all the people that work in the front office. But at the end of the day the way they communicated worked and got the job that was needed done.

"Driving trust, fun, and inclusion within distributed teams or a remote workforce can be challenging. But, if you want to increase engagement and business results within virtual teams you must have a deliberate plan to enable location inclusion, and that relies on activity creativity." (Connor 2020)

They also had to find creative ways to learn how to use technology a little better. The front office workers did not know too much about the technology they had to use to get their job done. The front office used a bunch of tools in order to make learning how to use technology easier. Since work went virtual there was now a flexibility in work. Now since work was at home and on technology they had many ways to use technology in order for them to work together virtually as a team.
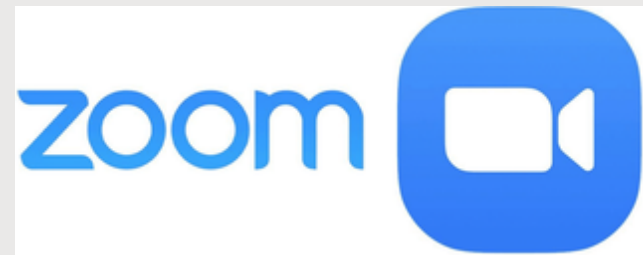
Interviewer: Katie Do
Interviewee: Manuel Favetto

While interviewing Manuel Favetto, an accountant for Meredith Health, he provided many ideas that showed creativity amongst his team. Favetto's team tracks reports and analyzes the budgets, by doing so they develop new strategies to implement throughout the organization. Favetto emphasizes the importance of developing new strategies is to allow success within the organization. It's important to keep up with future possible changes, critically thinking as a group mainly allowed room for improvement within creativity. As for Manny, in the beginning he said it was easier to come up with creative ideas because everyone had different knowledge, but as he worked with the same people for years; it began to feel more complicated to come up with new different ideas. Favetto stated that he felt like his group was cohesive, they were always on the same page; no one ever disagreed.

Since most of Favetto's work was through the computer, they had to learn new creative ways to communicate with one another. They communicate in various ways, from emails to Zoom calls. Sometimes it felt more difficult to communicate virtually rather than in person; conversations may be miscommunicated. At times, Favetto felt like there weren't any different perspectives when it came to brainstorming for projects. Manuel decided to switch things up within his team, forcing himself to become the dissent: being the one person to disagree and implement new ideas with his group. Becoming the dissent allowed Favetto to obtain new ideas and create a new project for his team, it opened a door that allowed the team to grow as a whole. Favetto emphasized that when working with a cohesive group; there's a balance between success and failure. When no one speaks up, the project may be handed in unfinished, with multiple errors.

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