Great teams

A GUIDE TO BETTER CREATIVE COLLABORATION
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by Alison Coward
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Hello!

If you’re here, it’s likely that you work as part of a creative team. Your work involves developing and delivering ideas, and you probably have to collaborate with other people on a daily basis to get things done. You’ll know that when this works, it’s great. It seems like magic with everyone bouncing off of each other and everything slotting into place. But this is often a happy accident. You don’t know exactly what you did to make it work like that, it just did.

At other times, although your team is passionate and doing great work, you can’t help feeling that you could do a lot more if you made some changes to the way you work together. You all have too much to do, ideas get lost in communication, and deadlines are met at the expense of doing the real work that you would feel proud of.

But it doesn’t have to be a trade off between getting things done and doing your best work together. It is possible to find a balance between creativity and productivity.

There are two things I’ve discovered about creative collaboration:
1. It is a skill that can be learned and developed
2. There is no one size fits all for collaborative projects

Each new project is different, and each new team has a new set of personalities and skill sets that need to be treated differently. So what we really need is a toolkit for collaboration, where you can take what you need as you need it, rather than following a rigid approach. It’s some of these elements that I’ll be sharing with you.

This book is a collection of 23 tips (19 main tips, plus 4 bonus tips), that combined, make up the approach I use at Bracket for leading and facilitating creative teams.
They’re my tried and tested techniques and methods that I’ve found never fail to get the best out of myself and everyone I’m working with. It combines my 15 years of working with teams and facilitating workshops, as well as what I’ve learned from the best creativity and collaboration experts. My aim is to bring it all together to create a handy reference guide.

You can use this book for running a project from start to finish, or you can dip into it at various stages to help rejuvenate or problem-solve.

The great thing about each of the tips is that on their own, they are small, non-disruptive actions that will have a big impact on the way your team works. You’ll instantly be able to see a difference, which influences the great work that your team produces, and will also help you make a difference in your own career as a leader.

It includes:
- Four ‘hidden’ skills that good collaborators have
- Two key foundations of successful collaboration
- The activity that most teams forget, yet is so simple, and so important to the success of a project
- One thing you can do to avoid unproductive conflict and bad feelings in your team
- The most important factor to keeping teams motivated and engaged throughout a project
- The reason why many of your brainstorming sessions feel confused and frustrating

I hope you find it a useful and practical guide!
Before anything, start with yourself

The irony of collaboration is that it really starts with the individual. Although a team is a group of people working together for a common goal, it’s made up of individuals with their own skills, personalities, history and backgrounds. The more each person on the team has the ability to collaborate and has taken steps to develop the skills for this, the more likely the whole team is to be successful.

So this means that if you want a better working creative team, you need to start with yourself. You’re already brilliant at what you do, but there is another layer of ‘hidden’ skills that you can develop on top of this. These skills will help you become a better collaborator, and help you get the best out of yourself and the people around you. They’re such an interconnected suite of skills that you’ll see some obvious overlap between them.

Here they are.
Design mindset

Whether or not you use design in your work, you don’t have to be a “designer” to have a design mindset. Design is increasingly recognised as something that should be applied throughout a project, not just at the end to make products, services and materials look good. It’s more than just aesthetics, it’s a way of thinking and a process.

Having a design mindset includes thinking about the user experience, prototyping, experimentation and iterating your ideas. It’s making sure you ask the right questions and frame the problem, before proposing a solution.

When you have a design mindset with regards to collaboration, you see opportunities to improve the way that your team works together, and you approach it as a true creative problem solver. You think of yourself and your colleagues as the ‘end users’ of the working processes that you create. You understand that you need to sketch out possibilities, try things out, and change them when you learn what works.
Strategic thinking

Next on the list is strategic thinking, where you start to look at the bigger picture of a project, identify where you need to get to and see how all of the pieces fit together. You ask big “what if…?” questions, you gather multiple perspectives and you’re able to draw out the main themes. You’re curious, want to explore trends, and keep an eye on what’s happening outside your project in order to bring new knowledge in. You want to stretch things a little bit further past what is comfortable.

This way of thinking is essential to collaborative working, because you value the diverse viewpoints and skills that come from your team. As a strategic thinker, you can take a step back and see how each individual contribution plays an important part in the project. You know that working well together and sharing knowledge will help you achieve much more than what each person could create on their own.
At IDEO, the global design & innovation agency, they make great efforts to only employ what they call T-shaped people. These are people that have a deep knowledge of their domain (the downwards stroke of the 'T'), but are able to understand and work with people across a wide range of disciplines (the horizontal stroke).

If you are a great collaborator, you are T-shaped. You take pride in your own work and keep developing your practice, but you value the expertise of others, and you’re able to communicate with them well to get the job done. This requires adaptability, being genuinely interested in others’ opinions, great listening skills, empathy and patience.
Facilitation

Great facilitation is essential when running workshops and meetings with your team and clients. It means that you’re able to design great sessions that you know will get the desired results, keep everyone engaged on the day and make sure everyone is contributing. It means that you can help your workshop attendees develop great ideas, come to conclusions and decide next steps together.

But facilitation isn’t just useful for workshops and meetings. As you develop this skill, you’ll find that you’re using it in many of your conversations and throughout projects to get the best out of the people around you. It helps you to keep momentum going and make sure the project is moving forward.
Building your team

You won’t always be in the position to create your team from scratch, but as more companies realise the value of cross-functional, multidisciplinary teams it's becoming more likely. If you do get involved in building teams, here are some factors that make a difference. If you’re part of an existing team, you can revisit some of these tips to energize your working.
1. Make your team diverse

If you’ve ever done a personality test you’ll know they can give you a fascinating insight into the way you prefer to work and your strengths and weaknesses. Some are more respected than others, and there are many out there, but the main thing they all highlight is that we’re all different.

BELBIN, for example, was an assessment tool developed in the 1980s by Meredith Belbin. As a result of his research he highlighted that for management teams to succeed, they need to cover nine different roles spanning across thinking-, people- and action-oriented types. This mix is vital to get good ideas, to keep communication going and to make sure work actually gets done.

This mix of personalities can cause conflict, which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, and I’ll talk more about this later. But it’s important to identify these differences at the outset. **Make sure that everyone understands their reason for being involved in the project and understands and respects everyone else’s reason for being there too.** This not only makes it easier to allocate clear roles and responsibilities later on, but helps your team members to tap into specific expertise when needed and be confident of their unique contribution to the project.

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**TIP**

When you first get your team together, allocate some time for everyone to share their backgrounds, expertise and knowledge, and what they can bring to the project.

Questions you can ask:

• What knowledge and experience do you have for this project?
• What are your specific skills and expertise?
• What resources can you offer, and what time commitment can you make?
2. Keep your team small

Amazon’s Jeff Bezos famously said “if you can’t feed a team with two pizzas, it’s too large”. The larger a team gets, the less effective it becomes. You might find it harder to prevent tendencies like ‘groupthink’, where people agree with others mainly for the sake of fitting in, and ‘social loafing’, where people sit back and let others do the work.

You need to have enough people to make sure you have all of your skill bases covered for what the project needs to deliver. At the same time, each person on the team must have unique insights and expertise to offer, and the team must be small enough that everyone has a distinct role. Even if there is some slight overlap, there should be enough difference between team members to feel that they can learn something new from each other.

There have been many different opinions on what the ideal team size is, and it seems to fall somewhere between 5 and 9 (i.e. 7, plus or minus 2). What everyone seems to agree on however, is that as a team starts to get into double figures, it becomes more difficult to remain productive.

--- TIP ---
Watch out for what happens if your teams gets larger than 10, particularly in meetings. If you’re unable to keep your team smaller than this, you may need to form sub-groups to keep the project productive.
3. Build trust

Two factors form the central foundation to a successful project team and great collaboration—trust and communication. Think back to any problem you’ve encountered when working as part of a team, and it mostly comes down to either one of these.

Team members have to trust and respect each other for it to work, no matter how talented they each are. Trust needs to be established from the start. It’s much harder to create it later in the project, and once it’s lost it’s hard to get back.

One of our most basic needs as human beings is ‘connection’ to others. So try to get to know your collaborators outside of the project environment. It’s not just about work, work, work. It’s about relationships too! You don’t have to party together, but maybe a lunch or coffee to find out a bit more about your teammates as people. And because we naturally tend to gravitate towards people that are similar to us, if you’ve done your work in making sure the team is diverse, you’ll need to do a bit more work to help them bond.

**TIP**

Early in the project, arrange a meeting outside of your usual work environment, so people feel a bit more relaxed and get to know each other in a social setting.

There are various ways to build trust. One method is to encourage your team to find what they have in common with each other. This can be as simple as finding that they have a birthday in the same month or share a favourite food. Or perhaps you can simply start by identifying what connects everyone for this particular project.
When time is short and pressure is high, it’s all too tempting to get stuck into your project straight away. But the way you start your project is just as important as what happens during it. Many teams don’t pay enough attention to this stage, and it causes problems later on. Getting your team into the right mindset, before getting stuck into the work, pays dividends.

Ideally, this is some kind of kick-off workshop where you bring everyone together for a few hours to look at the bigger picture, set the broad direction and get the project going.
4. Involve everyone from the start

Have you ever been part of a project where you feel you could have added more value, insights, and ideas, if only you were involved earlier?

I’ve found that **the most successful creative projects involve ALL team members from the start**, regardless of when their main involvement will be. It’s a fantastic opportunity to shape the project based on the knowledge and capabilities of your new team. At the beginning, members can really get to the heart of the challenge and gain a good sense of the overall project aim.

Even for team members who have more of a role later in the project, they can give information at the start on what they will practically need to do their best work. This input can also help shape what happens in earlier stages.

**TIP**
At the start of the project, plan a kick-off workshop where all team members are invited to attend. Take this opportunity to tap into everyone’s knowledge and experience to explore what the project could be. For example, encourage them to share any points of inspiration, similar projects they’ve worked on in the past and any questions they have. This will give your team members more ownership of the project, and allow them to make suggestions for how they can best contribute.
5. Set clear expectations

It’s easy to think that the best way to be creative is to let ideas run free without any boundaries. But the reality is that creativity needs constraints. In her classic piece “How to Kill Creativity” for Harvard Business Review, Teresa Amabile identified that people often need clearly specified goals to do their best creative work. Your team are more likely to thrive if there are clear objectives, criteria on which to select ideas, and clarity around the quality that you want to deliver to. Some of this may already be predetermined, like budget and deadline, but there will likely be other ‘quality’ criteria to be set.

Work with your team to set the direction and vision of the project, and where you want to get to. Defining this now will come in handy later on in the project when you’re trying to make decisions, and help the transition from ideation to execution.

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**TIP**

At your kick-off workshop, ask everyone to individually write down what they want to achieve by the end of the project. Ask the question: what does success look like to you? Share the results, find overlap and where they might be conflicting views to resolve. Use this to create shared goals and objectives.
6. Discuss HOW you’re going to work together

Most teams are pretty clear on **what** the end goal is, or at least what they’re loosely working towards, but they don’t always spend time agreeing on **how** they will work together to get there. This is the one thing that teams often forget to talk about and can have the biggest impact.

Although this seems a little less exciting than discussing the creative idea itself, if you do cover this upfront, you greatly reduce the chances for miscommunication, lost ideas and confusion. This frees up **more time** for you to focus on creativity, not less.

The trick is to keep it simple and light-touch. Don’t insist on heavy-handed and cumbersome processes, just a framework that keeps you and your team on track. Take time to discuss how you’ll:

- communicate general updates
- share ideas and new information
- how often you’ll meet
- the criteria you’ll use to assess, accept or reject new ideas
You’ll also need to discuss milestones, deadlines and key points throughout the project. With a new project, you might not have all this information until you’ve had time to explore and test ideas. But you need to start somewhere. Use what you’ve already discussed in your early meetings to create an initial task list and timeline together. Make sure you keep the timeline updated as the project develops.

**TIP**
The best creative projects happen when people are able to work in their own way towards the aims that have been identified. Once you’re clear on the project goals, ask everyone to map out their usual workflow, share how they best work, what they need and what they find challenging.

Once all of this information is laid out, preferably visually, the team will have more understanding of each other’s processes. They can work together to find the points where they need to interact and share information, where there are gaps, and where they may need to make some tweaks to their usual working methods. Design your team’s project workflow based on this.
7. Take a design approach

Even though you’ll initially discuss how you will work together, you still have no idea how this will play out with a new project and new team. So, set the atmosphere for experimentation. Test out the best ways of working together, and create an environment where people can (constructively) feedback if a method isn’t working for them.

Make sure you, or someone in your team, pays attention to this. Keep an eye on the process so that you’re sure you’re being productive, everyone is getting what they need and when they need it, communication is open, and meeting formats and frequency are working.

TIP

Start with a small part of the project, a quick deliverable, or something low-risk which can test your workflow and how well you work together. Review how it worked and make changes if you need to.
Get comfortable with being uncomfortable

One certainty about new creative projects is that they will have an uncertain, messy and chaotic stage, particularly at the beginning before everythings starts falling into place.

Bruce Tuckman even identified it as the ‘storming’ stage in his model “Tuckman’s stages for group development”. This is where ideas are thrown about and team members try to establish their positions and get their opinions across.

The first part of the model is forming, where the team get together. After that comes storming. Then you have norming, where team members start to fall into their clearer roles. Finally the team starts performing, getting on with the task at hand.
I’m not sure that creative projects are always as linear as this. As new challenges arise and ideas are developed, teams might move back and forth between the stages. In any case, the ‘storming stage’ can feel pretty difficult. But this uncomfortable phase is a normal part of creativity and innovation, so get comfortable with it!

Prepare yourself and your team to work through this phase, giving necessary time for ideas to incubate. This is where a design mindset comes in handy, as you’ll need to take an approach of prototyping and testing – doing, not talking – as you start to figure out what works and clearer answers emerge.
Generating great ideas

Who doesn’t want better ideas and more creativity in their work? Sometimes we feel we don’t have the time to be as creative as we would like. Here are some of the factors that I’ve found to work for raising the quality of creative ideas as a team.
8. Separate ideation and decision-making

There are two main types of thinking, divergent and convergent, and you can’t do both at the same time. Divergent thinking is thinking broadly, coming up with new possibilities, expanding your ideas and generating as many as possible. Convergent thinking is the opposite, where you try to narrow down options, find the ‘right’ answer and make a decision.

If you try to make decisions in divergent thinking mode, then you’ll be shutting down ideas before they’ve developed, and restricting the breadth of ideas developing. Likewise, if you keep trying to generate ideas when you need to make a decision, then you’ll find yourselves going around in circles. This can cause a lot of frustration in teams.

What you need to do is clearly separate these two types of thinking. Even if you need to do both ideas generation and decision-making in a single meeting, make sure that you have different activities for each task, and everyone attending is clear on what you’re asking them to do.

TIP
When you’re at any stage of a project, and particularly in meetings, know whether you need to generate ideas or choose the best option. Remember to clearly separate the two.
9. Make sure everyone has a say

One of the factors that leads to a successful team is equal contributions from each team member. Two separate research studies from MIT have shown how important this is\(^2\). The thing is, some people are just better at speaking up than others.

This difference can be seen particularly in extroverts and introverts. Extroverts get their energy from being in social situations. They speak in order to think. Introverts, on the other hand, get their energy from time spent alone. They like to think things through before they speak up. So you’ll need to make sure you find ways to hear from everyone. It’s not always those that shout the loudest that have the best ideas.

You might worry that bringing out so many viewpoints will make it harder to move forward with a project. But don’t worry if you uncover conflicting views amongst your team members. In fact, it’s much better that you do. That way you can deal with it openly and effectively, and it can even lead to better ideas (there’s a section coming later on embracing conflict).

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**TIP**

Design your meetings and workshops so that everyone can speak up, and put communication methods in place throughout the project. This could be an online space, for example, that gives people the chance to add thoughts as and when they come up.
10. Better brainstorming

There are mixed feelings about brainstorming, and not without reason. This method for group creativity, which was invented by adman Alex Osborn in the 1960’s, can feel unproductive and strained. Part of the reason is that teams often forget the original rules of brainstorming, which are: focus on quantity, withhold criticism, welcome unusual ideas, and combine and improve ideas. But most of the time, the problem is that brainstorming sessions are 1) spontaneous and 2) there is no facilitator.

“Plan activities and exercises that get people standing up, moving around and using their hands”

There are three stages to a great ideation (or any type of) workshop:

1. Preparation
2. On-the-day facilitation
3. Follow-up
Firstly, you need to prepare for a collaborative experience, during which everyone will participate. This preparation is a real design process, where you think about what you need for the next stage of the project, and think backwards from there. **Plan activities and exercises that get people standing up, moving around and using their hands.** To do this, make use of sticky notes, markers, paper and flipcharts.

Your workshop should look very different to a traditional meeting. You’ll make use of the walls to display ideas and notes, and it will be more dynamic. So make sure you have the right type of room for this. Plan for breakout groups, where you divide everyone into smaller teams, and remember the differences between divergent and convergent thinking.

On the day, you’ll have various tasks including time-keeping, taking notes, keeping the conversation flowing and ensuring that everyone is contributing. This makes it very hard to facilitate and be involved in brainstorming at the same time. If you do need to get involved, ask someone else to facilitate the session for you.

In following up, you’ll need to keep momentum going. Don’t lose the energy and all the great ideas that were developed at the workshop. Make sure that everyone is clear about next steps and the action they need to take to keep the project going. I’ll cover this more in the section Getting work done.

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**TIP**

There are many more tips for running great workshops and meetings on the Resources section at [www.bracketcreative.co.uk](http://www.bracketcreative.co.uk).
II. Avoid groupthink

One of the biggest fears of a creative team is a mediocre, bland or an uninteresting project. Although managing equal contributions, not shutting ideas down too early and better brainstorming can help to prevent this, there are still some other factors which challenge our efforts to be creative as a team.

For various reasons, people may not speak up and challenge ideas. This could be because they want to fit in, they might not want to undermine a more senior colleague, or they want to avoid conflict. They don’t want to be seen as a ‘trouble-maker’. But when this happens, you’re likely to run into groupthink and this can be the enemy of originality.

Groupthink is where people favour harmony in the group over the potential for conflict, and this leads to bad decision-making. Sometimes it’s unconscious, but sometimes people are even aware that the team are going in the wrong direction and do not speak up. Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastie researched this psychological tendency in detail, and found that factors as subtle as a senior member of staff speaking first can have an effect on a team going along with a bad idea.

It’s important to create an environment where ideas can be challenged, and they’re not just supported because of who they came from.

**TIP**

In a brainstorming session, try brainwriting. Have people write their ideas down silently and anonymously. Post these ideas on the wall without revealing who they came from, and get people to vote on their favourite ideas.
It’s a mistake to think that the perfect collaborative project is one that is harmonious from start to finish. **Real innovation emerges from the mixed viewpoints that can only come from a diverse, specialised and talented team** (which is where we started this book in the first section, Building your team). Because of this, there will inevitably be clashing of ideas, and this is great! Welcome and embrace conflict, but recognise and manage it well so that it doesn’t become destructive.

**Make sure that conflict is centred around ideas and tasks, not people.**

When the latter, it becomes personal and that’s not useful for anybody. But conflict around creativity is good. It pushes people, challenges idea and breaks comfort zones. It encourages people to justify their view points which can create a valuable learning experience. This can still be tricky to manage, so make sure your teammates know this, are prepared for it and are reminded when it’s happening.

Pixar’s Braintrust is a great example, where meetings are specifically set up for a team of experienced storytellers to provide constructive, but candid, feedback to a director’s project⁴. The director can accept or reject the feedback as he or she wishes, but they openly put themselves in a situation for their work to receive criticism.

**TIP**

You can create the environment for productive conflict to take place, for example during a specific workshop exercise that encourages structured feedback, or by stating that “now is the time to challenge all ideas, remember to stay focused on criticising the idea not the person”.

In her book Creative Conspiracy, Leigh Thomson suggests that a good way to manage conflict is to make sure all ideas are written on paper. That way when people are giving feedback “they can attack the paper, rather than attacking the person”⁵.
Getting your project started in the right way and generating great ideas is only the first step to a successful collaboration. You’ll need to stay attentive throughout the project to keep it progressing and moving in the right direction.

Earlier, I said that communication is one of the two most important factors that contribute to the success of a project. If you can keep great communication throughout the project, you'll foresee any challenges much earlier, you'll create more opportunities to spark ideas and you'll keep the team atmosphere strong.
If you’re involved in leading a team, whether formally or informally, it’s important to have knowledge about what makes your teammates tick. You might already be aware that financial rewards are not the most effective motivator for people carrying out any kind of creative work. People who do this kind of work are more driven by intrinsic rewards, e.g. recognition from peers and satisfaction from delivering high quality results.

Daniel Pink wrote extensively about this in “Drive”, describing the main elements of motivation as Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose. People need to feel that they have the freedom to carry out this work in their own way, that they feel they are working towards developing their expertise, and that they are involved in something bigger than themselves (another reason to involve them from the start of the project).
13. Don’t get stuck in ‘ideation’ mode

When you’re running a project for the first time, it’s difficult to know when to move from developing ideas to getting things done. When should you protect ideas and let them incubate, and when should you stop generating ideas and move into delivery mode?

The tension between creativity and productivity is a well-documented one, particularly by Scott Belsky, creator of the Behance Network and 99u, who has described the “idea plateau”. This is where there is a lot of excitement and energy at the beginning of a project and it wanes as the team move into execution mode.

Sometimes, when teams are struggling to ‘start’, it’s because the task is too large, or it’s still an intangible idea. The trick here is to get ideas out of everyone’s heads and onto paper so that they are visible and tangible, and then break them down into smaller, actionable tasks.
TIP
When you’re stuck, you can try what I call a ‘braindump’ to kick-start people into action.

How to do a braindump

1. Get everyone to ‘download’ everything that they think needs to get done during the project. Ask them to write their ideas onto post-it notes, one idea per post-it note

2. Organise those ideas into themes by grouping similar post-its notes together. These are your project areas

3. Take each bundle of post-it notes (your project areas), and arrange them into the order of what needs to get done. Identify the first task you can start with straight away.

4. Start!

Still finding it hard to organise your post-it notes into a timeline? Then your ideas are probably still too big. If what is written on a post-it note is not a small and actionable task, you’ll need to break it down even more.
14. Make tasks and timelines visible

Set up your team for high productivity by ensuring that everyone can easily see the project’s current status, either physically or virtually, and can update it as necessary as they do their work. This serves various purposes: the team can identify blocks and bottlenecks, they can see what everyone else is doing and it gives them more shared ownership of the project.

Keeping tasks and timelines visible also helps to avoid responsibility bias, a term used by Adam Grant in “Give and Take”, where we overestimate our contribution to a team project, and think that we’ve done more than our colleagues. For example, if you ask your teammates the percentage of work they’ve individually done for a project and add up the answers, you’re likely to get a total which is more than 100% – not possible! This partly happens because we naturally have more information about the work we’ve done ourselves than anyone else. But you can imagine how this can lead to some bad feelings and frustration.

TIP
Use a simple tool (like Kanban which shows tasks to do, tasks in progress and tasks that have been completed) to create a central point for people to know what’s happening in a project and when.
15. Frequent check-ins and updates

A few years back I worked on a project with another busy entrepreneur. It was a big event, and the experiences I’d had working with other entrepreneurs on collaborations had taught me a lot about prioritisation. If you’re working on multiple projects at the same time, it’s easy to let one or more of them slip.

We identified that the reason this project was so successful was because we had short but regular update meetings for the duration of the project (twice a week for 30 minutes). They were task-driven and energetic to keep motivation high. This kept the project front of mind and we had to account for the progress we’d made each time we met.

If you’re part of a creative team, it’s likely that your collaborators will be working on other projects. So you need to find ways to keep attention and focus. A frequent check-in can do this, whether virtually or in person. Keep these meetings short and focused on updates, and have different meetings for ideas generation. Give your teammates the opportunity to share anything that might be holding them up or preventing them from doing their best work.

**TIP**

In Agile methodology, teams use the ‘daily stand-up’ — a quick and focused meeting where everyone shares three things: 1) what they did, 2) what they are working on and 3) anything they might need help with. While daily might be too frequent for your project, these principles are very useful.
The co-working meeting

Another type of meeting I’ve discovered through my work is what I call the “co-working meeting”. This is where people get together for a specific amount of time for the sole purpose of smashing through a to-do list. This is not the same as brainstorming or an update meeting. With a co-working meeting, you’re completing tasks, some of which only you can do yourself, but being in the presence of others provides focus and motivation.
16. Celebrate the small wins

It’s easy to focus on the big end goal and deadline, but you can also keep motivation and team engagement high by taking stock of the smaller successes along the way.

In their research for “The Progress Principle”, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer identified that the single most important factor in ensuring that creative workers were happy and engaged in their work was that they felt they were making progress. They found that people need to feel that they are moving forward, and it’s the small steps that can have a massive impact. Yet most of the managers they interviewed had no idea how vital this was.

“People who work with and lead creative teams need to concentrate on removing barriers, smoothing the path and creating the conditions for people to do their best work.”

This is where the value of facilitation comes in beyond the purpose of running meetings and workshops. A traditional management role might involve directing, providing answers and making decisions. But actually, people who work with and lead creative teams need to concentrate on removing barriers, smoothing the path and creating the conditions for people to do their best work.

TIP
Remember to create mini, achievable milestones throughout your project, and stop and celebrate when you reach them.
17. Make time for both individual and group working

Collaborating on a project doesn’t mean you ALL have to be working together ALL of the time. Open plan offices have been criticised for depriving people of the individual, focused and uninterrupted time that is need to incubate and develop ideas. The best offices are designed with both individual and group spaces, and this also goes for projects. As long as communication channels are kept open, there are frequent updates and transparency around what everyone is doing, people will need their individual time to get work done.

This is important as people often do their best work when they enter ‘flow’, the psychological concept coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi which describes the state when you’re so involved in and engaged by a task you’re doing, you lose sense of time and space.

**TIP**

Let each team member share how they work best, for example when they get their best ideas and how they reach ‘flow’. Develop the project around this, with times when the team will come together to share updates, generate ideas and get work done.
‘Lab’ days

There are times when intense periods of collaboration, say half to full days, work really well. The team come together in one space to work through a problem and generate ideas together. It’s a great way to create a prototype or progress a project quickly, and you can get a tremendous amount done. In my experience, these lab days still generate individual tasks, and need to be preceded and followed by time where the team members get to process and digest the content on their own.
18. Watch your project scope

Creative projects often have the tendency to grow, and grow (and grow!), as team members keep coming up with more “must have” features or ideas. While you want to remain flexible as the project develops and not automatically reject all new ideas (this can demotivate people), you’ll also need to be mindful of the resources and time you have to deliver on them. Introducing new ideas late in the project can add pressure to the team, causes ‘scope creep’ and increases the chance the you’ll go over budget and/or miss the deadline.

TIP
When you’re discussing new ideas as a team, refer back to the expectations, goals and objectives you set at the beginning of the project, and assess them against these.

When you’ve finished your project, your team might want to get straight back into their other work. Don’t forget a wrap-up meeting or workshop with your team to celebrate what you’ve achieved, review what worked and what didn’t. Even if you only came together to deliver this project, everyone can learn a lot from the reflection and use it for their future work.
Getting people on board

Most of your team might be excited to experiment with new ways of working that can help them save time, work more smoothly and do better work together, but you may also come across some who are less eager. Sceptics come in all shapes and sizes – from people who feel uncomfortable working and sharing in a group setting, to those who feel that this is all unnecessary, to those who have a big personality and want to dominate conversations.

Each situation and person is different, so while it’s impossible to offer a hard and fast solution, there are two things that have worked for me when I’ve met some resistance: empathy and starting small.
Empathy

A key skill for facilitation is empathy – the ability to understand someone’s situation or position from their perspective. When you think of it like this, there are many reasons why someone might be resisting a change to the way they work.

Aim to be open-minded and curious about the reasons, rather than defensive that someone is being difficult. Instead of asking the question “how can I get [name of person] to do this?”, ask “what’s in it for them?”, and start from there. What’s the benefit to them in their role, for their work? What other responsibilities do they have?

Suddenly you’re thinking about the reasons why they would or wouldn’t want to try a new way of working. You may even want to approach the situation more collaboratively, using their criticisms or objections to help you shape your new techniques. Most people value being included in a process, even when they’re initially opposed to it.
Start small

Throughout this book, I’ve given you some relatively low-risk and no-cost methods for running a project from start to finish, that can entirely transform your approach to working. In situations where you might encounter resistance to a new technique, you can try one of the tips in isolation, subtly and respectfully. Rather than announcing that you’re on a massive quest to improve the way your team works completely, you can explain that you want to try something new.

For example, instead of running a full-day collaborative workshop for the first time, take a small part of an existing meeting, say 20 minutes, to try out a new method to generate ideas. This way it’s an experiment both for you and for your team to see how well it works. In the workshops I run, participants always remark how much they get done in a short space of time. If you can demonstrate a benefit like this on a small scale, then you gain a bit more buy-in from your team to try new things.
We all instinctively know what good collaboration looks like, but still we find working with other people a tricky process. When we’re using our brain power on creative work, somehow we forget what we already know about how best to work with other people. But when we do remember these small interventions, it makes the whole creative process run a lot smoother.

You may have noticed that the approach for helping your team progress through the stages of a great collaboration is very light-touch. You’re guiding everyone through, but leaving lots of room for creativity and for people to input their own knowledge into the project. This is facilitation and is one of the four key skills of great collaborators that I outlined at the start of the book (the other skills are: a design mindset, strategic thinking, and being T-shaped).

I can’t emphasise enough how valuable facilitation is as a skill, not just for running great workshops, but for being part of a successful creative team. By it’s very nature, creativity thrives more when people have autonomy and ownership, feel invested in the project and can work in the best way for them.

At the same time, innovation needs multidisciplinary teams, with individuals bringing their viewpoints and skills together. It requires navigating through uncertainty, making connections, and asking questions, among many other
things. You’re not managing, you’re creating an environment where everyone on your team can equally contribute to the development of the project, share their ideas and communicate openly, and trust and respect each other.

“The reward is that you get the best out of yourself and the people you work with”

Working in this way takes practice and patience. It’s a skill to be developed, not a natural talent that some have and others don’t. But the reward is that you get the best out of yourself and the people you work with, get better ideas, work more productively and you’re able to deliver more of the work that you’re really proud of. It’s also much more enjoyable to work in this way.
I’d love to hear from you!

Good luck with trying the techniques and tips I’ve given you. I’d love to hear your stories of how they worked for you. If you have any specific questions about applying them to your team, please get in touch.

Also, this is a first version of this book, so let me know your comments and feedback. Is there a topic that you were expecting to see that wasn’t included? Do you have any of your own suggestions and techniques for applying collaborative working to your team?

Email me at alison@bracketcreative.co.uk

www.bracketcreative.co.uk
Find more tips and insights for better creative collaboration at
www.bracketcreative.co.uk
1. Teresa Amabile is one of my earliest influences in the management of creativity. “How to Kill Creativity”, was the first article I read by her. Harvard Business Review, September 1998 [Link]

2. These studies involved Alex Pentland of the Human Dynamics Laboratory at MIT. They were referenced in the following sources:
   a. Why Some Teams are Smarter than Others, New York Times, January 2015 [Link]


4. I’ve read about Pixar’s Braintrusts in many places since Ed Catmull published Creativity Inc, but first in “Collective Genius: the Art and Practice of Leading Innovation”, by Linda Hill, Greg Brandeau, Emily Truelove and Kent Lineback

5. Leigh Thomson “Creative Conspiracy: the new rules of breakthrough collaboration”


7. Scott Belsky “Making Ideas Happen: overcoming the obstacles between vision and reality”

8. Adam Grant “Give and Take: a revolutionary approach to success”

9. Teresa Amabile & Steven Kramer “The Progress Principle: using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work”
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