

“Creativity – Technically Speaking”
Presented to Society for Technical Communication, Houston Chapter
February 26, 2010

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Communication, technical and otherwise, involves thinking and creativity. Yes, I used the “C” word. Thinking is a given; creativity is not. Here are some thoughts on how to keep those creative juices flowing freely especially when you may not feel creative at all.

Thinking is tough enough. Thinking creatively is even tougher. Thinking and feeling creative in a less than favorable or dare I say “not-so-creative” environment can at times really be a stretch, and a challenge to anyone.

Ever had an idea stomped on? Ever been thwarted in developing what you think is a really cool approach to solving a problem or explaining something, only to be told it will never fly? We all have.

In a past life, I was a senior writer/producer at Halliburton. I know what it’s like and how it feels to almost have every sense of creativity sucked out of you; to sort of wonder “why did you guys hire me in the first place?” Working in a traditional, conservative,

staid engineering environment was no fun – at first. Then I learned to adapt and have some fun. More on this later.

Can creativity exist in a technical environment? Sure it can. Those of you who may doubt this, ask yourself “What is creativity?” I suggest creativity is the spark that ignites what you say and how you say it. Creativity occurs when people perceive there are no limits; it’s the ability to see, feel, touch, think and imagine what one has not seen, felt, touched, thought or imagined before; and my favorite, *creativity is intelligence having fun*.

Creativity is a state of mind. And when the mind is having fun, creativity is boundless. Tonight we honor what thought and mind power have brought together in the arena of technical communication.

Some outside this room may not consider technical communicators to be “creative.” Some of you may not either. I say hogwash. If in doubt, think of this: If you have the ability to

challenge your own imagination and stimulate thoughts leading you to a new level of solution, you’ll realize your own sense of creativity.

Some **tips** to enhance your creativity --

Tip: In order to innovate and create, move beyond the conventional. Albert Einstein once said “*Imagination is more important than knowledge.*” Whether you believe that or not, never underestimate the power of your mind – or your imagination. Don’t ever be afraid to ask, “ Why, Why not or What if . . .?”.

Tip: Special notes to management: Don’t manage creativity; manage FOR creativity. Provide an environment that is open and receptive to new ideas.

Consider how Pixar Studios deals with failure and perhaps adopt the “suckless mentality” -- Accept failure, build it into your culture as part of the process; don’t ridicule it, but honor and embrace it. When presented with something that doesn’t quite

measure up, say something gingerly like “Gee, that really sucks.

However, if your tried this or that, it might suck less.”

Tip: Creativity needs to become more synonymous with
“FUN!” Ideas foster creativity and vice versa.

Ye Olde Creativity Survival Kit – Get any sort of container (old, cleaned out paint can is great) in which you place whatever makes you FEEL creative and THINK creatively. Music CD, crayon, gum, Post-it Notes (for that next, great idea; brainstorming and Warp Speed Thinking for idea generation) are good examples.

If you’re thinking this is just silly, well you’re absolutely right.

When it comes to creativity, silly is sometimes serious business. I proudly had my Survival Kit on display in my office at Halliburton and chuckled every time someone came in and took a double take.

Warp Speed Thinking is addressing a specific question by writing one idea per Post It Note and striving to generate 50-100 ideas in 5-10 minutes. This is a timed exercise; have a stop watch.

Jolly Green Giant-sized Yellow Wallpaper – Giant Post-it Notes are great for brainstorming. Ideas, words, thoughts, sketches, silly stuff, serious stuff, whatever, can all be included. As you finish with one, post it on the wall. Don't take it down. Let them cover a designated “Idea Wall” in your office or some place you can easily refer to them. I also did this at Halliburton. It was understood that whenever my office door was open, folks were welcome to drop in and write or draw whatever on the Idea Wall.

At the very least, take your smaller Post It notes and put them up on your office door; now you have an “Idea Door.” The point is to always have them in plain sight. Even when you're thinking or

working on a different project, you look over at the ideas and something may just trigger something else.

Now, a bit of a reality check: Never fall in love with your idea. There’s always a better one around the corner. And, it may not even come from you!

Also, you may not be able to get all your colleagues to appreciate the value of creativity, but you can certainly do some things that will help convince them that what you’re doing matters.

Tip: In an attempt to sway your “less than creative” colleagues to better appreciate where you’re coming from, refine the essence of your ideas. That is, make sure your ideas are clear and that you can explain their basic value in about 20 seconds. This makes it easier for the idea to gain acceptance.

Tip: If you want to generate interest, you need to be interesting. Let’s face it, technical communication can be dry and boring. Some of this is by necessity but that doesn’t mean it all has to be. True innovation springs from the collision of different experiences and perspectives. Let your imagination have fun and think in terms of *no limits*. When you can do this, your creativity knows no bounds.

Tip: Regardless of what you do or how you do it, remember: Trying to satisfy everybody never got anybody anywhere.

Tip: Take time to think. There’s always more than one way to do or say something. That’s where creativity and brainstorming come into play. It is possible to brainstorm by yourself. No interruptions, 30-minutes, a writing instrument and some paper.

Tip: Do not bring a DEAD CAT without a shovel! ☺ In other words, never present a problem without bringing the shovel – at least two possible solutions. In doing so, you save time if one of these is adopted, and you can share your creative thinking while learning more about what’s important to your colleague; remember, you may not know all there is to know.

Now, somewhere in all the world of communication, risks will be taken. In an Advertising Age interview, Lee Clow, the global Chief Creative Director of TBWA Chiat Day had this to say on taking risks: *“So it comes with being daring that you're going to screw up. But I'd rather apologize than to be so timid as to not try and do anything smart or brave.”*

Will there be mistakes made? Sure. According to Scott Adams in The Dilbert Principle, *“Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.”*

So much about communication involves telling a story. I’d like to end with this one regarding creativity and madness.

Several years ago Harvard University did a study on the relationship between creativity and madness. Ignoring what seems irrelevant to your immediate needs may be good for your mental health but bad for creativity, according to the research.

Notes Shelley Carson, a Harvard psychologist, "Scientists have wondered for a long time why madness and creativity seem linked, particularly in artists, musicians, and writers."

You may be interested to know that studies suggest a good working memory and the capacity to keep in mind many things at once, can protect creative people from going nuts. ☺

Carson notes, "Highly creative people in our studies showed the same latent inhibition patterns found in other studies of

schizophrenics. “ *(I’m not sure how comforting that’s meant to be.)*”

She further points out, "Both madness and creativity must involve many different genes. Hopefully, future research will help us progress toward silencing the demons of mental disorders that often coexist with the traits of creativity. Our research does show that, to be creative, you can be bright and crazy, but not stupid."

Her point is illustrated by this old joke: A man is driving past a mental hospital when one of the wheels falls off his car. He stops and recovers the wheel but can't find the lug nuts to secure it back in place. Just then he notices a man sitting on the curb carefully removing small pebbles from the grass and piling them neatly on the sidewalk.

"What am I going to do?" the man asks aloud.

The fellow piling the pebbles looks up, and says, "Take one

of the lug nuts from each of the other wheels and use them to put the wheel back on.”

The driver is amazed. "Wow!" he exclaims. "What a brilliant idea. What are you doing in a place like this?" he asks, nodding toward the mental institution.

"Well," the man answers, "I'm crazy, not stupid."

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