

DR. ROBERT EPSTEIN, ONE OF THE WORLD'S LEADING EXPERTS ON CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION, REVEALS TEN QUICK, ECONOMICAL WAYS TO GET CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION FLOWING IN AN ORGANIZATION DURING TOUGH TIMES. "THE ONLY CURE FOR TOUGH TIMES," SAYS EPSTEIN "IS INNOVATION."

CREATIVITY FOR CRISES

TEN TWEAKS FOR TOUGH TIMES

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INTRODUCTION



“The enterprise that does not innovate ages and declines. And in a period of rapid change such as the present...the decline will be fast.” –Peter Drucker

The Chinese character for crisis has two components: one signifying danger and the other, at least according to some, opportunity or “incipient moment.” When a company is in crisis, in many respects it resembles a start-up, with one important exception: In a start-up, no one is set in his or her ways; anything and everything is possible, and everyone knows it. When an established company is in crisis, however, people are often immobilized with fear, or, worse yet, they resort to tried-and-true methods. When times are tough, the survivors know what to do: Set aside the fear, and forget the tried and true. Instead, *tweak* the organization so that new ideas flow freely, and set up an *Innovation Net* that will catch and evaluate those ideas quickly. The only cure for tough times, I believe, is innovation.

TWEAK #1: ***NO FEAR!*** GIVE PEOPLE TOOLS TO FIGHT STRESS



“To fight a bull when you’re not scared is nothing. And not to fight a bull when you are scared is nothing. But to fight a bull when you are scared—that is something.” –Spanish bullfighter

Fear can be immobilizing, or, worse still, it can drive people away from an organization or even a career. You can fight fear in an organization by (a) spreading the word that “in our organization, we don’t fear fear—fear is a sign that we’re mobilizing to fight and win,” and (b) by giving people tools for managing stress. If your budget is stretched, that might mean providing online links to relaxation and meditation exercises; if you can afford it, that might mean in-house seminars on yoga, tai chi, meditation, breathing techniques, imagery techniques, and more. Speaking of cheap, there are even ways to sit at one’s desk—“relaxation postures”—that have some of the same relaxation benefits as meditation. Try this one out yourself right now, and feel the tension melt away:

Stretch your feet out in front of you on the floor, and let them fall away from each other, so that your feet form roughly a ninety degree angle. Let your shoulders relax so that they’re slightly rounded. Let your head fall forward naturally, and let your jaw go slack. Now close your eyes and breathe easily for a few minutes.... Enjoy.

Cost: Minimal.



TWEAK #2: *NO BOUNDARIES!*

MAKE ALL ASSIGNMENTS OPEN-ENDED



*"The way to get good ideas is
to get lots of ideas and throw
the bad ones away."*
—Linus Pauling

From now on—no exceptions—structure all goals, tasks, and assignments so that they're open-ended and unbounded. When you ask people for three ideas, that's what they give you. When you ask people for *at least* three ideas, you often get... *six!* Experts suggest that it takes about 10,000 ideas for every one that brings true innovation to the marketplace. If you want useful ideas to flow in your organization, you need to vastly increase the size of the pool from which you draw new ideas.

Cost: None.

Bonus: When all tasks are open-ended, you not only increase creative output, you also increase productivity.





TWEAK #3:

CHANGE YOUR SPACE

MAKE YOUR ENVIRONMENT DYNAMIC, NOT STATIC



*“The environment determines
the individual.” –B. F. Skinner*

One of the easiest, most economical, and most powerful ways to change the way people think is to change the stimuli—both physical and social—that surround them. Are you stuck thinking old, ineffective thoughts? Sweep the items off your desk and put some new ones there. Turn your desk a different way. Hang out with some new people. Put posters on the walls of your business reading **NEW IDEAS WELCOME HERE**, or, better yet, put *blank* posters everywhere that say **WRITE YOUR NEW IDEAS HERE** at the top. The next time you order pens and paper, make sure they’re all printed with a message such as, **NEW IDEA RECORDER**. A stale, unchanging space produces stale, unchanging ideas. An ever-changing space that broadcasts messages welcoming creativity can alter an organization’s culture overnight.

Cost: Minimal—mainly some people time.



TWEAK #4:
RETOOL YOUR TEAMS
SHIFT, DON'T JUST BRAINSTORM



“A committee is an alien with at least six legs and no brain.”
—Unknown

If you're still relying on group brainstorming to generate ideas and solutions, here's a way to double the effectiveness of every group: Don't keep people working together for very long; instead, let them *shift* outside the group every half hour or so to work on the problem individually. *All* creative ideas emerge in the heads of *individuals*, and the team setting inhibits creative expression in many individuals. When people return from a shift, they pool their ideas, often producing twice as many total ideas after just one shift. With more shifts, the net gain is even greater. Even in a brief meeting, a single shift has enormous benefits—far more ideas for the same buck.

Cost: Zero!



TWEAK #5:

CAPTURE THE NEW!

PRESERVE NEW IDEAS NOW, EVALUATE LATER



"I'll play it first and tell you what it is later." —Miles Davis

We all have new ideas every day. They come at random times, and they also come reliably when we dream, daydream, or experience the hypnagogic state—the semi-sleep state between waking and sleeping. The main difference between everyday folks and creative geniuses like Edison and Dali is that the geniuses pay attention to and *preserve* the new ideas, and, yes, both Edison and Dali made deliberate use of the hypnagogic state to get new ideas. It's also important to capture the new ideas *without* evaluating them; that can wait until later. In organizations, you can easily increase the rate at which people capture their new ideas, boosting the capture rate by a factor of ten or more. This can be done with simple materials changes (e.g., posters, pens, pads, and software that encourage capturing), by altering the space (e.g., allowing people to write on the walls, just as engineers did in the famous Skunkworks facility where stealth fighters were designed), and by implementing “anonymous suggestion systems” in which anonymous suggestions are tagged and can later be claimed.

Cost: Minimal.





TWEAK #6: **DARE TO FAIL!** CREATE A CULTURE OF CHALLENGE



“The way to succeed is to double your failure rate.”

—Thomas Watson,
Founder of IBM

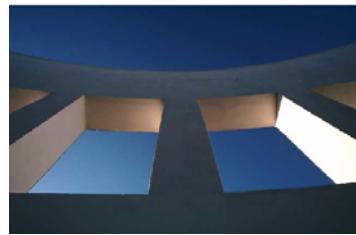
When you fail, you're in good company. Thomas Edison tried thousands of materials before finally finding a viable filament for the world's first successful light bulb. He “failed his way to success,” as he put it. Obviously, this doesn't mean that we should try to make our businesses fail, but it does mean that failure isn't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, research shows that failure—called “extinction” in the laboratory—is actually a major spur for creativity and innovation. The good news is that there are techniques—“controlled failure systems”—that can be embedded in organizations which enhance creativity without putting a company in jeopardy. For example, when employees are presented with extremely difficult company-related problems to solve just a few minutes a day—say, making the company 100 percent green by next Tuesday—hundreds of new ideas are generated, a few of which are bound to have significant value.

Cost: Minimal—mainly a few minutes of staff time each week.





TWEAK #7: *BROADEN THE MIND* TRAIN WELL BEYOND CURRENT EXPERTISE



“The creative is the place where no one else has ever been. You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. What you’ll discover will be wonderful.” –Alan Alda

New ideas emerge when old ones become interconnected; that's where all creativity comes from. Aha! That means that one way to prime the creativity pumps to produce interesting and novel material is to *broaden* one's knowledge—the broader the better. In an organization, that means encouraging people to get training far outside their current areas of expertise. This also works for individuals at home. Don't take yet another course on French cooking; take a course on cartooning, or on 12th century architecture, or on nuclear physics! The more diverse your knowledge, the more creative your ideas will be.

Cost: Minimal—if you're already doing in-house training or if you already pay for outside training.



TWEAK #8:
TREASURE THE NEW!
PROVIDE CREATIVITY-FRIENDLY FEEDBACK



*“Creativity is so delicate a flower that
praise tends to make it bloom, while
discouragement often nips it in the bud.
Any of us will put out more and better
ideas if our efforts are appreciated.”*
—Alex F. Osborn

The easiest way to shut down creative expression—as we all remember from our early schooling—is to criticize new ideas. Conversely, an easy way to keep new ideas flowing is to praise creative efforts. In an organization, this can be done through feedback provided by managers, through formal incentive systems (for example, providing cash awards for suggestions that originated through an anonymous suggestion system and that were later implemented by the company), and through positive feedback given during formal personnel evaluations.

Cost: Positive feedback costs nothing. An anonymous suggestion system can be set up at modest cost on a company computer network or, for nominal cost, with a shoebox and a two-part numbered form; one part gets handed in, and the other is retained.



TWEAK #9: BOOST CREATIVITY COMPETENCE TRAIN MANAGEMENT AND STAFF



“Ah, mastery.... What a profoundly satisfying feeling when one finally gets on top of a new set of skills and then sees the light under the new door those skills can open.”

—Gail Sheehy

Okay, Tweak #9 isn't quite as quick and easy as the previous eight, but if you're serious about boosting creativity and innovation, it needs to be mentioned. Managers and staff can be trained in specific competencies that have been shown to boost creativity and innovation in organizations. There are four basic competencies for individuals—Capturing, Challenging, Broadening, and Surrounding—and eight competencies for managers and supervisors who want to boost creativity and innovation in their work environment. These competencies are easy to measure using simple online tests (see <http://MyCreativitySkills.com>), and they're also easy to train using a variety of games and exercises that have been developed for that purpose. Faced with a budget crunch, the town of Brea, California (in Orange County) recently trained nearly 200 city employees in creativity competencies. Over the next few months, new ideas flowing from the training program resulted in new revenues and non-invasive cost cuts totaling over \$4 million.

Cost: Minimal to moderate—depends on what training resources you have or can purchase.





TWEAK #10: *SHOW 'EM HOW!* LEAD, MODEL, AND INSPIRE



“The most important single influence in the life of a person is another person who is worthy of emulation.”

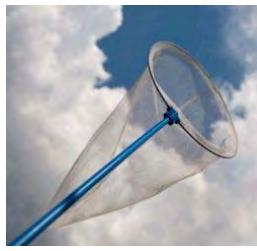
—Paul D. Shafer

Whether you're a CEO or a floor supervisor, one of the best ways you can boost creativity in staff is to lead, model, and inspire. Tell people how much you value their new ideas. Tell them about your own new ideas, and demonstrate creativity competencies in action; for example, use a memo recorder or pad and pen to capture a new idea when you're around other people. Remind them of the truth: that a culture of creativity and innovation is critical for the survival, growth, and success of your organization.

Cost: None.



THE INNOVATION NET



You've tweaked, and now you've got a new problem. As problems go, this is one of the best your organization will ever face: You now have *too many* ideas flowing upward toward management—far too many to act on or even to evaluate. Each of your managers used to get one idea a week from staff, if that.

Now they're getting dozens. What to do? The answer: Set up an *Innovation Net*—a small, diverse group of people who spend a few minutes each day screening the flow of new ideas. Depending on your organizational structure, you might want to have small groups of supervisors or managers—people who are closer to the front lines—do some pre-screening, or you might want all ideas to flow to a central location. The details about how the Net works will vary, depending on the organization. Yes, some new resources will be needed to evaluate the flow, but you'll probably look back and decide that this was one of the best resource eaters your business ever had.

Cost: Moderate, but the best money you'll ever spend.

EMBEDDING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION



If you work for a major corporation, you probably have a bulky manual—or maybe a series of bulky manuals—with a title such as “Policies and Procedures.” If you’re in the middle of a crisis, and all you need are some quick fixes, *tweak* your organization right now, and you’re done. But if you’re in this for the long term—if you’re after *permanent* changes in your organization that will keep creativity and innovation flowing at a high rate, you’ll want to open up that manual and start editing. You’ll find that fairly small changes in existing policies and procedures will yield enormous long-term results. In other words, you can *embed* creativity and innovation into your organization, altering the culture from top to bottom so that creativity and innovation are never left to chance.

Cost: Moderate—but pays off forever.

BRINGING CREATIVITY HOME



If you're like most people, crises don't stop occurring just because you've left the office. The nature of the crises changes, but they still keep coming. And even without crisis, couldn't you use a little more creativity in your personal life?

The tweaks laid out in this article can help you in every walk of life. At home, tweaks 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7 can be especially helpful. Moving furniture around or changing decorations in your home office will change the way you think. Taking a community college course on something you know nothing about—cartooning? chocolate making? salsa dancing?—will broaden your knowledge and allow diverse and interesting ideas to take shape in your mind. And talk about dreams.... Keeping a pad and pencil, or perhaps a memo recorder, near your bed when your nap or sleep will open up a whole new world of creative possibilities. Dali did it, Edison did it, and you can too.

Cost: Hey, you're home! Creativity makes every day more fun and interesting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



One of America's most distinguished psychologists, Robert Epstein is a Ph.D. of Harvard University, a long-time researcher and professor, and the former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today* magazine. Currently a visiting scholar at the University of California San Diego, his research on creativity and innovation has been put to work at Nestlé, Bayer, Proctor & Gamble, and other major companies. His fourteen books include *Creativity Games for Trainers* and *The Big Book of Creativity Games*, published by the Business Division of McGraw-Hill. You can learn more about Dr. Epstein's work on creativity and innovation at <http://CreativityCompetencies.com>. To book him for lectures, seminars, or consultations, contact Laura at OutinFrontPublicity.com (info@outinfrontpublicity.com, 1-877-877-1726).

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