Surprising Skill To Accelerate Innovation: Songwriting

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I write about how creativity and communications accelerate success.

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Songwriter Cliff Goldmacher facilitates workshops that help business leaders build skills that drive ... [+] GETTY

Nothing takes business leaders out of their comfort zone faster than

knowing they are going to do something they've never done, something potentially embarrassing, and do it in front of their peers.

Grammy-recognized songwriter Cliff Goldmacher knows the terrified look of nervous executives when he tells them they are about to write a song and perform it in front of their group. This challenge is the linchpin of innovation workshops he facilitates to build creative confidence with clients that include Bank of America, Dell and Google.

Leaders must steer their organizations through relentless change and uncertainty, which naturally creates discomfort. Goldmacher uses discomfort, with intention, to help leaders build skills they can use well into the future.

Behind the discomfort

"Coming from a lifetime of creativity, I underestimated the resistance that business executives have of appearing foolish in front of their peers," said Goldmacher, who helps participants build confidence while they're flexing new creativity muscles.

Cliff Goldmacher is a Grammy-recognized songwriter. JUAN PATINO PHOTOGRAPHY

"Once I take them out of their comfort zone, for the first two minutes, I'm careful to make it a psychologically safe setting where people can be a little more brave than they typically are in a business meeting," he said. "Because when you tell a team of high-level executives that they are going to be writing a song effectively you're telling them, I know you're good at a lot of things. But now you're going to do something probably never done. Are you ready?"

The steps seem straightforward. Goldmacher works with participants to examine an important business challenge and think about it laterally via metaphor, write a verse about it, which amplifies storytelling and creativity, and then write a chorus about it, which focuses on great communication.

“Essentially we take people who are bright and motivated, who don't think as a rule that they are creative, and then break down the creative process by doing something they normally would not do,” said Goldmacher.

What most surprises both Goldmacher and the participants is how eager team members embrace performing their songs together.

“First, I tell them that I sing the loudest,” he said. But more than that, the shared experience of overcoming obstacles together builds confidence. Participants have found a new way to think about a challenge and develop skills that to use in any future challenge.

“What I have found without exception is that when people are in a group and they've done something together, they want to sing it in a way that I think shocks even them,” he adds.

The Reason for the Rhymes

Goldmacher is author of The Reasons for the Rhymes: Mastering the Seven Essential Skills of Innovation by Learning to Write Songs. In the ultimate metaphor, Goldmacher draws parallels describing how to use songwriting to nurture these innovation skills: lateral thinking, creativity, communication, empathy, collaboration, risk taking and diffusion. All of these, I'll add, are also skills that go beyond innovation and will accelerate success at work and in life.

Goldmacher came to this new branch in his songwriting career through his TEDx talk "Some Things I've Learned about Songwriting in 25 Years," which led to this newer branch in his business model.

"I began to realize that a lot of what works in songwriting also works in the broader world," he said. On the return trip from the TEDx conference, a chance seatmate introduced Goldmacher to a leader from Deloitte's Greenhouse Labs, the global consulting firm's innovation group. She brought in Goldmacher to conduct workshops, and Goldmacher has built from that start.

With songwriting as the foundation, everything about the workshop is geared towards helping the client explore a challenge or an issue that is important to them in a way that sparks fresh thinking and builds new skills in a way that's much more memorable than analyzing a spreadsheet or reviewing a PowerPoint.

And being memorable helps leaders and their teams integrate these new skills into their everyday work. By integrating a new way to spark innovative thinking, leaders can set their teams' creativity free. Who knows what hit business solutions may result when leaders let go and sing out?

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