

## **"Stimulating Innovation with Collaboration Rooms"**

**By G. Lynne Snead and Joyce Wycoff**

*Innovation was not Art Fry sitting in church thinking about a better way to mark the place in his hymnal. It was innovation, however, when that great idea was later turned into Post-it™ Notes through the collaboration of thousands of people at 3M.*

Innovation is one of the buzz words most often heard in business. It is also one of the most misunderstood. Innovation is not one person having a great idea ... that's creativity or invention. It's also not just a bunch of folks generating lots of ideas ... that may be creative, but it can also be a waste of time and energy if the ideas don't go anywhere.

### **Innovation Defined**

Innovation is a collaborative skill involving actively scouting the future, generating new ideas, choosing the best, rapidly and effectively implementing them, and then learning the lessons from successes and failures in order to begin again.

Innovation is a contact sport that requires a rich mixing and mingling of people, information, ideas and collaborative processes. Providing a place for this "mixing and mingling" can be an extraordinarily powerful way to jumpstart innovation. Collaboration rooms, innovation centers, creativity labs, whatever the preferred terminology, these centers can be relatively easy to set up yet have enormous payoff.

Collaboration rooms come in a wide variety of sizes, shapes and reasons for being. They can be expensive and elaborate or creative and cheap. With a large dollop of creativity, these spaces often cost less than normal work areas. Suzanne Merritt scrounged used furniture for Polaroid's Creativity Lab and then enlisted her family and friends to help paint it bright colors for an energetic, playful atmosphere. Lucent Technologies' IdeaVerse engages participants in painting ceiling tiles and posters as part of the decorations for their creative meeting space.

When Gordon MacKenzie set up a specialized creative design group for Hallmark, he scoured antique shops for rolltop desks, used stained glass windows and doors as space dividers and milk cans as wastebaskets. Although trying to get milk cans through Hallmark's purchasing department required some creative accounting, the total per-person expenditure for an area that "fostered the free-spirited individuality of the staff and promoted the mission of the department," was \$700 less than the standard assembly-line cubicle set-up.

### **It's All About Projects and Collaboration**

In today's work world, projects have become a way of life and the foundation of innovation. The ability to effectively complete projects is a critical skill, and since most projects involve more than one person, the ability to collaborate successfully is a fundamental key to success. There are several principles that we believe are critical to creative collaboration:

- **Everyone has ideas** – Creative collaboration flourishes when everyone understands that great ideas generally emerge from a democratic process of throwing all ideas (good and goofy) into a pot where they tumble and merge, collapsing and reforming into something often completely unexpected and new.

- **Shared vision of a compelling challenge** – Great collaboration starts with a shared vision of an exciting challenge that charges people with energy and enthusiasm. Abraham Lincoln once said if he had eight hours to chop down a tree, he'd spend six sharpening his ax. Wise advice but, too often, in the heat of getting today's critical tasks done, we think we don't have time for all this "vision" stuff. The problem there, especially in a collaborative effort, is that if the group doesn't have a clear, shared vision of where they're going, no amount of creativity and effective project management will get them "there," since they're not sure where "there" is. On the other hand, if everyone has a clear vision, the project can tolerate a lot of inefficiency. Every action may not be exactly on target but all actions will be pointed in the right direction and moving basically toward the target in a self-correcting pattern.
- **Rich flow of and easy access to information** – Information is the life blood of creativity and collaboration. It's impossible to tell just which piece of information will trigger an idea that leap frogs the competition, opens up a whole new technology, or turns on light bulbs in all the right places. Doling out information on a "need-to-know" basis, is death to innovation.
- **Trust, respect and participation** – Creative collaboration respects and honors the talents and contributions of each person involved, regardless of rank, seniority or expertise. It asks everyone to participate fully and to take risks such as asking "dumb" questions or suggesting "silly" ideas. Organizations that are serious about collaboration make sure there is a safe environment for taking the risks that are necessary for creative collaboration.

### Meeting Rooms Vs. Collaboration Rooms

It's important to keep in mind that most meeting and conference rooms are designed for presentations, not collaboration. The standard conference room set-up is a long table surrounded by chairs, perhaps a small whiteboard at one end of the room, an overhead projector and a video system. These rooms are designed primarily for information presentation. One person sits or stands at the front of the room and presents information, using the whiteboard, the overhead projector, or the video monitor. Participants are focused on the front of the room and the information being presented. Discussion may or may not be encouraged, but participants are seldom invited to take control of the pen or the overhead or video monitor. There is no real co-creation of understanding or plans. There is, however, order and control.

Collaboration rooms are very different in that they invite a flow of ideas and energy with little concern for either order or control. Imagine a room surrounded with floor-to-ceiling whiteboards well stocked with colored markers. There are moveable easel pads and an abundance of sticky notes of various colors. Tables and chairs are smaller ... or non-existent, allowing more space to move around, cluster around engaging ideas, or back off for contemplation.

When a new idea surfaces, someone grabs a pen and makes it visual. Often several people may be writing and talking about their ideas at the same time, simultaneously adding ideas, moving thoughts around on sticky notes, making new connections, redrawing linkages, erasing, and reshaping ideas into new possibilities. Sometimes it's chaotic, messy, and loud ... but that's creative collaboration at work and when the energy is high, when the ideas are flowing and people are fully engaged, peak performance happens. When that happens, the results often look like magic.

### Deals and Nerf Balls

One example happened recently in Lynne's home office, which was designed specifically for small group collaboration and consulting with her clients. "In addition to the mandatory white board wall and moveable white board/easel pads," she states, "when I have a group working together, I cover the conference table with the large, easel-size sheets of Post-it™ paper that

comes on a roll. There are cups of felt-tip markers on the table so people can doodle, mindmap or whatever as we talk."

A major factor of great collaboration is energy and one way to keep the energy flowing is to create frequent "nano-breaks," micro-moments of brain relaxation. An easy way to build these nano-breaks into a session is to provide toys of various types, especially ones that can be manipulated ... squeezed, put together, torn apart, tossed, bounced or scrunched. One of Joyce's favorites is a brightly-colored, flexible magic wand. She states, "As Deanna Berg, one of the foremost consultants in the field of innovation known as the 'Queen of Toys' says, 'In today's world, even magic wands have to be flexible.' People create the most amazing things with these wands (officially known as Bend-a-Bands) ... jewelry, animals, buildings, monsters. Rather than being distracting, messing around with a stress ball or a magic wand seems to sharpen concentration, reduce stress and open up thought processes."

In Lynne's collaboration room, there is a nerf basketball set-up with lots of stress balls to toss at the hoop. "One of my favorite memories," she recalls, "happened when a guy put a multi-million dollar deal on the table while he was tossing balls at the basketball hoop. By that time, we had been working most of the day and we had mindmaps all over the table and all over the room. When he finally made the offer, he made it clear that it was the easy collaboration and creativity of the group that made him feel comfortable making the offer. I'm convinced that in a different environment, we would never have been as productive and we would not have established the easy camaraderie that led to this offer."

### **Building a Collaboration Space**

In addition to the principles of collaboration spelled out above, here are some important fundamentals to keep in mind as you start to design your collaboration space. There are a few specific ideas with each fundamental but your own needs and situations will stimulate ideas appropriate for your situation.

**Interaction** – Collaborative spaces invite interaction and movement, allowing people to move around, grouping and regrouping as ideas and energies shift. Small tables for 4-5 people are generally better than large conference tables.

**Visual thinking** – Ideas and thoughts gather power and energy when they can be seen and interacted with. No collaboration room is complete without generous whiteboard space, large sheets of paper, boxes of colored markers and a large supply of Post-it™ notes.

**Beauty** -- Beauty operates at a deep level, opening up the imagination and the heart. Lynn Frost, Vice President of Product Innovation with FranklinCovey (see inset box) states, "I believe in Goethe's quote that every day you should read some poetry, see a beautiful picture, get into nature so that we don't lose the sense of the beautiful that's in all of us." You can make your space visually pleasing by using plants, water fountains, windows that let in natural light and beautiful scenes, colors, and a variety of textures.

**Fun** -- Play is an important part of creativity and collaboration. Fun breaks down barriers and frees us from the inhibitions that keep us "in the box." Bean bag chairs, toys, bright graphics, crayons and silly hats all help create an atmosphere of fun.

**Abundance** – An atmosphere of abundance sets up a mindset of generosity and sharing which promote collaboration and idea-generation. A feeling of abundance can be created by having large bowls of fruit, candy or snacks available (chocolate is always a winner), keeping a refrigerator well-stocked with bottled water and soft-drinks, making sure there's always markers, writing pads and sticky notes available.

**Tools** -- The purpose of collaboration rooms is to work together more effectively. It's very important to have the right tools immediately available in the room. This will vary for different organizations but generally includes a phone with a fast modem for connection to the Internet, a good computer system complete with mindmapping and project management software, a printer, an overhead projector and VCR.

#### **Maximizing Effectiveness**

Collaboration rooms exist to create better and more innovative project results. Therefore, you might want to have a constant reminder of the process you're following. The one we use is the FranklinCovey VPIC (Visualize-Plan-Implement-Close) process. You might want to have some sort of visual reminder of the collaboration process you intend to use posted in all of your collaboration rooms. This gives people a road map to the process so they know where they are at all times.

Collaboration rooms are most critical for the Visualization stage. These rooms stimulate open interaction and respect for each participant. They create a safe environment for generating "out-of-the-box" ideas and voicing the hesitations and reservations that might remain unspoken in more hierarchical environments.

#### **FranklinCovey's Innovation Theme Rooms**

When FranklinCovey's product innovation group needed to move, they decided to make their new space more representative of their mission and values. Lynn Frost, Vice-President of the group, explains, "To me environment is everything. I think people are more productive, more creative, when their environment is beautiful and relaxed. It opens up all those channels of the best ideas inside of them. I think every human being deserves to have the environmental support. It feeds the spiritual needs of the human; it feeds the mental needs, the emotional needs and it definitely comforts the physical needs.

Lynn's group brainstormed what they would like to have their space look like and decided to eliminate private offices and have everyone in cubicles. This freed up enough space to create three themed meeting rooms that could also be used by individuals when they needed privacy or quiet time.

The first theme room is the Nature Room, a windowed room that looks out at the mountains, trees and river that surround the office campus. The room is filled with plants, a trickling fountain, a miniature Japanese rock garden and colorful posters of different natural elements. It has a sound and video system and a conference table that will handle up to ten people.

Next is the Nerfical Room with one wall of floor-to-ceiling white boards with colored markers on bungee cords that hang from the ceiling, toys galore, bean bag chairs. Lynn describes it as, "kind of a bounce off the wall room. Everything in there is soft enough to throw at someone. It has no windows so we get in there and just bounce around in that room.

It's also a place where if our kids come to the office occasionally, they can go in there and draw and play."

The third room is the World Room. We want to make sure that every product we create can be localized and customized for other cultures. This room has an eclectic representation of other cultures ... sculpture, paintings, maps, architectural models, plants, and lots of statements and poetry from different cultures.

These collaboration spaces help Lynn's group work together more effectively and generate better ideas and results. Because of their choice to have all main offices as cubicles, they were able to carve these themed meeting rooms out of the normal space allotted to them. It's every manager's dream: more results, no additional costs.

**Resources:**

*To Do ... Doing ... Done, A Creative Approach to Managing Projects and Effectively Finishing What Matters Most*, by G. Lynne Snead & Joyce Wycoff, A Fireside Book, 1997.

*Mindmapping: Your Personal Guide to Exploring Creativity and Problem-Solving*, by Joyce Wycoff, Berkley Publishing Group, 1991.

*Orbiting the Giant Hairball* by Gordon MacKenzie, OpusPocus Publishing, 1996.

G. Lynne Snead is the Program Director for Planning for Results for FranklinCovey Company, Inc., and can be reached at [lynne.snead@franklincovey.com](mailto:lynne.snead@franklincovey.com). Joyce Wycoff is a Co-founder of the InnovationNetwork and can be reached at [staff@innovationnetwork.biz](mailto:staff@innovationnetwork.biz)

Source: Innovation Network. Retrieved from  
[http://innovationnetwork.biz/articles/collaboration\\_rooms.html](http://innovationnetwork.biz/articles/collaboration_rooms.html)