Two gifts you can give your Java developers—today

Your words, actions, and attitude can inspire creativity. Here’s what to do.

by Alan Zeichick

April 9, 2021

Next time you hear a bad idea from a programmer, a tester, or—gasp—an architect, try saying “Yes.”

That is, fight that reflex impulse to say, “No. And here’s why your idea isn’t going to work.” That negative response shuts down creativity, says Duncan J. Wardle, former head of innovation and creativity at Disney.

Instead of going negative, try replying with a positive “Yes, and…?” Ask encouraging follow-up questions—not to point out your colleague’s flawed thinking, but to help create a collaborative environment. Build a process that fosters creativity and imagination, and see where that leads.

And while you’re at it, give those developers, and everyone on the team, the gift of time. No, not a wristwatch. Give them time. “Programmers work at an amazing pace, often on two screens at the same time. They never give themselves ‘Time to Think,’ yet their best ideas always come to them when they do,” says Wardle.
“We all find ourselves saying, ‘I don’t have time to think!’” Wardle says. The next time that happens, go for a walk, take a shower, or fall asleep. “Go to those places where you get your best ideas. That’s not to say that you should send your junior coders to the showers, but rather, let them take the time to stop staring at their screens without feeling guilty or furtive.”

“There is a very famous saying, ‘There is no time like the present!’” Wardle says, recommending that developer team leaders reverse that statement to “There is no present like the time!” Give yourself and others time to think. Just think.

More on the power of “Yes, and…"

Those words “transform the power of your idea into our idea,” Wardle explains. That transformation makes the idea bigger and accelerates its potential opportunities. It encourages collaboration, and from that collaboration, you can create new tools, new code, new libraries, and new processes.

Plus, by saying “Yes, and…,” you demonstrate to your coworkers that you honestly want to explore new ideas, not shut them down. That’s why Wardle encourages asking questions that turn the discussion into an impromptu brainstorming session. Don’t throw up roadblocks meant to trip up your colleague. And don’t be aloof or afraid to participate. Throw out your own ideas, too, as long as you don’t position your ideas as directives. Be collaborative: “Here’s an idea; let’s see how to make it work.”

Brainstorm big

Wardle warns against the natural tendency to scale ideas down during brainstorming. Limiting ideas makes them more manageable, less costly, and less risky, perhaps—but also ultimately less innovative and revolutionary. “You can always take a great, well-thought-out idea that’s ultimately too large and ‘value-engineer’ it smaller,” he says. “But you can’t take a small idea and make it bigger later.”

Being from Disney, owner of the Star Wars franchise, Wardle posited that a colleague might suggest throwing an appropriately themed party for customers. So how would he “go big” in brainstorming that? “Dress the band as stormtroopers, with Darth Vader conducting the music with his lightsaber,” he says. “Every customer can come dressed as their favorite Jedi Knight, and everyone can fly down to the party in the Disney corporate jet.”

There will be plenty of time later to worry about constraints and logistical challenges.

Stay playful
To children, the world is full of playthings. A refrigerator box is a fort, a castle, a house, or a rocket ship. A stick is a magic wand or a wizard’s staff. Anything can be anything—until an adult kills the joy. “You used to play in that box, full of imagination, until the teacher told you it’s just a box,” Wardle says. “Suddenly all that imagination and creativity start to collapse.”

The lesson is not to take creativity too seriously, either. It’s only in big, playful thinking that the most innovative ideas emerge. Don’t shut down the fun; encourage it. “The moment we have laughter, you open the door between the conscious and subconscious brain,” Wardle says. He always looks to get everyone laughing at the start of a brainstorming session.

Wardle also suggests that everyone discover when and from where their own most creative, playful ideas come—and tap into that resource. “Thomas Edison used to fall asleep on an armchair with a penny between his knees,” Wardle says. When Edison fell asleep, the penny dropped, and the noise woke him up. “And he wrote down whatever he was thinking.”

**Find the pain points**

When you’re designing new software, services, or processes, understand the customer’s pain points and make them go away. That’s how to reinvent or disrupt a market.

For example, imagine a world where a big limitation facing many customers magically disappeared. Wardle uses the example of Blockbuster Video, a business built on short-term rental of movies and computer games that identified two pain points:

- Customers don’t like late fees. What if those fees simply go away?
- Customers don’t like to drive to a physical store. What if we had no physical stores?

Wardle explains that Disney’s theme park executives are constantly looking for areas that might limit a visitor’s enjoyment, whether it’s paying for toys in souvenir shops, waiting in line for rides, or addressing dietary restrictions and food allergies at the restaurants.

One solution was RFID wristbands, which are delivered to visitors before their arrival. “It’s your theme park ticket and your hotel room key,” explains Wardle, adding that the RFID bands can even arrange to ship purchases directly to the hotel room or the customer’s home. “It even knows if I like pickles on my hot dog.”

Implementing RFID wasn’t easy: “Imagine the security features,” says Wardle. But it was worthwhile because the RFID bands address a real visitor pain point—wasted time. The less time park visitors waste filling out a shipping form or waiting at a hotel...
front desk, the more time they can spend having fun with their family.

Find out what customers don’t like about your existing products or about other products in the market. Brainstorm what it would take to eliminate those drawbacks. Unleash the creativity. Get everyone laughing. Say “Yes, and…” to draw out ideas. Go big. And think about the customer’s pain.

Run an energizer

If you ask anyone to name the most creative people they’ve ever met, you will most likely hear the response, “Children.” As pointed out above, children are always playing. By being playful, children open the door (the reticular activating system [RAS]) between their conscious and subconscious brains.

Why is that important? Wardle says that during most of our working day, we are too busy to have big ideas, “because that door is closed, and we are in the brain state known as Beta, which I call Busy Beta, where we have access to only 13% of our brain: the conscious brain.”

You can break that limitation, he says, by deliberately inviting playfulness into your day. “Simply being playful, you open that door just wide enough to give you access to the other 87% of your brain, the subconscious, known as Alpha, which I call Amazing Alpha.”

How do you summon that Amazing Alpha? Look up from those screens and run an energizer, which is Wardle’s term for a short, creative, playful exercise or activity to unlock the imagination.

“You have an amazing imagination,” says Wardle. Use it.

Photo: Duncan Wardle

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- Feed your creativity
- 5 ways you can bring more creativity into brainstorming and kick-start the flow of ideas

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