

10 Tips to successfully manage creative people

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1 Extract ideas, don't dictate them. Let's face it, it's human nature to like your own idea better than someone else's. But if you don't get others to start developing good ideas, yours will not only grow strained too soon, but your creative people will quickly grow disgruntled from having to do the "legwork" on your ideas.

2 Coach ideas more than you coach execution. There are few things more disappointing than ideas that have been only half-incubated before they're executed. Don't tell us HOW you're going to build a graphic or package, tell us WHY, and tell us how you arrived at that plan.

3 Encourage brainstorming sub-groups. Don't make them come up with every good idea either by themselves or in your presence. Help them develop brainstorming alliances that will strengthen teamwork within the visual group, and have that group present their ideas to you.

4 Make them learn to articulate their ideas to nonvisual people. Have them start by articulating ideas to you, and give them tips on how to better articulate ideas to others (the best method: ask questions about things you need to know to understand the idea). It's the only way their batting average for edgy ideas will be high enough to satisfy them.

5 Set clear, but not ridiculous, parameters. Let them know the barriers they cannot cross; they'll appreciate that structure. But if your barriers are so confining it's like trying to corral a mustang in an urban back yard, you're going to run into problems quickly and painfully.

6 Be the reader advocate. Cool and edgy stops being cool at all when the net result is that it's too difficult to read or confuses the message you've been charged with making clear. My favorite example is blue type on a black background: Looks great on a backlit monitor; on paper, many people can't read it. So it stops being cool.

7 Understand "red tie" issues and don't get hung up on them. I love red ties. My dad hated them. Truth is, neither of us was wrong, it was a question of individual taste. As you coach, fix things that are wrong. Don't fix things in which the only flaw is that it wasn't done to your personal taste.

8 Don't let them "win" because it's "their turn" or to placate them. Make them earn it. It's easy to feel sorry for someone who has four ideas in a row shot down. But don't let No. 5 be a gimme because you feel bad for them. Doing so produces inconsistent feedback and actually confuses them in the long run. Set your bar; keep it there.

9 Make feedback clear and consistent. An old editor of mine used to say, "The cow that gives the best milk isn't the one that's pampered with sweets, it's the one that's milked every day at the same time. That first one will just give you a lot of bullshit." The point is, as you try to milk the best work out of people, they need to feel your presence and hear your opinion often — both good and bad. It improves their consistency.

10 Make them laugh. I'm sorry, but I've never seen creativity fostered in a snarling atmosphere. One editor I worked for banned laughter, calling it "personal noise" that he wouldn't tolerate. It's hard to be creative when your butt cheeks are clamped that tightly together.

