

TRITENESS, CREATIVITY¹, AND ABSURDITY STORIES²

How to Use These Stories

Leadership begins when people exhibit virtues with excellence. Virtues are standards of moral behavior, such as courage, integrity, kindness, and humility. This document focuses on the virtue of creativity. When we lead with exceptional creativity, we feel deeper satisfaction over what we accomplish, we help and benefit others, and we improve the world around us.

Like all virtues, too much or too little of a virtue is a vice. Thus, when leaders are not creative enough, people may stop innovating and lose interest in their work. When leaders are too creative, people may have unrealistic expectations and fail to find success in their work.

Leading with exceptional creative is often difficult. It is difficult to find the optimal expression of creativity between triteness and absurdity. It is difficult because a creative action in one situation is not a creative action in another situation. It is difficult because the people who care about a situation often disagree about the best way to exhibit creativity, and in many of these cases each person—including you—will be partially right and partially wrong, and we need to learn from each other and work through conflict to sort this out. Even when you figure out how to exhibit exceptional creativity, it is also important to communicate what you are doing to others so that they will understand what you are doing.

This document contains stories of people being creative and of failing to be creative. (The titles next to people's names are their titles at the time the story occurred and may not be their title currently.) Discussing diverse situations in which people failed or succeeded to live up to their values often helps people to recognize and act on other opportunities when they arise. By discussing these stories in meetings, on teams, over internet or intranet forums, or in classrooms, groups can come up with ideas for leading with exceptional creativity, learn each other's perspectives, work through disagreements, and generate ideas. For example, you might read and discuss one story at the beginning of a weekly meeting, post a story on a team forum and ask people to share their thoughts, begin a work shift by discussing a story, use a story in a town hall meeting, or use the stories as fodder for discussion in classroom settings. The following questions may be helpful in discussing the stories. Choose whichever questions are most helpful for your group.

¹ In addition to being used to foster discussions about the virtue of creativity, these stories may also be used for discussions about imagination, ingenuity, originality, or resourcefulness.

² The stories in this document were written or told by the protagonists. Ryan Quinn edited them and added the reflection questions. The stories are to be used as the basis for class discussion, and not to illustrate effective or ineffective handling of a particular situation. Some protagonists agreed to use their real name, others asked for us to use a pseudonym. The goals of this document include becoming aware of issues, identifying the benefits and drawbacks of taking different approaches, assessing their impact on outcome(s), and learning ways of addressing situations you may encounter in the future.

1. What, if anything, did people do in this story that was creative?
2. How could the people in this story have been more creative? How could they have been exceptionally creative?
3. How might some experiences from your own life be similar to this story?
4. What inspires or elevates you about this story?
5. What disappoints or angers you about this story?
6. What might you have done in this story to overcome your disappointment or anger and help the person who disappointed or angered you to do better?
7. What caused the people in this story to behave the way they did?
8. Who in this discussion disagrees with you? What could you do to understand this person's point of view?
9. How might your perspective on this story be wrong?
10. What ideas can you take from this story and discussion to apply in your own life?

Story #1: Bárbara Ximénez Bruidegom, Founder Director

When we first launched our smartphone app, we did not have a particularly clear sales model. The app enables users to record a video and then to scroll through the action frames within the video to select one of those frames as a high-quality photo. It was just a free app with in-app purchases. Then we attended the Tech Crunch conference in New York. While we were there, we ran a competition in which the person who took the best picture with our app would win a GoPro. We did the competition purely to draw attention to our app and to get people to download the app. However, when we started marketing that competition on social media, we got amazing engagement rates, well beyond what we expected. It drove our downloads up massively. It got us in the press, it got us many features—all kinds of benefits.

Because of this experience, we realized that this was a technique we could use for selling more generally. We now use competitions all of the time. When we do, we typically get large numbers of new downloads, lots of publicity, and we are collecting photography so we can create a large-scale photo sharing site. Typically, when companies advertise apps on Facebook, they get a click through rate of one percent, with 0.06 percent of people who actually engage with the advertisement. When we started using these competitions, we got 12 percent engagement, and in some cases even up to 50 percent. The cost to us was the same, but the engagement was much higher.

Story #2: Parry Merkley, Creative Director

As a director in a major advertising firm, the first account I had success with was American Express. My team had recently arrived in New York in the 1980s, and we were outsiders to the New York corporate culture. The local people, who were embedded in the

culture, were not sure what to do with the American Express account, but as outsiders, we looked into it and what stood out to us was the idea of membership.

At the time, Visa was using their advertising to try to mislead people into thinking that Visa and American Express were the same kind of product, but they were not. Visa was a credit instrument, while American Express was a financial institution that offered people the opportunity to charge and to pay monthly on your service. If you had an American Express card, it meant you were good for the money. American Express also had a complimentary world travel service that helped you in your times of need. Visa did not have any of that. By making people think that Visa and American Express were parody products, they started this war of features and benefits. Local people took these differences for granted because they were surrounded by them all of the time. We were new to New York, and nobody needed the status conferred by American Express where we came from, so we did not know what we did not know. That ended up working to our advantage. We could see that outsiders did not have American Express cards.

The fact that outsiders did not have American Express cards gave us the idea to brand American Express with the phrase, “Membership has its privileges.” When people got their American Express card, there was usually a story about it. For example, you got your card when you received your promotion to a corner office. Things are different now, but when we got the account, that was the climate. Our idea, of branding American Express by saying that membership has its privileges hit the nail on its head.

We won the account, and our people went around the world making television commercials. For example, there was a commercial where a guy drops his wallet in the canal in Venice, but a representative from American Express tells him, “Don’t worry Mr. Smith, the new card will be ready at your arrival at the hotel in Beijing.” Or a guy on a cruise ship guy forgets his prescription medication, and American Express helicopters the medicine to him on the deck of the ship. These were features that Visa did not offer.

While my colleagues were making the commercials, I was left at home by myself because I had design experience but not commercial experience. As a result, I designed the print campaign. I contacted a famous photographer and asked if he would shoot it. The print advertisements showed celebrities on one side and members on the others. The pictures showed people who were members of the American Express “club.” As such, they implied that if you became a member, you would be in good company. Our campaign won every award in the book.

Story #3: Tim Flanigan, Senior Vice President and Deputy General Counsel

My company had a major legal case that we had developed against one of our former suppliers. I did not believe that we were going to be able to convince our senior management to bring this case to court, so I essentially gave up on it.

After I said that I was done with it, one of my colleagues took the case forward. Instead of trying to persuade senior management to bring the case to court, my colleague took it to a major Wall Street law firm. He asked them if they would be willing to bid it on a contingency basis, or in other words, to accept payment only if they won. This is hardly ever done in the corporate world.

Based on this odd request, the law firm did a very thorough analysis of the merits of the case. Eventually, they said they would take it. In fact, if I remember correctly, they said they would do it for a contingency of fifteen percent because they thought it was a very meritorious case. The fact that a major law firm was willing to take the case, and that we would not have to front any of the cost of litigation, immediately turned our CEO around. He said, “Great! Let's do it. Oh, and by the way, let's not do it on a contingency basis. Let's do it on an hourly basis.” This meant that we would pay the cost, but it would reduce the law firm's overall compensation at the end. Eventually, the law firm accepted this change of terms in good graces.

I had never seen someone use a bidding process as a way of convincing management to pursue a case. Since that time, I have used variations of that idea twice.

Story #4: Lauren Herr, Program Coordinator

Our sponsor increased my organization's budget for a two-year project, but when I reviewed the contract, I noticed a discrepancy between what was requested and what was in the contract. My organization receives funds through the sponsor from two different sources for each year of the contract: federal and agency. For the agency segment, we receive the full year budget annually. For the federal, we receive 75% for the first nine months and 25% for the last three months of the budget year. Funds must be spent only during that budget period and do not carry over. However, when we modified the budget, the sponsor allocated the federal budget at 67% for the first nine months and 33% for the last three months. As we were already midway through the year, this created a budget shortfall for the first allocation period. I brought the discrepancy to the sponsor, who found out that the sponsor's accounting office had made a mistake. Unfortunately, due to the terms of the contract, we were unable to do another modification to adjust this prior to the end of the allocation period. It was up to me to figure out how best to utilize the funds that were available and what alternative sources we could pull from in order to maximize this amount as to have the least impact on the project as possible.

My first step was to prioritize. Putting personnel costs first was obvious. However, to determine which operational expenses should be prioritized, I sat down with the Program Director to work through the options. We determined which line items could be moved to another budget for the time being and which would only be allowable under the project budget. I also took advantage of staff vacancies that were yet to be filled. This opened up a limited amount of funds with which we could work.

We also developed a protocol for how future expenses were going to be allocated and approved based on project guidelines and allowable costs. We will also now have excess funds for the last quarter of this budget period that we will likely not be able to spend down. We have done well with this process and will be able to maintain operations through the end of this period. The sponsor is also working on initiating a modification on her end so that the second year of our contract does not have the same issue and is properly allocated at 75% / 25%.

It would have been very easy to freak out about this and worry that people above me in my organization would see this as my fault, but I knew that we would be able to get through this period with minimal impact on the project. Fortunately, by doing this, I was able to show that this was not the result of a failing on my part, and that I was able to come up with a solution that not only alleviated the current issue but also set us up to make sure that this does not happen in the future. We were fortunate to have other funding sources that could offset most of the costs that we otherwise would not have been able to cover. There were some things that had been planned for this period for which we were not able to complete, but overall, there was minimal impact on the project.