

## 4 Yo-Yo

### CREATIVITY

#### It Only Happens When You Let Go

At the height of the Watergate scandal, President Richard Nixon went onstage at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee. He didn't sing, give a speech, or tell jokes. Instead he played with a yo-yo. The yo-yo belonged to Roy Acuff, who had incorporated yo-yo tricks into his act for years. After the show, the president signed the toy and presented it to the singer. Years later that item sold at the Acuff estate auction for \$16,029, making it the world-record price ever paid for a yo-yo.

Historians agree that the yo-yo is one of the oldest toys in history. However, they disagree on its point of origin because it seems to have appeared in multiple sites at various times. Similar toys have been documented in China around 1000 BC and then five hundred years later in Greece. The most unusual theory is that it evolved from a sixteenth-century weapon used by hunters in the Philippines. The first public mention of the toy in North America was in the patent obtained by

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James L. Haven and Charles Hettrick in 1866. Throughout history this toy has been known by many names, but an article in a 1916 issue of the *Scientific American Supplement* gave detailed instructions on how to make this “Filipino toy” and called it by its island name, the “yo-yo.”

The modern yo-yo craze began in 1928, when Pedro Flores trademarked the name “yo-yo” and began manufacturing thousands of units per day. Two years later, Flores sold his business to Donald F. Duncan, a toy marketing genius. His new “Duncan Yo-Yo” would dominate the market for the next thirty-five years, accounting for up to 85 percent of the yo-yos sold in the United States, including an astonishing forty-five million in 1962.

Duncan would say that the success of the yo-yo could be attributed to his annual nationwide yo-yo contests more than anything else. At these events, the average person could recognize the excitement and creative potential of this toy. Today people of all ages still love the yo-yo because of its simplicity and the nearly limitless possibilities.

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Remember the first time you played with a yo-yo? Step back in time with Michael when he received his first yo-yo:

I got my first Duncan Butterfly yo-yo when I was eleven after seeing a professional yo-yo demonstrator at the mall

and deciding that there could be no greater job in the world than this. That first day I tried to do all the tricks I had seen him perform: Walk the Dog, Around the World, and Rock the Cradle, to name a few. The only problem was that I kept hitting myself in the head. The more I tried, the more tangled and dangerous the toy became. After a week, I had numerous knots in the string (not to mention my head), so I cut the string shorter. This only made the yo-yo more unmanageable. The good news was it was too short to hit me in the head anymore, but the bad news was the string was now too short to do any tricks. So for weeks I just carried it around in my pocket until finally retiring it to the shelf. And there it stayed until I found it while helping my parents move, some twenty-eight years later.

Creativity is very much like a yo-yo. It remains dormant until it is released. Good ideas are a commodity. Since many organizations will live or die based on the stream of ideas they can produce, creativity is the fuel for growth and opportunity. Many times creative solutions are better than expensive ones. Creativity can be the fuel that propels your business. Ideas, enhancements, improvements, developments, inspirations, and initiatives not only keep your business on the cutting edge but also ensure viability. This chapter shows the value of creativity and creative people. It will spark your creative genius, even if your tank seems to stay on empty.

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According to Michael Michalko, one of the world's leading experts in the field of creativity, creative people are simply those who come up with more ideas in a shorter space of time. Some people think that this only happens to certain people or personalities. But the truth is everyone has the ability to be more creative when the conditions are right. You can learn to be more inventive, more ingenious, and more imaginative than you ever thought possible. You can also help others to release their creative side. Remember, good leaders don't necessarily need to be exceedingly creative to be successful, but they must surround themselves with people who are. The yo-yo teaches you how to equip yourself and others to be more innovative by developing the kind of environment and processes that generate valuable ideas.

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Organizations often underestimate the value of creative people. Creative people connect the dots when others don't. They make observations about products, services, or presentations that are obvious to them but others miss. They see where modifications can be made or how to mix one idea with another, resulting in effective cross-pollination. Simply put, creativity creates opportunities.

## The Purpose-Driven Yo-Yo

Think about how a yo-yo would spin if the axle were off-center. The yo-yo would wobble down the string absent the momentum needed to return back to your hand. The same is true of creativity. It is best when it has a central goal or problem to solve around which all the discussion should revolve. Want to see your team get creative? Put them in a room and tell them to come up with one hundred ways (with money as no object) to make your product or service better.

### Make Creativity Attractive

Make creativity so attractive that achieving it benefits the whole team and gets them talking. Give them creative topics to discuss, and it will create ownership within their area and allow them to think creatively about the whole organization. People need a central purpose for their ideas and discussions. That is why water-cooler talk is so popular—it is based upon a pop culture event, a ballgame, or another office member. Admiral Hyman Rickover once said, “Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people.” The most attractive thing about creativity is that with it you gain influence and affect administrative decisions regardless of your title.

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**Give Creativity a Direction**

Creativity requires a direction. This is largely due to the proven cliché “necessity is the mother of invention.” Invention is creativity that solves problems. Just as the yo-yo’s inertia and course is provided by the throw, people need guidance and purpose for their imagination. David Allen, best-selling author of *Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity*, says it is “hard to be fully creative without structure and constraint.”<sup>1</sup> He illustrates this with a futile effort to paint without a canvas. It is a leader’s responsibility to guarantee fluency and flexibility of thought with clear expectations.

Many people talk about being creative but seldom make the jump to creativity because they are unsure how to begin. Since there is no prescribed route to follow, astrophysicist Stephen Hawking says forming new ideas requires you to take “the intuitive leap.” Direct your team’s creativity and help them make that leap to solve your organization’s problems.

**The Requirements of Creativity**

There are four requirements for the yo-yo to work, and those same requirements mirror the creative process: releasing, revolving, returning, and rewinding. Follow these creative absolutes and you will unleash your creative potential and the creative potential of those you lead.

## 1. Creativity Requires Releasing

With all of its potential, a yo-yo is simply a paperweight until you let it go. It won't work if you just hold it. Only when you let go will it do what it was designed to do, and that is to spin. Letting go is the removal of constrictions. Creativity is often squashed by restrictive boundaries, unnecessary policies, and lack of opportunities. While it sounds overly simplified, the process demands that you first have to let go. Walt Disney, an icon of creativity, said, "The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing." Make the choice to be creative.

Disney often used the term *Imagineer* to describe a very creative person. Your organization could benefit from you being an Imagineer like Walt. "Walt Disney was a visionary and a futurist. And what is a futurist? . . . A futurist is a planner and a doer. Futurists look at trends and innovations. They look for patterns of change. They then act. Futurists don't just predict the future. They make the future happen."<sup>2</sup>

When you do actually "let go," you make available a variety of freedoms. *The first of these is the freedom to think.* This wide-open approach is crucial for the mind to encounter something new. It is in that free space that you find the liberty to dream. If you're imprisoned by the day-to-day stress of running your organization, you will find little room for innovative thoughts. Never underestimate the value of freeing up creative time. Your organization's future will suffer

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when you're too constrained to dream. Plan creative time in your calendar just as if it were a real appointment. Always have something to record your ideas: a legal pad, Post-it notes, or a voice recorder. If you have creative thoughts while you are driving, you can record them on voice mail. In your mind, replay your day on your drive home. Think through what was accomplished, what is pending, what was left undone, and how you could have improved the day. You can also spend your drive time on the phone bouncing ideas off of people who can give you solid feedback. Create the time to think.

*Another essential freedom is the freedom to explore.* Most innovation today comes from looking at the old in new ways. Exploration forces you to study all the angles. It causes you to search for new possibilities. Renowned psychoanalyst Erich Fromm stated, "Creativity requires the courage to let go of certainties." This only happens when you are willing to leave your current mind-set. *If you hold on too tightly, your perspective narrows and you exchange creativity for comfort.* Allow those around you to explore. Even Walt Disney recognized the value of his team exploring possibilities, so he ensured they had a work environment that sparked creativity.

Letting go to explore works best with an attitude of trust. Trust is expecting that the method will help you accomplish the goal. As a leader, you may not live consistently outside the box, but you need people around you who do. And to

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maximize creativity, a leader needs to trust those who do think outside the box.

*The most important creative freedom by far is the freedom to fail.*

How many people ever get the yo-yo trick right on the first try? Does your team have permission to fail while being creative? If so, you are cultivating a winning team of creators. But if they fear your rebuke because of a failed attempt at something new, they may revert back to not risking anything at all. Just remember, the consequences of failing are small compared to the consequences of not trying at all. H. Jackson Brown, best-selling author, said it best: “You pay the price for getting stronger. You pay the price for getting faster. You pay the price for jumping higher. [But also] you pay the price for staying just the same.”<sup>3</sup> Do not be afraid of failing.

Here is an exercise in creativity Ron uses that may produce results in your organization:

I like to use managers’ meetings for training and development. Many times meetings can become calendar synchronizers and newsletter updates, most of which can be e-mailed. When you get people together, make it worth their time. Have a plan for training and spend at least fifteen minutes of the meeting accomplishing this task. I usually pick a book to