HOW

HAVE

TO

IDEAS

AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

WHO CARES?

BUILDING AUDIENCE-CENTRED ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

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CharityComms

I THOUGHT WE'D PAUSE FOR A MOMENT AND THINK ABOUT CREATIVITY. IT KIND OF THROWS OUT THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK. BUT HEY, IT'S MY BOOK.

Creativity, surely, is innate. It's something mysterious that you're just born with, right? So, while some of us lead predictable, rational lives, others are blessed with flashes of inspiration that propel the rest of us forward.

Not so. In the words of American artist Chuck Close: '*Inspiration is for amateurs. The rest of us just show up and get to work.*'

Close is telling us that creativity is not just about that single 'light bulb moment'. It's about process. So the people among us who appear to be more creative, who seem to come up with all the good ideas, are just those who have understood the creative process, learned how it fits their way of thinking, are willing to take some risks and – most importantly of all – put in the hard work.

This chapter looks different from the rest. That's because I think you'll find it more useful to reflect on this subject and find what works for you than to slavishly adhere to a set of exercises. Ultimately a strategy is not a SWOT and a PEST and a research report. You need these, of course (which is why they're in this book), but they exist only to create the conditions for producing ideas and to help you decide whether they're any good.

To help us along I've dug around in a few books and blogs, talked to friends and colleagues, and put their thoughts together with a few of my own. They don't all slot neatly together, although you're bound to spot a few common threads. Each come at the question from a different angle, which I hope will help you generate ideas for your strategy. You're going to need lots of them.

❝ CREATIVITY IS NOT JUST ABOUT THAT SINGLE 'LIGHT BULB MOMENT'. IT'S ABOUT PROCESS

GET THE IDEA

It's too easy to forget that, ultimately, it's the content – the *ideas* – in your strategy that matters above all. Once at a restaurant I asked a waiter what the soup of the day was. She replied, straight-faced, '*It's a system where we offer a different soup every day.*' I still don't know if she was having me on, but I'm glad she said it, because she gave me the perfect analogy. She was telling me about her *method* – a strategic framework in which soup occurs – but I wanted to know about the *content*. Are we talking minestrone, French onion, or pea and ham?

OVER FOUR IN FIVE CHARITY COMMUNICATORS (82%) SEE THEMSELVES AS A CREATIVE PERSON. AND FOR ONE IN THREE (29%), THAT'S A STRONGLY HELD VIEW

CharityComms member survey, 2019.

BRIGHT SPARKS

82% AGREE/ STRONGLY AGREE

'I SEE MYSELF AS A CREATIVE PERSON'

29% STRONGLY AGREE

1 GOOD IDEAS SOLVE PROBLEMS
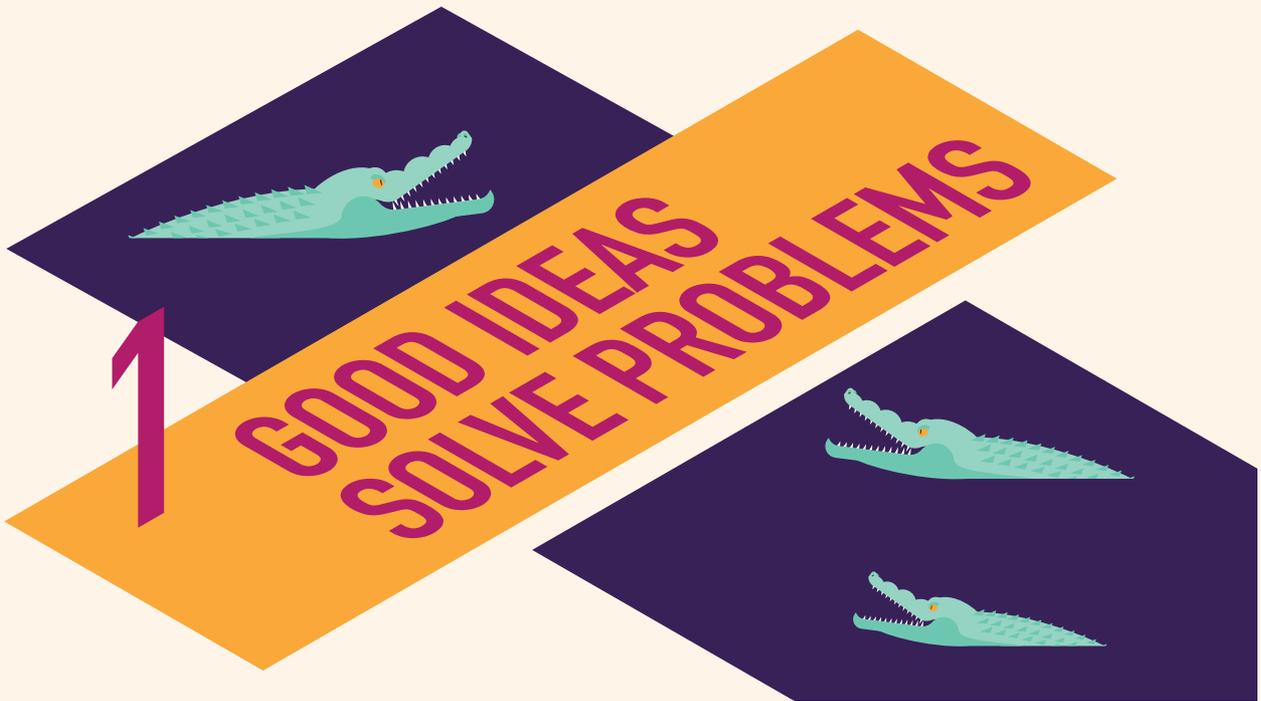
Ask anyone who has ideas for a living where they start, and they will pretty much all say the same thing: all good ideas start with a problem to solve.

What do they mean by 'problem'? Think of it as an obstacle that prevents you from achieving your objective.

Try this analogy. You want to get to the other side of a river, but you can't swim. So, your inability to swim is your problem right? Therefore, the solution is to learn to swim. But now you do a little research and discover the river is teeming with crocodiles. So, learning to swim won't solve it – the obvious solution is to build a crocodile-proof boat. Well, that sounds fine until you consult an expert who tells you the crocodiles have a stash of limpet mines, and now the penny drops: you're going to have to build a bridge.

See where I'm going? The better you understand your problem, the better your solution will be and – to stretch the analogy to groaning point – the less chance you'll have of being eaten by crocodiles.

Albert Einstein famously said, '*The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution*.' It's one of those old truisms that you can apply to almost anything – including engagement strategy development – and in doing so borrow a bit of Einstein's cleverness.

When my agency works with clients, after the contracts are signed the very first thing we try to do is figure out what problem they're trying to solve. And, in every case, the quality of that problem entirely determines the quality of the outcome.

So, if good ideas are about *problem-solving*, the place to start is *problem-finding*.

❝ THE BETTER YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR PROBLEM, THE BETTER YOUR SOLUTION WILL BE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PROBLEM-FINDING

Cognitive psychologist Mark Runco has spent much of his career researching problem-finding – you can dig deeper online for his published research. He describes a set of diverse skills needed to solve problems, including problem identification, definition, expression, and construction, many of which rely on *divergent thinking* – that is the ability to (forgive me) think outside of the box and explore possibilities without limiting one's imagination. We'll look more at this later in this chapter.

In his research, Runco found two approaches to problem-finding: the *egocentric* approach and the *socially sensitive* approach. People who take an egocentric approach, he says, are essentially looking for *their* problem and are likely to attribute their problem to negative motivations in others.

This happens all the time in organisations, as siloes are formed and trenches dug (*'We'd raise more money if the digital team cared more about it'*) or where there's an absence of empathy with external audiences (*'Politicians don't listen to us because they're only interested in their careers'*).

Socially sensitive problem-finders on the other hand look for problems that they don't necessarily share themselves (*'The digital team needs better content'* or *'Politicians want to know how our issues are relevant to their constituencies.'*) Socially sensitive problem-finding will always be the most successful approach because it is more constructive. It finds problems that can actually be solved by considering the viewpoints of others.

Conversely, the least successful communicators are those who can only find egocentric problems. They tend to view their audiences with disdain – as an enemy to be conquered, as opposed to people with values and beliefs to be understood and respected, even if they differ wildly from their own. This is why audience research is so important and why it has to be approached with a generosity of spirit. Without it you may never find a good problem to solve.

❝❝ AUDIENCE RESEARCH HAS TO BE APPROACHED WITH A GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT

EGO CENTRIC **VS** SOCIALLY SENSITIVE
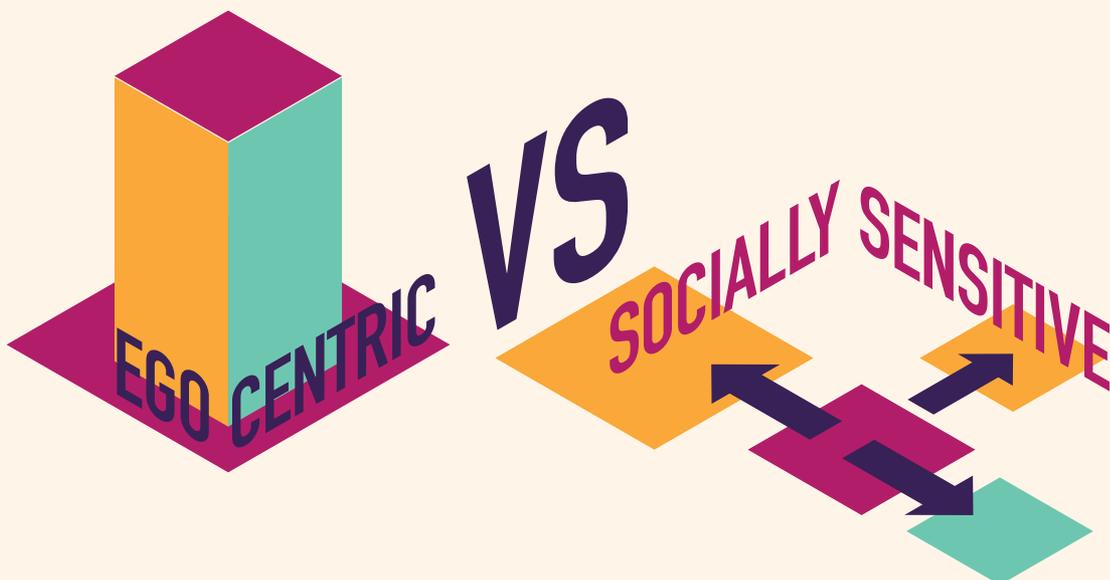
WHAT MAKES A GOOD PROBLEM?

1 IT HAS TO BE A REAL PROBLEM

People sometimes think they've found obstacles or problems which, as soon as they do the research, they discover aren't real.

For example, some international NGOs still worry about how to explain to supporters that most of their work entails funding local partners, as opposed to 'delivering' aid directly. I've been asked to research this question numerous times and have yet to find anyone outside these organisations who cared or expected anything different.

Similarly, I've known medical research charities who think it's a problem that their non-expert audiences don't understand enough about their research programme, when these audiences really just want to know that researchers are trying to beat cancer (or whatever health issue it might be).

These are not real problems, they're Runco's egocentric problems that reflect internal interests and worries. In these examples, the real problems are more likely to be linked to credibility (is this NGO actually making a difference?) or relevance (health charities often struggle to engage people not directly affected).

❝❝ GOOD PROBLEMS ARE THE ONES THAT REWARD YOU FOR THE MONEY AND TIME YOU SPEND SOLVING THEM

2 IT HAS TO BE SPECIFIC

'We're not recruiting enough young donors' **is a common starting point for strategy development, but it's not specific enough to qualify as a *good problem*.** Try flipping it on its head, and instead ask yourself: *'Why are so few young people interested in donating to us?'* Then look at your research.

There could be any number of problems at the heart of this. Perhaps your younger target audiences don't see your cause as particularly urgent or salient, or you've failed to tell them why you need their money. Maybe you're talking to the wrong young people in the first place. These are good problems because they give you something specific to work with – and could help you decide what to do about issue building, your positioning, or your audience targeting.

3 IT HAS TO BE A PROBLEM WORTH SOLVING

Don't put your efforts into solving problems that don't matter that much. I'm reminded of an episode of the TV show *Dragon's Den* (a pitching ground for entrepreneurs) where a garden-shed inventor failed to get investment for his innovation: a plastic cover for the cut end of a cucumber that stops it drying out. Sure, it solved a problem but, really, who cares? Rubbish problem.

Good problems are the ones that reward you for the money and time you spend solving them. You're looking for the big obstacles that, if you overcame them, would enable you to provide better services, raise more money, or win campaigns.

So, in short: good problems are socially sensitive, real, specific, and worth solving.

2 GOOD IDEAS FOLLOW A PROCESS

What is the creative process? Some creative people reject the idea that there can be a process at all. Many think that when they have ideas they do so instinctively, often (for some reason) in the shower, rather than adhering to any particular model. In fact, whether they know it or not, they're actually following long-established patterns of thinking.

I was the same. I used to think I had all my ideas when cycling to work and it had something to do with fresh air and adrenaline. But then I researched the subject and realised that the 'moment of clarity' was in fact the culmination of a much longer process that had set the right conditions for the idea to emerge.

Charles Darwin, for example, claimed to have come up with the theory of natural selection in a momentary flash of inspiration. Later research showed that his notebooks had described the theory in some detail over several months before that moment, but he hadn't yet organised his thoughts enough to realise what he'd found.

Don Draper, John Hamm's anti-hero adman from the TV show *Mad Men*, gives this advice to his protégé Peggy Olson, who is stuck on a project and out of ideas: '*Think about it really hard. Learn everything. Then forget about all of it, and an idea will just pop into your mind.*'

His advice seems to reinforce the impression that creativity is a mystical process that 'just happens' and that cannot – even should not – be explained. But actually Draper is describing a process that is widely understood in creative industries, and often codified into working patterns and project design.

This process was first described by social psychologist Graham Wallas, when Don Draper would still have been in short trousers, were he not a fictional character, in his 1926 book *The Art of Thought.* Here, Wallas describes four stages of creativity: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. In doing so, he is not so much designing a process as observing how the human brain creates problem-solving ideas, moving between conscious and unconscious thought. Let's have a quick look at it.

PREPARATION

Think about it really hard. Learn everything ...

This is where you set the conditions and define your parameters. Ideas don't happen in a vacuum; they are informed by data, and they need a problem to solve. For me, qualitative research – talking to people or running focus groups – often gets me closest to the central question: '*How can I persuade these people to understand or care about this issue?*' But whatever methods you use, in this preparation stage you need to find out everything you can about what you're trying to achieve and think deeply about who you're trying to engage. If you don't, you'll have the wrong idea.

INCUBATION

Then forget about all of it ...

With your brain loaded up with stimuli, it's time to let go and stop thinking about it. This is where your unconscious mind kicks in and does the work, organising the information, creating new patterns and connections. Have you ever found that the harder you try to have an idea, the more difficult and frustrating it gets? This is because you haven't absorbed the right information or given yourself enough time to incubate it. It's the same reason why the best cure for writer's block is to stop writing and go do something else for a while. In the context of strategy development, the need for incubation explains why it can be very difficult to solve a problem all in one go. So if you're planning to work with your team to generate new ideas, talk them through your strategic purpose and detail your research, then leave a few days before getting together to talk ideas.

◀◀ THE 'MOMENT OF CLARITY' WAS IN FACT THE CULMINATION OF A MUCH LONGER PROCESS

ILLUMINATION

An idea will just pop into your mind.

OK, this is your magic moment, when your unconscious mind decides it's done enough and surfaces an idea. It can feel exhilarating and will usually happen when you're least expecting it. We are, I think, at our most creative when we're feeling happy and relaxed, which may explain why so many of our good ideas reveal themselves when we're in the shower or cycling to work, or wherever we're most 'tuned in' to ourselves. These 'aha' moments are precious and fragile, and have a nasty habit of disappearing as quickly as they arrive. So make sure you always keep a notebook or tablet with you to record them straight away (park your bike or switch off the shower first, though). I can't tell you how many ideas I've lost because I decided to write them down later.

VERIFICATION

How will I know if this is the right idea?

While the first three stages explain the idea generation process, the verification stage is where we evaluate and make decisions. The experience of creating ideas can be exciting and intuitive, but now we have to call on our rational mind to test them. It's easy to become too attached to your ideas because they can almost feel like part of you, your offspring even. When American author William Faulkner said, '*In writing, you must kill all your darlings,*' he was reminding us not to fall in love with our ideas. If the paragraph doesn't fit, delete it, however beautifully formed it might be. Every creative process – including the strategy development in this book – needs to include moments where you ask yourself, '*Does this idea solve the right problem? Will it achieve our goals?*' Throw out the ones that don't.

'Don't try to create and analyse at the same time. They're different processes.'

JOHN CAGE, COMPOSER

3

GOOD IDEAS USE TEMPLATES

It's easy to assume that true creativity demands no limits on the form the final product should take, but usually the opposite is true. We need templates to create ideas that make sense. Templates set us free.

Wherever you look – whether it's at art, music, film, or even strategy development – you will find patterns endlessly repeated. These patterns have evolved over generations to form structural, visual, verbal, and aural languages that allow their audiences to understand and contextualise them. And even though we're all following similar patterns, we're still creating new and interesting things.

This book is full of templates. So far they've mostly been processes for activities like conducting research. Later, we'll be talking about brand ideas, propositions, messages, and other stuff that you'll need to create. We'll be going into storytelling too, so let's look at that for a moment.

For years I was hopelessly addicted to crime fiction. I enjoyed seeing how different writers brought their own signature to what was always the same basic plot or template. The job of the crime writer is not to free themselves of the template but to explore its bounds and find ways to say something new and interesting. In this sense, the template is a source of creativity, and not a constraint at all.

◀◀ WE NEED TEMPLATES TO CREATE IDEAS THAT MAKE SENSE. TEMPLATES SET US FREE

In his first two films, director Quentin Tarantino understood this perfectly. He deliberately subverted the crime genre by telling his stories out of sequence or having his protagonists converse at length about topics (such as cheeseburgers) that did nothing to propel the plot. In doing so he made an old genre feel fresh by disrupting the crime fiction template without ever quite breaking the rules.

> ʻMost people start off by mimicking something, but then it turns into their own thing because they don't have the ability to mimic it precisely. What's great about that approach is it can lead to originality from copying. Like we all just have our own fingerprint, right? So in the process it turns into a different idea.ʼ
>
> **RAY BARBEE, CHAMPION SKATEBOARDER**

There's a book called *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (Christopher Booker, 2004), which argues that there are (you guessed it) just seven archetypal stories in existence that are endlessly repeated.[1] Some 25 years earlier, Syd Field, in his book *Screenplay*, had gone further, distilling all film plots into a single basic template. Since I read Syd Field, I've yet to find more than a handful of films that don't fit his three-act paradigm, with the protagonist's goal established in the first five minutes and a couple of ʻplot points' to pull the story in new directions, resolve the central conflict, and keep us invested.[2]

What does all this mean for your strategy development process? Well, you should take comfort that you're never working with a blank page, particularly as you go into the creative stages. Lots of people have done this before you, and you should not be afraid to borrow, copy, and adapt.

We are all using the same motifs and the same templates. In fact I've included a template for your written strategy later in this book, and I know you'll use it to produce something unique.

Your job is to explore the limits of these templates to find new and engaging angles – and you should certainly look for inspiration beyond the bounds of the charity sector.

❝ YOU SHOULD NOT BE AFRAID TO BORROW, COPY, AND ADAPT

4

GOOD IDEAS ARE SCARY

When I was in one of my first communications jobs, my boss told me: '*What may feel to you like shouting, will sound like a whisper to the outside world*.' Well, actually, it's possible I made this up years ago, and then ascribed it to her – you know how our memories can play these tricks on us.

Assuming my boss did say it, she was encouraging me to take risks – to be bolder and say things that will get noticed. To *feel the fear*. Since then, pretty much every creative director I've met has relayed their version of the same story to me – that at some point early in their career, their boss said something like: '*Now go away and think of something that will get you fired*.'

Whether these stories are apocryphal or not, it's certainly true that the most successful projects I've worked on have been touched by a frisson of fear. You'll be familiar with it – it's that feeling of butterflies you get when you say something that might get you into trouble. Have I gone too far? Will there be consequences?

> '*Your ego can become an obstacle to your work. If you start believing in your greatness, it is the death of your creativity.*'
>
> **MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ, PERFORMANCE ARTIST**

❝❝ THE MOST SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS I'VE WORKED ON HAVE BEEN TOUCHED BY A FRISSON OF FEAR

As communicators trying to promote our causes, we have to find the courage to tell the truth all the time – even though much of what we say is challenging established ways of thinking – as we try to effect change in the world.

Sometimes the truths we tell can be hard to stomach, even for our colleagues, because we might choose to tell them in ways that are brutally simple, assertive, unfamiliar, or just plain weird. Most charities are culturally prone to timidity and prefer a technocratic voice, so we often find ourselves swimming against the tie.

> 'Rather than choosing something "safer" – which makes the perfect route appear risky – a weirder idea makes the perfect solution seem even more perfect. And, every now and again, the they'll-never-choose-this-in-a-million-years weirdtastic one will get chosen.'
>
> **FROM *NOW TRY SOMETHING WEIRDER*, BY MICHAEL JOHNSON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR AND PRINCIPAL OF JOHNSON BANKS**

Fear is an integral part of creativity. Often that means fear of failure, which can hold us back, even in the knowledge that successful ideas demand courage. So fear of failure makes us more likely to fail. Quite a cruel paradox when you think about it. Fear can also take the form of the fear of being harshly judged, which for some of us can be a paralysing prospect. But, of course, these fears are universal – we all feel them, and we all have to find ways to work with them. In her 2003 book, *The Creative Habit,* Twyla Tharp puts it succinctly: '*There's nothing wrong with fear; the only mistake is to let it stop you in your tracks*.'

Work with your fears, *how*? Well, the good news is that this interplay between fear and creativity is a very popular topic and seems to have spawned an entire blogging industry. Take a look; there's a lot to read. The slightly less good news is that 99 per cent of the advice can be distilled into two categories.

First there's '*get over it*', which strikes me as kind of glib (get over it *how*?). Second, there's '*embrace failure*', which has become such a modern cliché that I can hardly bear to repeat it. For sure, failure is a necessary part of innovation (which we'll come to soon), but stripped of context, this is lazy advice, because failure is, ultimately, a bad thing. Your boss won't like it (and it *really can* get you fired).

The most interesting answer I've found is from the American researcher Brené Brown. In her 2012 book, *Daring Greatly*, she argues that to be creative and have ideas you have to be willing to face criticism or ridicule. There are some profound psychological traits that we have to overcome to achieve this, which Brown spent ten years in research and 12 months in therapy to figure out.

Her central argument is that we have to accept our own vulnerabilities, allow them to be 'seen' by others, and learn not to treat them as weaknesses. Brown tells us that '*vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change*' because creativity is, after all, about believing you have the right to your ideas and being willing to be exposed.

❝❝ WE HAVE TO ACCEPT OUR OWN VULNERABILITIES

If that thought fills you with horror, worry not – you are not alone. Some of the most talented fundraising, communications, and marketing directors I know don't try to do the creative stuff themselves for this and all sorts of other reasons. Instead, many see themselves as enablers of networks, nurturing ideas in others – and there's nothing wrong with that. It really doesn't matter where the ideas come from.

5 GOOD IDEAS ARE DECISIONS

Earlier, we looked at the final 'verification' stage of the creative process, and we saw how evaluation and decision-making are integral to generating ideas. The opposite – indecision – is the enemy of creativity.

And, if I may say, indecision is a particular problem in the non-profit sector – a downside of our consensus-based working culture. It's the reason so many charity strategies include eight themes, 24 goals, and 120 sub-goals, few of which have a real prospect of being achieved, at least not to the extent that they make much difference.

❝❝ INDECISION IS A PARTICULAR PROBLEM IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

Experience has taught me that the few charities with the discipline of thought to pick a small number of goals are those that win more campaigns, raise more funds, and provide the most effective services. While

such decisions may ultimately be above your pay grade, your external engagement strategy can serve as a catalyst, helping your organisation to find the focus it needs.

Photographer and blogger Dustin Wax puts it nicely: '*Most of the creative people I know don't see their creative impulses as particularly exclusive. What separates the creative from the not-so-creative isn't so much the ability to come up with ideas but the ability to trust them, or to trust ourselves to realise them.*'

So, part of the job of being creative is to know a good idea when you see it, make the decision to pursue it, and stick with it until it's realised. But here's the rub: many of the best ideas are deceptively simple and therefore difficult to spot. A common misconception of the creative process is that a good idea has to be complex, new, or unexpected. Sometimes the best ideas are those that have been hanging around for ages but nobody's realised yet how good they are.

Let's look back at some examples I used earlier in this book:

Save the Children, around 2007, realised that it needed to focus more on children under five, and, yes ... saving lives. Its subsequent child survival campaign, investments in fundraising and advocacy, and scale-up in emergencies prevented the deaths of hundreds of thousands – perhaps millions – of children from preventable diseases, such as diarrhoea and malaria.

Or take **Plan International**, who a few years later realised it needed to elevate its sleepy campaign for girls' education to a bigger, more assertive proposition about girlhood – because being a girl in a developing nation was the single biggest predictor of whether you'd be poor, marginalised, or suffer violence. Its 'Because I am a Girl' campaign transformed the UK narrative around international development and led to an Act of Parliament that put a gender focus into every pound of UK aid spent. Plan International didn't do this alone, far from it, but in that critical moment it was the lead voice on the cause. The fact that so many UK development agencies now put gender issues front and centre is a measure of its success.

Now imagine being in these organisations at the time. Like any others – like yours – they were messy and full of competing interests, and time to reflect and develop ideas was a scant resource. These two groundbreaking ideas don't sound like much on their own, do they? It's all about *saving children's lives* or it's all about *girlhood* had been aired many times before they were picked up. People both inside and outside these organisations had proposed similar strategies, among countless others, only to see them rejected, because they seemed too narrow or too familiar. The reason these ideas ultimately proved successful was that the organisations eventually realised they were the *right* ideas, took a decision to back them, and had the tenacity to see them through.

❝❝ THE POINT, IN THE END, IS TO MAKE THE DECISION

So, how do you spot a good idea? Test it against your objectives. Will it achieve them? Or, if you're generating ideas for your objectives, will these objectives achieve your strategic goals? You get the picture – whatever granularity you're working at, there will be a higher-level test. But let's break that down. Innovation agency Smartstorming has a blog post entitled '*What Makes a Good Idea, Good?*' that includes a list you might find useful. So, in the spirit of templating and mimicry, I thought I'd steal it, adapt it, and summarise it here. Their headlines, my notes:

- **DIFFERENT/BETTER** Is your idea an improvement on what you're currently doing? Noting my earlier point, it doesn't have to be new, but it has to signal some kind of change. If it's simply a reorganisation of everything you've done before, it's not a good idea.

- **DELIVERS VALUE** Does your idea achieve something that people actually want? In the context of audience-centred strategy, that must mean giving your audiences something *they* want, while achieving your organisation's purpose. That's a central premise of this book.

- **DOABLE** Is your idea doable? In the process of idea creation you'll probably come up with a lot of concepts that can't actually happen. Do dream big, but if your longlist includes '*smash the neoliberal hegemony*', '*launch a zero-carbon airline*', or '*get Beyoncé to run the tombola*', now might be the time to reluctantly cross them off.

- **ACCEPTABLE COST-BENEFIT** Finally, is your idea worth the investment? You can define this however you like, perhaps in terms of financial cost or revenue, staff time, or environmental impact. If you just can't afford to do it, or if an alternative idea achieves the same for less, then it's a bad idea.

These are decision-making tools, as good as any I could have come up with. In fact we used a simplified version of these earlier when we looked at impact and feasibility to help you decide which goals to include in your strategy. But the point, in the end, is to make the decision.

6 GOOD IDEAS ARE NETWORKS
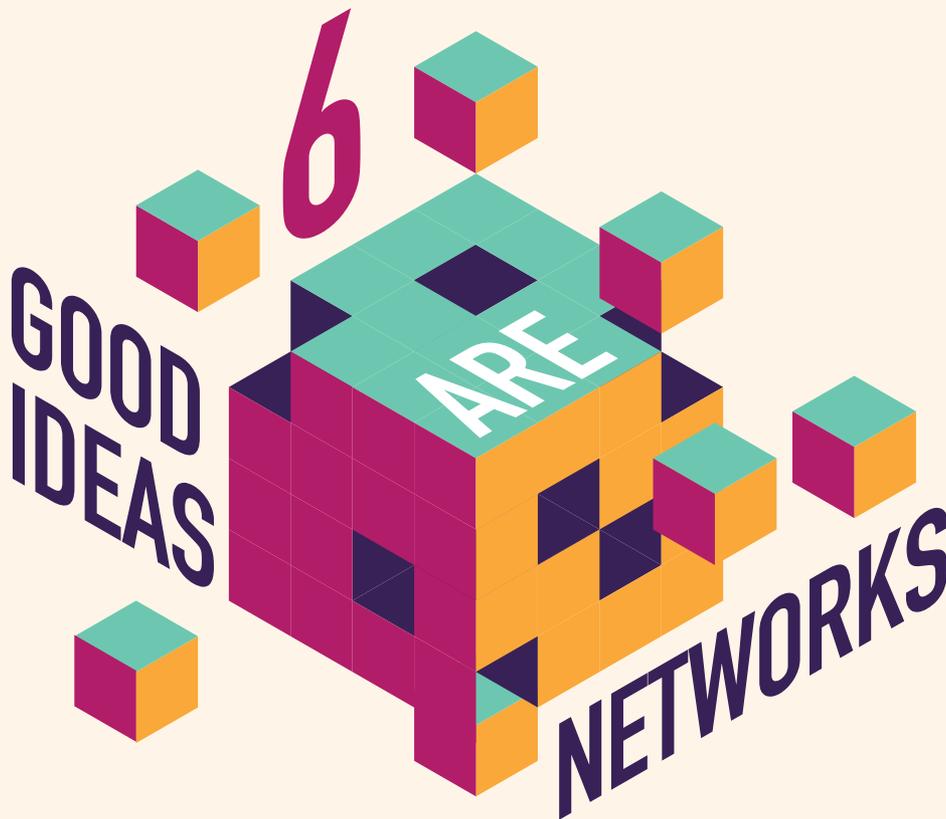
Creativity, for some, is understood as a product of social interaction and collaboration. This is often described in terms of '*collective intelligence*', where a group, deliberately or not, forms ideas beyond the capacity of an individual.

London's Southbank Centre was established in 1951 as part of the Festival of Britain, and was described as a '*tonic for the nation*' – an expression of recovery following the Second World War. It was not intended as an overtly political venture, but given its postwar context, its symbolism is inescapable.

A few years ago, its now former artistic director Jude Kelly described the Southbank Centre to me as a deliberate response to totalitarianism: a beacon of the escape from the despotic imagination of an *individual* to the liberating imagination of the *group*.

Enabling new ideas to form and collide, through a diversity of art forms and open spaces where people could mix freely, was seen to be prerequisite for a vibrant culture and democracy. That's what the Southbank Centre is about, and that's why you can sit about there all day, using the free Wi-Fi, without spending anything. Don't feel guilty – they want you there.

This idea of spaces that nurture creativity is developed by writer Steven Johnson in his book *Where Good Ideas Come From*. He gives us the example of the 17th-century English coffee houses at the start of the Enlightenment, where social interactions – or *networking* – between people with different backgrounds and different information, fuelled by the stimulant of caffeine, contributed to a rapid growth in innovation and political ideas.

Johnson questions the notion of the idea as a *'single thing'*, when in fact, he says, *'an idea is a network'*. And he means this at every level. At molecular level, an idea is a new network of neurons in the brain that has never formed before, while the network patterns of the world around us – from coffee houses to the World Wide Web – mimic the internal patterns in our brain to form new connections and produce ideas. Johnson calls these spaces *'liquid networks'*: real or virtual environments where people connect and ideas bounce around.

> 'Chance favours the connected mind.'
>
> **STEVEN JOHNSON, AUTHOR**

So creativity is about linking people and linking their ideas.

Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, said it: *'Creativity is just connecting things.'* (It's a camera *and* it's a phone? Seriously?)

In networked creativity, the incubation period can last for a long time before a new idea finally fades into view – perhaps when technology allows or the world is ready. Da Vinci and his successors spent 400 years sketching flying machines before anyone got off the ground. Now we're at least 30 years into the search for viable carbon capture technologies – a search that has connected global networks of scientists, economists, and policymakers. Not too much longer, we hope.

But the creativity of the network can happen quickly too. Have you ever asked someone to help you try to solve a knotty problem that's been puzzling you for months only to find the answer is obvious to them? Sometimes bringing new perspectives to an old challenge is the best way to find ideas.

❝❝ IF YOU WANT TO GENERATE IDEAS, USE AND EXTEND YOUR NETWORKS

❝❝ SOMETIMES BRINGING NEW PERSPECTIVES TO AN OLD CHALLENGE IS THE BEST WAY TO FIND IDEAS

Who you have in your network matters. The innovation strategist, Kathryn Haydon, argues that extending our networks and collaborating with people with whom we have weaker ties will improve our ability to generate ideas because: *'Strong ties come with the pull of homophily[3] and the pressure of social conformity. We may be less willing to take risks on new ideas that might jeopardise the feeling of belonging among our tight-knit groups.'*

Haydon thinks that we should bust our siloes, shake up our teams, and collaborate with people we don't normally work with. Without this, she says, we eventually lose our capacity for the 'divergent thinking' needed for idea generation, and 'convergent thinking' takes over. In terms of the creative process, that means we give too much weight to *verification* (validation and judgement), and not enough to *preparation, incubation, and illumination*. When this happens, our organisations shut down new thinking before it's had a chance to flourish. *'It'll never work'* becomes the default reflex, and we stop creating. Familiar?

The take-out for your strategy development? If you want to generate ideas, use and extend your networks, both inside and outside your organisation.

Bring people together with different information and different perspectives. Someone may show up with the missing half-idea that you need to complete the puzzle.

CHAPTER REFERENCES

1 These are: overcoming the monster; rags to riches; the quest; voyage and return; rebirth; comedy; tragedy.

2 If you're interested in this, be excited. There's a whole section on storytelling in Chapter 6.

3 The tendency for people to seek out or be attracted to those who are similar to themselves.