

Anxiety and Creativity Don't Mix. So... don't worry. Be Happy: Warm-ups for Creativity Sessions

Anxious and rigid people are less capable of improvising in a situation that requires them to think creatively. (It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out.) However, people who experience anxiety have equal ability to come up with novel ideas once they start to practice control of their angst.

So how can angst be arrested? By doing something that anxious and rigid people too often have neglected or forgotten how to do: daydream!

According to the *Gayle Encyclopedia of Psychology*, children who experienced motivating and happy daydreams and visualizations about goals and a bright future carried their daydreams over into adulthood. These early daydreams became the impetus for problem solving, creativity, or accomplishment later in life, according to B.J. Goldsmith, who reported his findings in the *Los Angeles Business Journal*. Unfortunately, Goldsmith also found that children who tended to have negative projections (daydreams gone bad!) carried anxiety into adulthood.

In order to produce a creative environment for yourself, do some positive daydreaming. According to Goldsmith, "... the next time you are faced with solving a problem, remember relaxation opens the door and imagination primes the pump."

As I reflected on these findings it occurred to me that a great way to "prime the pump" is to conduct a warm-up activity before an idea generating session. Just as athletes need to stretch before a physical workout, Creative Problem Solving participants need to stretch their divergent thinking muscles before getting to work on the main issue. Those of you who have participated in one of my creativity sessions will recall what a warm-up activity accomplishes. Starting off with a short idea generating exercise on a light-hearted case problem raises everyone's energy level and helps the group achieve better, faster results. The classic warm-up activity I do in my sessions is to design the perfect bathtub. (Really, it is!) Several of my workshop participants have actually sent me pictures of their bathrooms, remodeled to incorporate ideas generated during this practice session!

Warm-up activities help groups to:

- practice creativity tools and techniques
- learn or review the guidelines for generating ideas
- get comfortable with working together
- create a climate to encourage laughter and exploration.

Most warm-up exercises are admittedly silly. They're designed that way. The "problems" to solve are mundane and non-threatening. Many of the ideas suggested will sound

absurd or impractical. That's exactly the imaginative mindset the group needs when its members eventually approach the "serious" problem. So don't let the "silly" factor deter you. If you sense resistance, explain the reason for the warm-up exercise, and promise it will take only a few minutes.

Those of you who have been conducting creativity sessions might be ready to add a few new warm-up exercises to your repertoire. In our book, *Facilitation: A Door to Creative Leadership*, Blair Miller, Jonathan Vehar and I suggest the following warm-up topics.

List all the ways you might improve:

- a bathtub
- a bicycle
- a stairway
- an automobile
- a telephone
- a glove
- any other common object.

Recently students in my graduate course in Creative Studies at the International Center for Studies in Creativity came up with these warm-ups.

List all the ways you might use:

- 1,000 broken shoelaces
- 10,000 non-recycled cans
- 10,000 pounds of guacamole
- 4 square tires
- 7,000 rolls of tin foil
- 10,000 pounds of Jell-O
- a compass that is stuck on North
- old used lipsticks
- 1 million jellybeans
- 100 rolls of plastic wrap.

Want some more? How about these?

- How might you get a hippopotamus out of a bathtub?
- How might you get an elephant out of a jeep?
- What are all the things you will need if you are traveling to the sun?
- What might be all the ways you could recycle used Post-its™? (One of my favorites.)
- Think of all the ways you could make a purse theft-proof.
- How can a person drive without his or her hands?
- Consider all the ways there might be to brush a tiger's teeth.

How valuable is it to do a warm-up activity? In my entire career I neglected to do a warm-up twice. Once, because I thought the group was already warmed up and ready to tack-

le the tough issue, and once because I thought I didn't have enough time. In both cases, I had to retrace my steps and conduct a warm-up activity anyway, just to get creativity flowing.

It may take only five minutes, but those five minutes set the tone for all the "serious" work that will follow. Do a warm-up. It's that important!

References:

Goldsmith, B.J., (2001, May). [Online]. "Essential Learning: Innovative Problem Solving." *Los Angeles Business Journal* 1-3.

Miller, B.J., Vehar, J.R., & Firestien, R.L. (2001). *Facilitation: A Door to Creative Leadership*. Williamsville, NY: Innovation Resources, Inc.

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