

Teams, Trust, and Tribalism

by Nicholas Ind and Cameron Watt

Collaboration is the norm in design management. Nicholas Ind and Cameron Watt explore the nuances that help companies get the most from this strategy. They note creativity and productivity are optimized when there is an "equitable tension," respect, and trust among stakeholders—a balance of structure, or process, and autonomy; of boundaries and expansive thinking; of active management and self-direction; of homogeneity and diversity.



In the literature on creativity, there is considerable emphasis on the enhancement of individual potential. Yet in most commercial contexts, even if there are individuals who inspire the rest, creative outputs result from a team process. This immediately changes the approach to creative thinking, because the vital element becomes the ability to generate and manage effective teams that have the courage to think in new ways. Our research demonstrates that the key antecedent to effective collective creativity is trust. The importance of trust should not be surprising, but both within the group and outside, in relationships with internal and external clients, trust is often taken as a given. This is misplaced. Trust needs to be earned over time if the seemingly natural tendency toward tribalism in organizations is to be mitigated.



Nicholas Ind, Author and Consultant



Cameron Watt, PhD, Innovation Consultant, Muse

Designing creative teams: Keep it simple. Creative teams must balance the need for order with that for self-expression. Overly rigid structures can unbalance the dynamic illustrated in Figure 1 (on next page), bringing about demotivation, conflict, and lack of cooperation. Such imbalance occurs because traditional hierarchically based structures reduce personal freedom and encourage political behavior, reducing trust, altruism, and risk-taking. However, overly informal structures can also hinder the creative process by failing to provide support, focus, or leadership. Without formal structure, teams may feel vulnerable, confused, and isolated, and they may oscillate between defensive and aggressive behavior. As economist Ernst Schumacher once argued, we always need "freedom and order."

The argument in favor of order may

appear to run against a great deal of research that advocates high levels of team autonomy. We agree that autonomy is vital, but we believe that structure and direction are required for it to actually occur. We do not recommend that creative organizations introduce traditionally structured teams in which decision-making and idea

generation are directed from a single team leader or board director. Neither do we argue for the implementation of specific role responsibilities; such a system can lead to pigeon-holing of staff, a lack of diversity, and reduced motivation.

What we do suggest is that organizations should provide simple supportive structures that reinforce key organizational objectives and

system's, as well as identify broad spans of responsibility for team members.

As an example, let's take online gaming company Funcom (producers of *Anarchy Online* and *The Longest Journey*).¹ At Funcom, the focus of

team members is primarily on the game they are developing. Individuals are motivated to deliver the best within their specific remits, but they also need to connect with other team members, whose skills may fall into a radically different area. A visual artist who is creating a fantasy world set 30,000 years in the future might need to connect with a software engineer whose primary concern is how the detailed programming will work. Both have to be willing and capable of learning from each other and to solve problems together without reducing efficiency. In describing the culture of Funcom, founder Gaute Godager says, "It's innovative, self-examining (not taking anything for granted), and cooperative, and it involves teamwork. Everyone says they like to work in teams, but we're 110 percent dependent on them. For a product to work, there needs to be one person in each area who knows what's going on. There needs to be creative discipline, but within that framework there also needs to be a lot of freedom. Meeting these two demands is quite difficult."

The key factor that Godager and his managers recognize is that effective teamwork and the management of tensions can be realized only through trust. To achieve this, the company tries to recruit people with high levels of skill in their specific disciplines. This is important, because team members need to have trust in one another's capabilities; after all, no one person can micro-manage the detail. Godager sees his own role as one of inspiring people about the game idea and of setting the boundaries of creativity. He knows he doesn't have the technical expertise to oversee the specifics, so Funcom's employees are allowed as much creative freedom as they can handle. The value in this is that the individual team members feel a strong sense of project ownership, since it is their own individual and collective creativity that defines the game. In part, this is an issue of scale. Whereas a company like Disney can employ highly specialist individuals, Funcom needs people who can cover bigger areas and input their creativity into the detail. It is also an issue of philosophy—a view that the ability to express creativity is fulfilling.

The key factor that Godager and his managers recognize is that effective teamwork and the management of tensions can be realized only through trust.

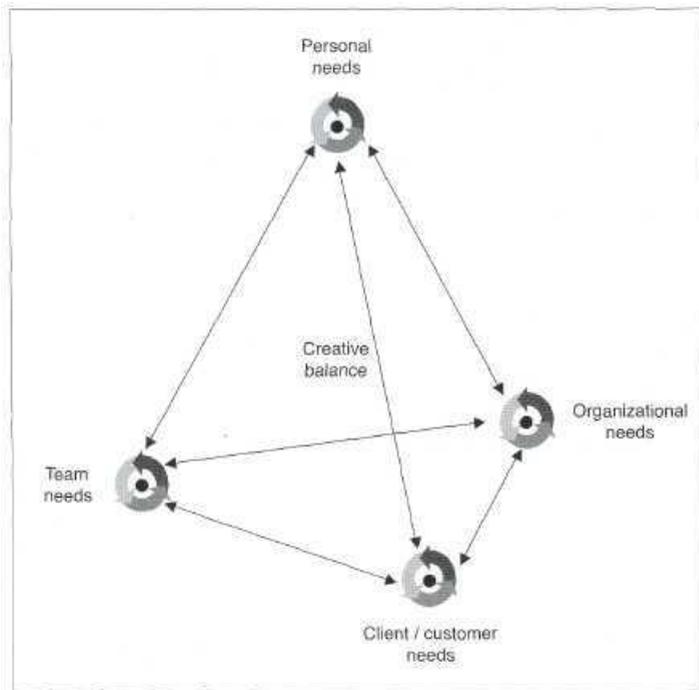


Figure 1. Relationships and tensions in creative projects.

1. Much of our research has been done on successful creative brands such as Funcom, as well as Quiksilver, Aardman, and IDEO.

In well-balanced organizations like Funcom, structure acts as a flexible template that allows team members to work flexibly within broad constraints. This balance enables diversity within a paradigm that is fundamentally homogeneous in terms of core values, objectives, and systems. Individual needs are met and managed within a framework of shared values and goals that facilitate trust.

Getting the right balance

Our research supports the commonly held view that teams made up of diversely experienced people help facilitate creativity. Although none of the companies we have worked with highlighted size of team as a key issue, it is interesting to note that all the firms involved usually formed teams of between three and six people. In such a context, the development of socially based informal interaction is more likely to occur, since members often work in the same space. We are neither suggesting that small teams will ensure creativity nor that large ones will prevent it. However, we do assert that the possibility of need imbalance may increase within larger teams, as more stakeholders become involved and associated need-tensions increase. In particular, in larger teams, the importance of personal needs can be reduced in favor of team or organizational needs, resulting in negative perceptions, demotivation, and formation of internal tribes. Our experience suggests that, as with larger organizations, larger teams often require more control from management, with the needs of certain stakeholders prevailing over others. Again within the context of Figure 1, such a lack of equality can lead to problems in stakeholder relationships and reduce the potential for achieving creative balance. This inflexible approach to design can result in the personal needs of senior managers and senior designers dominating the internal environment, reducing the value of team and individual needs. In addition, large teams can increase the distance between clients and customers and those members actively engaged in the project. Such layering reduces personal contact and involvement, increasing the potential for misinformation and misunderstanding. Such a climate can quickly reduce trust, intrinsic motivation, and benevolent behavior and nega-

tively affect the creative process. This is not to say that such stakeholder dominance will never occur in smaller teams. However, it is often easier to identify, making it easier to manage the situation before damage is done.

As well as size of team, the other key component in achieving a balance is diversity. In general, diversity is desirable, but it is particularly important that such a group has points of commonality derived from clear accountability and a shared perspective or shared values. The view on diversity is supported by a number of key writers,² who all argue that variety in both skills and personalities is key to generating energy, interaction, and a creative climate within *organizations*. Without differences in knowledge, styles, and personalities, teams can quickly develop what Irving Janis described as group-think, in which perspectives and debate are confined in a static framework of understanding.

Without the tension of diversity, the creative climate can become de-energized and demotivated. In this context, maintaining and developing creative relationships may prove difficult, with negative feelings and perceptions among stakeholders reducing trust. We believe it is critical to understand and balance different styles, philosophies, and skills among groups to maximize diversity, yet minimize the potential for conflict. Without the right balance, constructive discussion and idea generation can dwindle. Debate, fueled through a diversity of perspectives, is a key part of the creative process within teams.

We suggest that the answer lies in balancing the needs for diversity and homogeneity. Too

*Our research supports
the commonly held view
that teams made up of
diversely experienced
people help facilitate
creativity.*

2. T. Amabile, "How to Kill Creativity," in J. Henry (ed), *Creative Management* (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 4-10; C. Ford and D. Gioia, "Factors Influencing Creativity in the Domain of Managerial Decision Making," *Journal of Management*, 26 (2000), 4, pp. 705-732; and L. Thompson and L. F. Brajkovich, "Improving the Creativity of Organizational Work Groups," *Academy of Management Executive*, 17 (2003), 1, pp. 96-112.

much diversity in personalities and experience may not provide a common frame of reference for the team, making trust-building, relationship development, and the generation of relevant ideas difficult, as well as increasing the potential for conflict and tribal behavior. By the same token, too much homogeneity can lead to group-think and creative stagnation.

The challenge for managers in getting this balance right is to recognize how much creativity is needed. At certain times, real blue-sky thinking is required; at others, the boundaries of creativity are more limited. As an example of

these diverse needs, Tate Modern (the world's most visited modern art gallery) in London used teams in different ways as management planned the gallery's launch in 2000. A distinctive aspect of Tate Modern is the curation of its art collection, which is based around themes rather than chronology. The definition of the thematic approach was the result of a small and cohesive core team comprising Lars Nittve, director of the gallery, as well as two curators and an education curator. All of them wanted to challenge people's perceptions about art. However, having developed this idea, they were still

determined to avoid group-think. To overcome this possibility, they expanded the group into a think tank augmented with artists, philosophers, and art historians. In an interview with us, Nittve said of this diversity, "I think we valued different voices and we also knew that we all came from the same direction. And it's not given that that is the only direction. At certain moments in processes, it's good to have some friction because it breaks up patterns and models of thinking. Sometimes you're moving too automatically.... Also, we wanted to move toward having different voices in how we displayed and talked about the collection... to move away from this institutional voice to a more multiple voice."

At this stage, the boundaries of creativity were defined by the vision for Tate Modern, but within those boundaries there was considerable latitude. Once the team had agreed upon a thematic approach, the members defined a new goal: Flesh out the basic themes and test the viability of delivering them. Whereas the first think tank required diversity of background, the new groups, who would explore the themes, needed to have diversity of knowledge but within a cohesive field. Consequently, a series of bigger groups was formed, with curators from the Tate's central collection. These people used their specific expertise to define how the four themes could be realized from the works the museum owned. Finally, once the bigger groups had reached agreement, a small group was formed to fine-tune and detail each room within the themes. This tighter group was less about diversity and more about unity. Nittve says of the last group, "When you install the collection, it has to have a similar tone of voice. It's enough that you get different positions and statements in the works of art, because you have different artists. If the mode of installation and presentation were different from room to room, it might just turn chaotic. That's why we had a smaller team under one person who was responsible for bringing that together."

This accordion-like process within Tate Modern was designed to adapt to the requirements of creativity—providing different levels of diversity and homogeneity at different times. At the earlier stage, when creative boundaries were at their broadest, diversity was encouraged to help create connections that might not have been seen by a narrowly defined group. However, when the level of creativity became more detailed and the boundaries narrower, homogeneity was more valuable. At that point, the requirement was not to question the fundamental approach to curating the museum, but rather to provide creativity in the specifics of installation.

One last word on team balance: It is vital that clients and customers (whether internal or external to the organization) are seen as part of the team. Too often, organizations maintain a them-and-us attitude toward such relationships, forgoing the potential for insightful contributions and

At the earlier stage, when creative boundaries were at their broadest, diversity was encouraged to help create connections that might not have been seen by a narrowly defined group.

key opportunities for gaining essential buy-in and feedback. IDEO, Quiksilver, and Levi's are organizations that champion such thinking. They are committed to breaking down the traditional barriers that exist between customers and designers. They employ a clever use of free-flow networks that encompass a wide variety of customers who are heavily involved with their brands, testing new concepts and living with existing lines. These semi-formal networks have been built up over many years and include opinion leaders within fashion, sports, and lifestyles, as well as passionate amateurs and successful professional boarders, surfers, and skaters. Quiksilver customers, for example, are in continuous contact with Quiksilver staff, who themselves are all essentially members of this network, feeding back information on products, trends, and prototypes. Such communication is not limited to occasional formal marketing reports, but instead takes the form of a constant conversation with stakeholders—hence the notion of free-flow.

What does managing creativity mean?

A major challenge facing managers is how to balance the tensions within the team dynamic to foster a creative climate. The model in Figure 2

indicates how this can be achieved. Managers have to deal with and balance external organizational and client pressures within a team context. The model details the forces at play and identifies internally driven pressures relating to specific team needs, such as trust, support, and enjoyment, which match those of individuals. However, there are additional needs and tensions that are more specific to a team dynamic than a personal one, and it is these that this section will focus on.

Benevolent dictatorship

The previous section highlighted the need to develop teams in the form of self-organized networks of integrated teams supported by a core organization. The challenge facing managers is to balance this concept with the external pressures placed upon the team by clients, organizations, and other stakeholders. It is important that teams be allowed to develop ideas in their own way—a point well highlighted by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari wrote about the concept of nomadology, in which groups form not because they are put together by a hierarchy, but because they are responding to change, immanently. The conceptual space that groups occupy is not predetermined but is a result of sense-making and

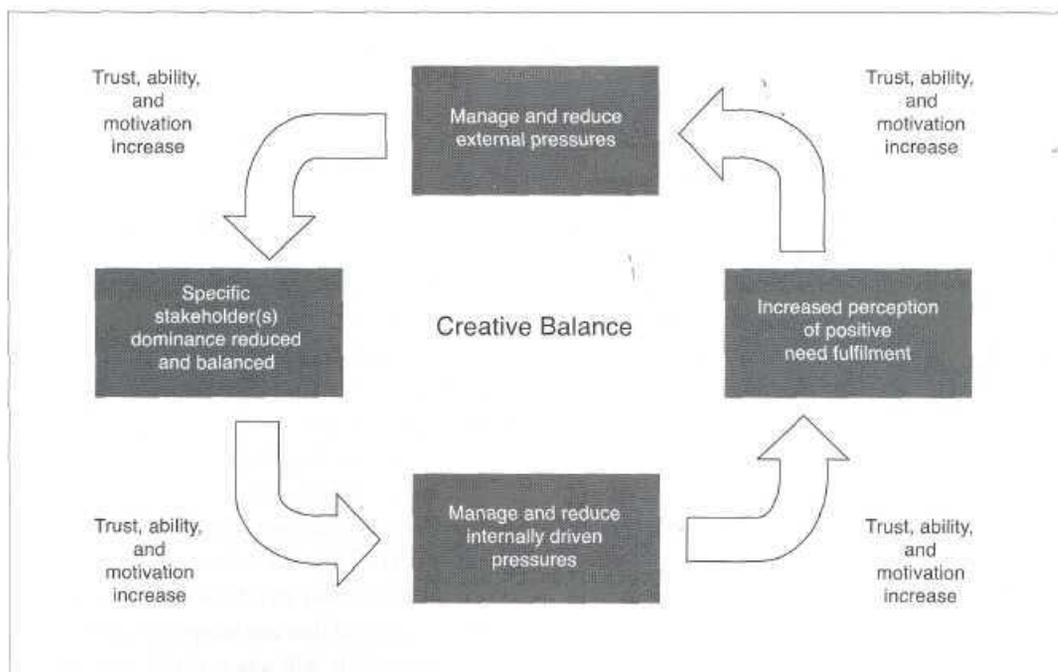


Figure 2. Managing for creative balance.

the movement of the group in response to inputs. This approach helps ensure that changes in the internal or external environment are sensed quickly and that reactions are fast and creative. A nomadological approach also suggests that creative acts are less likely to be "royal" (to come from senior figures in the organization) and more likely to be nomadic (from within the organization).

However, achieving client and organizational objectives is just as critical. At IDEO, managers relish engagement with external stakeholders because they realize that cultures cannot become creative if they remain locked in ivory towers.

Without facilitative and supportive management, teams find it difficult to develop integrated, trust-based relationships as they return to more-traditional roles.

IDEO attempts to involve clients at all stages of a project and espouses the idea of co-creativity as a way of making the process of innovation as transparent as possible. Tim Brown, CEO of IDEO, believes that "if you do it in a complete enough way, expectation management becomes a self-managing thing. The more 'black-box' you make the process [of creativity], the more you have to worry about expectation management. There's no visibility—they [the clients] can't prepare themselves, and they can't

prepare you. So that's why we've tried to move toward being more transparent and more open; there's more participation, involvement, and buy-in." At IDEO, managers work with clients to set and agree on key objectives and to define the boundaries of creativity. The setting of boundaries is critical, because the process is delicate and requires a high level of skill and emotional intelligence.

If managers are to use emotional intelligence, they must ensure that they manage emotions ethically, delivering what they promise to staff. Otherwise, they may damage their reputations. It is important that managers do not seek to manipulate but instead look to develop partnerships with team members. Over-control or

the implementation of inflexible or too tight boundaries appears to be the most common problem. This often takes the form of creative direction or decisions made from outside the team environment. High levels of external control can reduce the possibility of a team generating a shared and meaningful vision or goals relating to the project and the development of the team itself. The development of a shared vision is a key element in directing and bonding a team, for without such a vision members can feel disenfranchised and devalued, leading to problems of trust and demotivation within the team.

A second common way managers constrain their teams is through the introduction of a process model that prescriptively describes how projects should be approached. In such a situation, the team can perceive its role as one of technician or supplier, rather than expert or consultant. Lacking freedom to express ideas, teams can become predictable and uncreative in their thinking. Managers need to understand that although process parameters can be useful as a guide, ensuring the team has enough autonomy to develop and agree upon project goals and objectives is vital. Such self-organization is important, because it communicates trust from senior management and is a powerful way to develop team commitment. The team begins to feel it has the potential to control its future and to affect change.

Without facilitative and supportive management, teams find it difficult to develop integrated, trust-based relationships as they return to more-traditional roles. Design company Design Bridge, as well as Funcom, provides good templates for the management of creative teams. The focus for both companies is on creating a supportive learning environment, which allows individuals the freedom to experiment within an emotionally safe context. This view appears to extend to the way in which teams are organized and managed, relying on a high degree of trust and interdependence among team members and managers. The objective is to create a network-based team structure that balances diversity and homogeneity and that can support itself by drawing upon the skill sets available. Once the team has been chosen for a project and key

objectives agreed upon after discussions among team members, managers, and the client, senior management steps back and assumes a hands-off, monitoring role. The team is given the freedom to explore and develop ideas with the client without significant interference from internal hierarchies. Senior management is involved at key internal meetings and in monitoring and mentoring, but not in client meetings unless requested. This process appears to work for a number of reasons. First, the high level of client involvement enables the team to gain a better understanding of their needs, as well as build trusting relationships and communicate more easily and directly about design issues. Second, the resulting high degree of trust between stakeholders internally and externally results in positive perceptions and benevolent behavior. Third, due to the high quality and diverse nature of the team, members possess the breadth and depth of skills, knowledge, and experience needed to manage complex projects. Fourth, team members are aware of their areas of responsibility and, although encouraged to be involved in the whole process, remain focused. Finally, project management staff provide a protective framework within which the team can work without significant distraction or fear.

KejrLessons for Design Managers

Understanding which forces create tensions within the team dynamic, what the consequences could be in terms of perception and behavior, and how best to manage for balance, are critical management tasks. Favoring the needs of one stakeholder over another can create an unbalanced team dynamic, resulting in the prevention of benevolent creative behavior.

We recommend that organizations do the following:

- Move away from traditional role designation and hierarchical forms to a far more fluid network-based model.
- Provide clear boundaries and support structures, but do not micro-manage.
- Do not pigeonhole staff; rather, allow them to step out of character and offer new perspectives on projects they show interest in.
- Develop the correct balance between diversity and homogeneity by choosing diverse personalities, experience, and skills, while maintaining the existence of a set of shared core values that provide the basis for a team's culture.
- Accept that the team management role is not about control—it is about supporting, protecting, and nurturing teams in an attempt to build high levels of team trust, vision, and motivation.
- Provide flexible role and responsibility boundaries within the team, and ensure an equitable distribution of power.
- Finally, really involve clients and customers. Use informal networks to get continuous, honest feedback and information and get clients working with the team at every point possible.