



**THE CREATIVE LEADERSHIP FORUM**

ASIA PACIFIC AND AUSTRALIA

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## ***Will the BBC Become The World's Most Creative Organization?***

**Believe It or Not!! Creativity Can Really Happen In A Bureaucracy!**

*By Ralph Kerle*

### **A World Best Practice Case Study**

**Experience Design as a Transformative Organizational Experience**

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On January 28, 2000, the British Government appointed Greg Dyke as Director-General of the BBC to revitalize the sagging morale of one of Britain's icon institutions. The world's largest public broadcaster with 28,000 employees spread across a vast media network of TV, Radio and Internet had been through a period of internal cost cutting and restructuring. Morale was low and employees so protective of their respective areas of responsibility that important internal decision making had almost ceased to exist.

The choice of Dykes, a former current affairs researcher with London Weekend Television was not without rancor as he was in the tradition of most leaders of public broadcasters accused of political bias, in this instance of being a "Tony crony".. However, Dykes had one major asset in that he had graduated from the rank of programme makers and thus understood very well the engine room of the organization.

In his first public statement, Dykes provided a clear direction when he announced under the theme of "One BBC", his priorities for change were aimed at "putting audiences, creativity and programme making back at the heart of the BBC".

An important early recognition by Dykes was that in previous attempts to bring about change in the BBC, external consultants had been used and on all occasions, they had failed to make any lasting impressions. The organization was internal looking and hierarchical in the way of traditional public service organizations. Outsiders trying to bring about change in an organization with this type of ecology and a staff of 28,000 had an impossible task. If the mission was to succeed, he rightly reasoned only internal staff could be involved in the process.

Dykes commissioned research on the BBC as a whole and discovered the concerns within the organization where that there was no clear vision by Executive Management as to where the BBC was headed. It was perceived by staff that there was little connection between what Executive Management said and their behaviour. The trust between departments was extremely low and as a result collaboration almost impossible. If the BBC was to be moved the mandarins within the organization known internally as "Bafta Bastards" had to be challenged, involved and moved outside of their privileged positions of power or by passed.

In 2002, Dykes launched a culture change project entitled "Making It Happen" with the stated mission of "over the next 5 years, making the BBC the most creative organization in the world".

The action plan, with the internal consultants as its prime drivers, Dykes developed to achieve the mission was audacious and epic in proportions but sturdy and thorough in its academic, experiential and practical rigorousness.

The Discipline of Innovation Workshop with its underlying principle of Continual Innovation Keys, part of the Value Creation Partnership Program designed by SRI International the independent research and development organization originally established by Stanford University in 1970, provided the strategic infrastructure for the project. The SRI Value Creation Partnership Programme proposes that "the prime focus of innovation be on the customer, that the language of value within the organisation be strongly articulated and communicated and that a value improvement process be instigated as part of the organizations ongoing innovation programme".

The 6 Continual Innovation Keys the BBC would concentrate on to achieve Dyke's goal were leadership, creativity, audiences, One BBC aimed at eliminating the corporate silo mentality and Just Do It, an action theme that exhorted staff to take risks in their roles and to act quickly and decisively on their decisions in relation to the risks.

A well respected senior executive from programme making was selected to head a team responsible for driving the change. The team consisted of 6 full time project managers, each with responsibility for one of the "key" themes and an internal communication teams made up of staff producers and assistant producers charged with creating and producing print, intranet, films and events to promote the messages and achievements of the culture change project.

Between May and October 2002, 15 Divisional Directors were asked to nominate 400 Executive Managers as the internal key creativity leaders to spearhead the change programme - the "Leading The Way" team as it was christened. These Executive Managers would be required to work cross divisionally, outside of their normal roles as and when required and to be trained to become excellent creativity facilitators. To welcome them to the team and to officially launch the project, all 400 were invited on October 4, 2002 to "Leading The Way One" - a "one day" creativity meeting!

The process used to facilitate this meeting was built around "appreciative inquiry" a methodology for aesthetic discourse developed by Dr. David L. Cooperrider of the Weatherwood School of Management at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.

Cooperrider describes "appreciative inquiry as being about the co evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them". In its broadest focus, it involves systematic discovery of what gives "life" to a living system when it is most alive, most effective, and most constructively capable in economic, ecological, and human terms." It is built on the 4 principles of discovery, dream, design and destiny and is a technique that involves "the mobilization of inquiry through the crafting of the "unconditional positive question" often involving hundreds or sometimes thousands of people". Cooperrider proposes "that appreciative inquiry seeks, fundamentally, to build a constructive union between a whole people and the massive entirety of what people talk about as past and present capacities: achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, elevated thoughts, opportunities, benchmarks, high point moments, lived values, traditions, strategic competencies, stories, expressions of wisdom, insights into the deeper corporate spirit or soul-- and visions of valued and possible futures".

And that is exactly what happened! The Executive Managers unleashed so many fabulous stories and reflections on past glories that it became almost impossible to stop the gush and with this gush, came the instant affirmation that the main value of the BBC was "creativity is the lifeblood of our organisation".

Unequivocally, creative programme making is what made the BBC what it was, is and will be!!!

And the "unconditional positive questions" applied to this statement produced a clear statement of organizational values and actions. The BBC as an organisation should celebrate creative success and learn openly from failure. It must make time and space to solve problems and to be creative. It should adopt a disciplined approach to developing, testing and refining programme making ideas, take considered risks and

encourage people outside immediate teams to help in coming up with new ideas. From an individual perspective, staff members would be encouraged to use audience and customer insights to inspire their thinking and support the best idea, not just their own.

The meeting quickly wrote headlines for the BBC Wide Change Plan - "Blockbuster Innovations" at an Executive Management level and "Inspiring Creativity Everywhere" at a staff level.

In 2003, "Making It Happen" began to focus on implementing the BBC Wide Change Plan using the SRI Value Creation Partnership Programme methodology.

In order to focus innovation on the customer, the first tenet in the SRI Value Creation Partnership, several internal audience focus groups were established to determine just who the BBC was serving. 250 Executive Managers left their offices and took to the road over the summer of 2003 interacting directly with the viewing public. Who were their audience in reality? What did their audience want? How was the BBC servicing their needs? For Jan Hunt, an editor and a 15 year veteran of the 6 O'clock News, her initial cynicism for "Making It Happen" transformed into "slight evangelism" as her audience became real people with real experience of her programme making. Real people who wanted to have a meaningful relationship with their revered British institution, the Beeb!! This ethnographic journey came to life through footage shot of the interaction between the audience and the internal focus groups as it was collected, edited and shown to programme makers. Photos taken on their field observational trips, pasted on PCs, editing machines and walls in studios began to appear as programme makers used visual reminders as a way of connecting and personalising their relationship with their audience.

"Inspiring creativity everywhere" as a mode of thinking was seen as being fundamental to changing the mindset of the organization. It formed the basis for the implementation of the second tenet of the SRI Value Creation Partnership Programme which is that "the language of value within the organization be strongly articulated and communicated". The challenge became the selection of the tools and techniques of creativity that could be spread virally into the organization to enable this language to develop.

Caroline van den Brul, a TV programme producer and now Director, Creative Networks in her search for new creative programming making methodologies had previously developed a real interest in creativity processes and tools. She had attended the US Creative Problem Solving Institute Conference produced by the US Creative Education Foundation in 2002 and had participated in their Springboard Programme in which participants are trained in the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) facilitation process.

Designed in 1948 by Alex Osborn, a former advertising industry executive - the O in BBD&O and author of the classic creativity text "Applied Imagination", the Creative Problem Solving (CPS) process, embraces 6 basic steps; exploration and identification of the goal or challenge in relation to a problem, gathering of data in relation to the challenge; clarification of the problem; generation of ideas to solve the problem; selection and strengthening of the solution and a plan of action. Each step is approached from the notion of divergent and convergent thinking and different types of creativity tools such as dot voting, brainstorming, visualizations, improvisations, evaluation matrices are inserted at each step to assist in providing outcomes. Decisions on ideas and concepts in each step are deliberately withheld until seemingly all possibilities in a particular step are exhausted. A vote is then taken

to determine the most popular resolution (the convergence) before proceeding to the next step, where the process of divergent and convergent thinking is reapplied until the most popular idea as a solution to a problem has been elaborated and a plan of action agreed.

Van den Brul understood this process was simple and yet profound in the way it facilitated story telling, idea generation and a plan of action. She was caught up in the fresh energy of "Making It Happen" and knew she had something to contribute with this knowledge. She quickly signed on to adapt and design the CPSI process to the projects needs and to train the internal creative facilitators that would use the process.

Between May and June, 2003, "Just Imagine", a series of 210 events run by these newly trained creative facilitators across the length and breadth of the BBC's operation in the United Kingdom began the conversation of the language of values and how these values might be used to "Make It Happen".

Every single BBC staff member was invited to attend and over 10,000 staff participated in face to face creativity sessions. It was not uncommon to have employees from areas as diverse as programme making, legal, resources and administration all contributing on topics as diverse as creativity and "just do it". What astounded the project team and the facilitators was the enthusiasm and cooperation these sessions unleashed!

Geoff Zycinski, Features Editor, Radio BBC Scotland summed it up when he said "if the BBC as a whole could take the level of energy and enthusiasm that we discovered in our meeting and directed that focus outwards towards our audience, what could we do?".

In a practical exercise to test the validity of what the BBC was proposing, Geoff asked himself a question. "Could you use the creative energy of one idea for one year in one town to make a difference?"

To answer this question, Geoff conceived of "Soundtown", a radio programme making project based in a school hall in Dalmellington, a small mining community with an unemployment rate of 58% located 50 miles south of Glasgow in the Southern Uplands of Scotland.

The local school was chosen as the sight in which to construct a small but fully operational sound studio that could provide local programme content as well as traditional featured programmes

The first barrier to the project was the fact that Radio BBC Scotland had no budget for programme making for a project of this nature. Geoff was astonished at where money could be located within the organization when not only the programme makers but other departments who had access to budgets became involved in an externally focused project with a strong sense of social entrepreneurship.

Within the space of 12 months, the "Soundtown" project had trained local school children in highly sophisticated media production skills, developed and broadcast a series of locally produced programmes, hosted a series of local events including giant pub quizzes, had bought sporting stars to the local community to broadcast a highly popular sport show nationally and produced a master class in Dalmellington with the BBC Scotland Symphony Orchestra for local musicians.

The effect of the “Just Imagine” was to define the language of values within the BBC and to set a course of action for the implementation of the third tenet of the Sri Value Creation Programme, the instigation of an ongoing innovation programme.

Small creative initiatives started to appear throughout the organization. Languages classes were offered at Bush House for all staff of the World Service and Global News; a creative pairing initiative to develop and pitch new creative programming making ideas was implemented at Birmingham, an undercover initiative to unearth new writing talent within the entire BBC commenced; meetings in Radio and Music were opened to all staff; mentoring schemes were instigated within Television News and Sport, a network of audience champions was established for News and cultural studies were offered in the Documentary and Factual Commentary areas. Policy and Legal were recognised for the excellent work they had done in making the Communications Bill workable for BBC programme makers and staff. Factual Learning established watering holes to speed up their contribution to the Value Creation Process and connecting with communities had provided a way for individuals and teams from within the BBC to volunteer their time in an innovative and meaningful way to outside organizations or activities.

The “Making It Happen” Executive Management team started aligning the BBC leadership behind the ideas that flowed from these “Just Imagine” events. They worked on facilitating and recognising the potential blockbuster innovations unearthed and drove cross divisional collaboration in attempts to implement them.

The mandarins watched this flurry of creative activity with increasing concern. Goodness knows where this series of seemingly unconnected initiatives might lead to. “We’re losing patience. A lot of time and money is being spent on this change project with whole lots of little time consuming initiatives taking place. The purpose was to find breakthrough programmes. What new programme initiatives have you come up with?” became the mantra. The BBC organizationally was now opening up. The new ecology was disturbing. Creativity had been released! The “Making It Happen” team realized they needed to act quickly against this campaign of destabilisation. Fear, a prime virus in the old culture, had reappeared and threatened again!

In the BBC bureaucracy of old, creative power equalled stimuli multiplied by thinking power divided by the fear of failure and in order to continue to drive this strong push to become the world’s most creative organization, the project team had to adapt the new ecology to create an environment where this fear of failure equalled zero.

The solution produced by the project team was again audacious in its concept and simple in its construct - confront the voices of fear directly and publicly and produce a result.

An opportunity was begging. The BBC had not been able to produce a Television Factual Entertainment programme of any lasting significance and audience focus groups had indicated a strong desire for one. Here was a chance for the “Making It Happen” team to find a creative solution quickly in the form of a successful on air programme that would also act as a loud organizational and public manifestation of the entire culture change programme.

Properly facilitated, one of the best tools in the CPS model is good old fashioned brainstorming. The BBC Wide Change Plan announced it would hold one of the world’s biggest ever one day facilitated brainstorming sessions “The Big Brainstorm” with the sole purpose of conceiving a break through programme concept. Every BBC

staff member regardless of what department they worked in was invited to attend an all day event to be held at one of the BBC Film Studios and to participate in a competition to brainstorm programme concepts and hopefully to have their programme concept commissioned for production on the day of the event. The response was overwhelming with over 1000 requests for more information with 400 turning up on the day.

On arrival, each delegate was seated at a table of 10 and provided with the Big Brainstorming Creativity Toolkit that detailed the Creative Problem Solving process, the rules and regulations for the competition. The brief for the day was introduced and a short film specially produced for the occasion, demonstrated how audiences are a rich source when generating programme ideas. At this event, our participants were representing the BBC audience. Delegates were asked to seek a quantity of ideas rather than a quality idea and to abandon all their assumptions in following this path. Associational thinking techniques were introduced to make the delegates find forced connections between their individual contributions. The difference between thoughts and ideas was explained and they were asked to evaluate and refine their concepts as the day wore on. What makes your idea distinctive from current output in this area? What's in it for the audience? Does it tell an interesting story that will emotionally engage the audience? Does it have a clear and simple format or structure? Are you and your team still excited by it? Would you want to invest time in taking active part, watching and listening?

The second part of the day involved developing a pitch for the programme idea your table had selected as its best option and then presenting that pitch to the audience.

What followed was an enormous San Remo Song Contest like judging process compered by a troupe of well known BBC entertainment presenters who encouraged hoops, hollers, hugs and other unlikely outpourings of emotion from BBC staffers and management, as programme concepts were slowly but surely knocked out of contention.

At the end of an exhilarating and exhausting day, "I'm All Right, Jack", a programme conceived by a team that included members as diverse as the Adviser to the Deputy Director and Manager, Technology Review Project was unanimously selected as the winner. It was commissioned on the day and went to air in prime time on BBC 2 early in February 2005.

3 and 1/2 years along, the BBC was now well on its way to becoming the most creative organisation in the world.

Unfortunately, this story does not have a fairy tale ending as our hero leaves before the final chapter is written.

On January 29, 2004, Greg Dyke, along with the BBC Chairman, was forced to resign as Director General of the BBC as a result of the Hutton Report findings into the alleged inaccuracy of reports made by BBC News Reporter Andrew Gilligan. Gilligan reported an anonymous intelligence source had been asked by the Blair government to exaggerate the risk of Iraq's weapons potential. In a series of hostile exchanges between the BBC and the Blair government over the veracity of the reported claim, Blair's principal adviser, Alistair Campbell revealed the source to be Dr David Kelly, an Iraq weapons expert. Kelly, after appearing for questioning by a group of MPs in which he claimed it was not he who had spoken to Gilligan, later committed suicide. Lord Hutton's report found that the BBC had erred in presenting an inaccurate news report.

As an indication of Dyke's internal popularity, some 3000 staff members protested in the streets and thousands signed petitions on the announcement of his forced resignation.

In a sign of a return to the past days of cost cutting and restructuring, the new Director General, Mark Thompson announced on July 12, 2005 the redundancy of 4000 jobs designed to deliver a more "creatively and financially" sound organization.

Interestingly, Dyke's most important legacy appears to be 400 of the world's best fully trained creative facilitators now residing within the Executive Management of which approximately 40 work regularly in that capacity. The Creative Network, a new internal department currently being set up, recognizes the important asset this embedded skill set is to the BBC and knows that it can be called into action at a moments notice!