Perspectives
Using Games to Improve Performance and Results
Sue Baechler

Counterpoints:
Michael P. Carter/Mary Shapiro/Steven Kowalski/Joe Robinson

Linking Theory and Practice
The Dynamic Nature of HR in China
Steven H. Hanks

Thought Leaders
“Thought Leaders” Interview With Noel Tichy
Steve Stockler

Features
Workforce Shaping Models and Metrics in the Public Sector
Andrew Trice/Kristin Bertelli/Dan Ward

Gang Rules: Creativity in Unexpected Places

The Myth of the Consummate Leader
John Berson

What Business Can Learn from the Nonprofit (and Vice-Versa): Drucker Revisited
An Interview with Tim Shriver, CEO, Special Olympics
Greg Kesler
Gang Rules

Creativity in Unexpected Places

NOTE: The list of co-authors for this manuscript is long indeed, atypical of most papers in the management field. Yet, in Science or Nature, the world’s top journals for the physical sciences, the list of co-authors on any given article can be long, ranging from principal investigators to lab assistants. In management research, we sometimes discount manuscripts that list more than three authors, let alone 12. But, for this piece, each person contributed, especially by offering ideas that others could use. As a result, the leaders of this group all should be listed for being catalysts for creative collaboration.

By Nancy K. Napier, Boise State University, Gary Raney and Ron Freeman, Ada County Sheriff’s Office, Chris Petersen, Boise State University Football, Jamie Cooper, Drake Cooper, Don Kemper and Jim Balkins, Healthwise, Charlie Fee and Mark Hofflund, Idaho Shakespeare Festival, Trey McIntyre and John Michael Schert, Trey McIntyre Project, and Bob Lokken, WhiteCloud Analytics
What happens when jail deputies and dancers, software engineers and football coaches, actors and advertising gurus meet and share ideas? Creativity comes from unexpected places. Over six years, members of "The Gang," an eclectic group of diverse and loosely coupled high performing and highly creative organizations, have learned from each other and used creativity to continue to boost performance. This article discusses some Gang Rules, or lessons from the members, as well as how other organizations can benefit from being part of a similar group.

Imagine this situation: A father, mother and child want and need to communicate, but the mother is far away and hard to contact. Experts worry that the mother's location is dangerous for the son to visit and could potentially lead him becoming desensitized to its implications if he saw his mom there. The unit has tried a few different options for communication among family members, including sending videos and using awkward telephone setups. The most recent arrangement is a Skype-like system, with daily access from 9 a.m. until 11 p.m. That way, family members and friends can chat more regularly, even when the distances — physical and psychological — may be great.

The mother is not in the military. She's in jail. In a unique arrangement for inmates, the Ada County, Idaho jail was the first in the country to utilize $300 netbook computers and software similar to Skype to facilitate communication with inmates. It eliminates the $250,000 distance video setups and the need for the glass walls of telephone booths. It also avoids the potential to desensitize children who visit a parent in jail. Experts know that when children visit a relative in jail, they may lose the sense of the jail being a "bad place." Thus, Sheriff Gary Raney's creative alternative solves those problems and saves the county $400,000 annually (Whyte, 2010).

In another scenario, a skeptical viewer sits before a screen, waiting to see if the upcoming show is worth the time to watch it. This is a world wherein people are fast to assess the value of spending time — viewers today give rental movies an average of 10 minutes to "grab them by the throat." This viewer will watch for no more than two minutes and then decide whether to continue, in this case, to buy and learn a piece of business intelligence software, not watch a film. But the challenge is the same: What can the software package do to get a customer's attention in those crucial one to two minutes so he will want to learn how to use it? One software firm's CEO studied the movie industry to understand how to use emotion to pull in viewers. Bob Lokken's firm ProClarity then used the "grabber" technique to build such a growth business that Microsoft bought it six years after it started.

Consider one more story. Chris Petersen, Boise State University's head football coach, once said: "I like creativity. I like doing things differently." This comes from a person who, five years ago, said he wasn't creative, that he was a person who was "all about structure and routine." Yet he competes in a world of giants against organizations where one of his counterpart's annual pay was more than his entire organization's annual budget. He slowly recognized creativity might indeed have some value in generating a competitive advantage. As time passed, the coach realized that the way he recruited senior managers and others to the organization was different: It was comprehensive; it went beyond the normal "does he have the expertise?" question to include a 360-degree evaluation by others who worked and played with the new recruits. As he compared training approaches, he found other differences. His organization used a philosophy of "whole-part-whole" learning, where the senior managers provided information and forced those below to shift perspective from the big picture to the detailed, feet-on-the-ground level, and then back to the bigger picture. The approach helped his team members learn how to do their jobs and execute their actions in the field better than many others. He even rediscovered some of those old ideas he had discounted so many years before, tweaked them and beat Goliath in one memorable encounter. All this from Petersen, who thought he wasn't creative and now knows that he depends upon it in more ways than he realized (Whiteside, 2010).

Evolution of The Gang

Creativity can emerge from unexpected places — in the way a jail helps inmates maintain contact with people in the outside world, in the way a software package taps emotion to draw in users and in the way a football program finds, trains and develops players and coaches. These three organizations are part of The Gang, a group of seven high performing, highly creative, diverse organizations in a remote city in the Northwestern part of the United States. Being in a remote site has given Gang members an excuse to reach across fields and disciplines to learn from each other. As the software CEO Bob Lokken has said, "If I were in Silicon Valley, I'd spend my time talking to other high-tech CEOs. But lacking those industry clusters, I'm forced to look outside my field for ideas. And the Gang gives me ideas I never would have thought of."

Like many interesting ideas, The Gang started as an accident. When the academic among us was researching a book on organizational creativity, she wanted to find some organizations that seemed to be creative in coming up with new ideas that fit the time/place and had value (Amabile, 1996; Simon, 1988; Sterberg, 1999) but were "extreme opposites" — or so she thought. The first two she looked at were business analytics software and theater. What could be more different? Despite teaching and telling students never to make assumptions, she did. Of course, almost all of the expectations soon evaporated.

Within a year, she included two more organizations in her research: a football organization and a health information provider. By chance, one of her students was a football player, and until he showed in class, she'd had poor luck with football. But this one was different. As he said, "Think of me as a soccer player." He was a kicker, and a good one, as well as being an engaging young man and outstanding student, which warmed any professor's heart. To
support him and learn more about what a kicker does, she watched the Boise State football games on TV. When she heard more than one ESPN announcer say “Check out that risky move! Did you see that creative play?” she thought, “Creativity? In sports? How can that be?” So she went to the athletic director.

“Of course there’s creativity in football. We’ll get you in to see the head coach for 15 minutes.”

The 15 minutes turned into two hours. The coach (Dan Hawkins at the time, who went to and has since left the University of Colorado) said, “Go talk to some coaches and players.”

“But I know nothing about football.”

“Even better. You’ll see the creativity without the technical stuff getting in the way.”

Word got out and several regional organizations, such as the chamber of commerce, wanted to hear about what theater, software and football had in common when it came to creativity. After two years, the group of three grew to four: 1) the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, the focus of a Yale Drama School case study; 2) ProClarity, a global business intelligence analytics firm that was so successful Microsoft bought it; 3) the Boise State University football program, consistently ranking in the top 25 U.S. programs, and more recently in the top 10; and 4) Healthwise, a nonprofit health information provider that has led the industry in helping people take responsibility for their own health decisions and was recently cited in Harvard Business Review on “the hard return” on employee wellness (Berry, Mirabito, & Baum, 2010).

The Gang is now seven, including law enforcement, dance, marketing/advertising and a new software venture. Gary Raney, the sheriff (who developed the idea of the Skype-like communications approach in the jail) of the Ada County Sheriff’s Office, teaches in Northwestern University’s leadership program and is developing new approaches to problems like inmate housing. The Trey McIntyre Project is a full-time dance company that settled far outside the normal dance hot spots, yet still spends half the year touring worldwide and receives rave reviews in such publications as The Washington Post, Le Monde and The New York Times. Drake Cooper, consistent winner of regional and national advertising awards, has built a powerhouse of creative output for a range of clients. Finally, after selling to Microsoft, ProClarity’s founder started a new company, WhiteCloud Analytics, which focuses on helping hospitals and the health care industry dramatically reduce costs and increase quality.

Each organization epitomizes qualities of outstanding creative learning organizations: constant curiosity, non-defensiveness about examining their successes and mistakes, relentless attention to building and preserving strong cultures, and a disciplined approach to creativity and innovation.

The full Gang meets annually. Each organization brings four to six members to attend a two-hour, intense conversation about innovation, leadership, culture, creativity and common problems. The Gang leaders also started an informal bimonthly Messy Problem Lunch – the host organization presents a “messy problem” and others give input and ideas. Finally, The Gang is gaining visibility beyond the city; several national and regional organizations have sought out Gang members as speakers (e.g., NASA, the American Association of Physician Executives).

**Gang Rules**

While many associations and groups support specific industry sectors or business organizations generally, The Gang’s strengths are understanding and leveraging learning across different disciplines and sectors. This group of relentless learners focuses on how to “outthink, out innovate and outperform” its peers and has developed several rules, or lessons, throughout the years.

**Rule 1 — Think in Reverse: Turn a Disadvantage into an Advantage**

One of creativity’s key ideas is to think in ways that are not the norm. Gang members, for instance, “think in reverse,” or in ways that are opposite to what most people might. The Trey McIntyre Project (TMP) thought in reverse when it came to deciding where to locate the new dance group. Choreographer Trey McIntyre and Executive Director John Michael Scheir tested 25 U.S. cities as possible locations for their company of nine dancers. Settling on Boise, Idaho, far from the usual centers of dance and culture, mystified others in the creative performing arts world. The move seemed fraught with disadvantages; it was far from major sources of money, a ready supply of dancers, a large audience and the usual creative stimulation. In fact, The New York Times did a feature story about the group (and its shocking location decision) just after the company started and returned for a follow-up story two years later (LaRocco, 2008, 2010).

Considering the company’s philosophy, the move to an isolated outpost made sense. First, TMP’s board of directors and donor base comes from outside the local community, so the company is not location-dependent for funding. Second, rather than being hurt by being far from a trained supply of dancers, McIntyre sees it as an advantage. He recruits dancers from schools like The Juilliard School in New York or from ballet companies in San Francisco or Houston, and they come to Idaho because they want to be part of his full-time company, committing to McIntyre, each other and also to the community. With no other world-renowned options in town, they want to make this work.

Other Gang members agree that the disadvantage of remoteness, isolation and the shock value of being based in a place many people confuse with Iowa and Ohio has advantages as well. As one leader says, “It keeps us honest; we can never believe that we’re good if we come from a place that few people know of, let alone care about.” And, even more useful, they can hide and then burst onto the competitive scene, using surprise when they come up against their most often much bigger and more powerful rivals. Of course, as they do gain notoriety (e.g., the football program’s higher rankings), the surprise element may fizzle.

**Rule 2 — Position Coaches in Sports ... and in Business: Look Outside the Field for Ideas**

Lokken, former CEO of ProClarity analytics, intuitively understood the value of looking for ideas from outside his industry and discipline. Drawing upon the film industry to understand how to get potential users’ attention was not his only use of the industry. Because films are made by forming and reforming teams of people to achieve a goal (making a film) on budget and on time, he used some of those ideas for creating his own software teams for new product development. But he also studied other groups that form quickly and get something done fast on time and on budget: the Rangers and SWAT teams. He continues to look outside the software field, partly because he’s curious and
partly because of the lack of equivalent companies with which to compare notes.

Further, Lokken listened hard one year to the coaches talking about the role of position coaches. In football, each player group has a position coach who focuses on improving the techniques and performance of those individuals who play a position (e.g., quarterback, linebacker). In Lokken's most recent firm, he's initiated the idea — assigning position coaches for software programmers, marketing, leadership, etc. Each "coach" works with each "player" to improve quality and performance; then, he has the coaches rotate, forcing everyone in the team to learn how to coach others — a clear example of reaching outside his field for ideas from another field.

Rule 3 — Oxymoron? Using Structure to Enhance Creativity

Coach Petersen resisted the idea of football being creative. When he first heard about the idea, he said, "I'm not a creative guy. There's nothing new in football — we need routine and structure and processes. Creativity is not part of our world." Time passed, and enough ESPN commentators and others helped him see the error of his ways. For Petersen, his coaches and his players, "Creativity is just part of who we are — we do things others don't. That makes us different." And part of it is that they use structure to allow creativity. Regardless of the fields they come from, the Gang members also use fairly structured processes that allow room for creativity. Whether for a football game plan, a new health information deliverable, a campaign or theater production, the process is generally consistent: review what worked and didn't; brainstorm; rehearse/practice/try out ideas and decide what to keep and toss; beta test/run through/preview; and implement — launch, open or play the game.

For organizations like Healthwise, an international provider of online health information (e.g., a content provider for WebMD), the goal is to increase the time for creative thinking and decrease the time for fixing and beta testing. A culture of inclusiveness, transparency and involvement demands that meetings are an important part of daily work life, and employees try to include "open thinking" or brainstorming time whenever they hold a meeting. When we analyzed the time spent on the open thinking, it appeared to be typically about 15 percent of the time of the meeting, although some managers are trying to boost that to 25 percent. This means that, in any given meeting, whether it is an hour long, a day long or a three-day retreat, a good proportion of the time is devoted to divergent creative thinking before trying to come to solutions.

Rule 5 — Football Players, Fire Hoses and Feet Positions: Whole-Part-Whole Learning

Several years ago, Boise State University's football coach Chris Petersen commented that his players come to the university for four or five years and that some need two and a half years to "get it" — to understand the program's system or culture and way of doing things, the approach to training, the values and how to be a successful college student on top of being an athlete. As he said at the time, "It would be great if we could speed up that process of 'getting it.'"

As teachers and motivators, sports coaches have the challenge of major turnover in players (on average, 25 percent per year), who are away from their home structure for the first time, encounter distractions and often think they are better than they really are. So coaches need the players to see a new reality fast — about their specific positions and how they fit into their program, their university and their new lives.

The coaches use "whole-part-whole" learning (Swanson & Law, 1993). It starts by overwhelming new players with information about the program, the values and culture, along with the roles they play (the "whole"). Next, within each position (e.g., defensive lineman, running back, wide receiver), the coaches work with the players on the "parts" they need to learn — how to move, where to place their feet or how hold their heads. Then, Petersen returns to give them more of the "whole," the larger picture of how they fit into the program, the university and the community. The position coaches then bring players back to the details of their specific tasks. This constant shift in perspectives (whole part, part part, whole part).
whole, part, etc.) encourages players to become quick at adapting to new ways of viewing a situation, to be comfortable with unrelenting change and to learn to see a bigger picture.

When Petersen explained his approach to the other Gang CEOs, several saw benefits in their own organizations. Raney commented that, while his office gives new employees an orientation that includes the “whole”—history and objectives of the entire organization—before employees go into their new positions, they rarely return frequently (or at all) to the “whole picture.”

Likewise, Lokken could see application even in his latest startup venture, WhiteCloud. Growing from two to 20 people in a year (before even introducing a product onto the market), Lokken wants employees to understand the goals of the firm, but then to get into their own jobs and move forward. But he realizes that with any startup, the pressure and urgency is intense. So he now wants to build in cycles of pulling employees back up a level or two so they can see the big picture more frequently, particularly in an environment (health care) that is changing daily.

Rule 6 — When an Inmate Escape is a “Good Thing”: Look for What’s Missing

Six months after Raney was elected to office, the most dangerous inmate in the county jail escaped and remained at large for 10 days. It was not a great way for a new sheriff to start his job.

But Raney used the escape to review very thoroughly both the escape itself and the organization more broadly. Most people in and outside of the jail blamed the escape on the guards’ lapses in security, which was certainly key, but Raney instead kept asking himself, “What else am I missing?” Eventually, he uncovered a more fundamental problem — what he called “the cancer of complacency” (Raney & Schwartz, 2008). The organization had run “well enough” for years without serious problems or mistakes. Raney then realized that the escape revealed a sense of complacency and triggered a major shakeup in the organization.

Regional theater directors may also ask, “Why didn’t we see that?” when they learn about the business model that the artistic director of the Idaho Shakespeare Festival has initiated. Several years ago, CharlieFee assumed the leadership for a comparable regional theater in Cleveland, 2,000 miles away from Boise. Throughout several years, he developed a model where each company creates two theater productions and transfers them (including the stage sets, actors, costumes) to the other site, essentially providing each theater four productions for the cost of two and a half. Advantages include longer commitments for higher quality directors, designers and actors.

Rule 7 — Real Gang Leaders Don’t Have “Aha” Moments: Making Creativity Routine

An “aha” moment — or flash of insight — is the sudden awareness of understanding or solving of a problem. Many people believe such moments come from nowhere, are single flashes, generate complete clarity, are unpredictable, personal and isolated — they “just happen.” Not so. In fact, “aha” moments come after much work or thinking; they may be single moments but can be a collection of smaller moments that build to clarity. They can be encouraged, and some people have learned how to nudge them in being for themselves or for others.

Several Gang leaders mentioned that when they were younger, they had notable flashes of insight. Kemper, the founder of Healthwise, recalled a critical “aha” moment 30 years ago when he heard a speech by the former assistant secretary for health education and welfare, Vern Wilson. During that talk, Kemper realized that individuals could (and should) take control and make decisions over their own health rather than relinquish those decisions to professionals. That became the cornerstone of his organization’s mission — helping people make better health decisions.

More recently, Gang leaders say they do not experience dramatic “aha” moments or that insight happens as a “slow door opening.” In probing why, it became clear that the leaders have incorporated insight thinking into their regular routines. Rather than consciously forcing themselves to think about this in another way, or ask explicitly, “what am I missing,” they do it as a matter of course. Like the discipline of creativity, they have made routine the process of looking for new ways to reach clarity and solve problems.

Rule 8 — Finding the Secret Ingredient to Success: Dogs in the Office?

Healthwise, one of the Wall Street Journal’s “best small companies to work for,” is also known for its very strong and vibrant culture. Most people who visit the organization’s headquarters notice several features: dogs roaming the building with their owners, Wednesday afternoon healthy snack breaks and periodic “culture check-ins” to ensure that employees stay in tune with the culture and values. Of course, the culture goes much deeper than the visible artifacts, permeating each meeting and interaction within the organization and with outsiders. The focus on transparency, for instance, has led directly to the abundance of meetings; the notion of agile development has moved from just software development to other processes within the organization. Regular meetings, similar to agile’s “scrum,” emphasize reviewing current progress and anticipating future problems before they become big issues.

Finally, Boise State’s football program has gained the reputation for being good but also for being creative — or, as some announcers call it, “using trickery in their plays.” Coaches are very cagey about who they talk to, who they let watch their practices and who hears about their approaches. They are willing to talk with high school coaches because they control the supply of raw material, so to say, but almost never to university program coaches, unless they are schools that are not and will not be competitors. Even so, sometimes a visiting coach says, “Hey, we do some of the same things you do; this confirms we’re doing it right.” When that happens, the Boise coaches often think, “It’s not that simple.” Like Healthwise, the football program’s system includes more than a “blue field;” rather, it includes the entire system, culture and way of operation — not one or two elements, but the full integrated set of actions and ways of thinking and operating. Part of that is the openness to Gang ideas, creativity and being relentless learners.

Benefits of Developing Your Own Gang

Throughout the years, Gang members have mentioned several benefits they receive from interacting with each other, but three main ones consistently emerge. First, they value the ideas and perspectives of people from outside their disciplines for what they can learn and
Start Your Own Gang

Critical elements for forming and facilitating a multisector gang include the following points:

• **No competing organizations:** Because Gang members come from different "works," they feel free to talk about their problems and industries since they do not fear others will steal ideas. In addition, it forces them to speak simply — without jargon — to convey ideas.

• **High output, low egos only:** Gang leaders and their organizational members know they were invited to the Gang because they are high performers, so they come to the group with respect already established. They also have low egos, partly because of the cultures their organizations pursue. As a result, they don't posture, show off or try to outdo one another. They just come to learn.

• **Relentless learners:** Each Gang leader is obsessive about improving organizational performance, and that means learning — from each other and any other source they can find. They are masters at questions, openly curious and excellent listeners.

• **Have a facilitator:** The professor who has studied The Gang for research continues to facilitate meetings — mostly to organize them, offer questions to discuss and help keep a discussion moving. It's a research boon for her but a convenient nudge for the busy Gang members, especially in the early days before they knew one another well.

Although we have looked for other examples of this type of multisector gang either in the United States or beyond, we have found none. That made us curious — could we replicate the idea? To test it, we started a Posse that has now been running for nearly a year. The multisector group comprises younger people from younger organizations, but they follow the same pattern: helping one another learn and solve problems. Since then, a Pack has begun, so we think the model is viable where musicians and tennis coaches and school principals and nonprofit CEOs learn from each other. Who knows where other Gangs may grow?

References


