

Simply Creative

Seven ways to guide your thinking

BY KEVIN WHITE AND NATALIE SUM

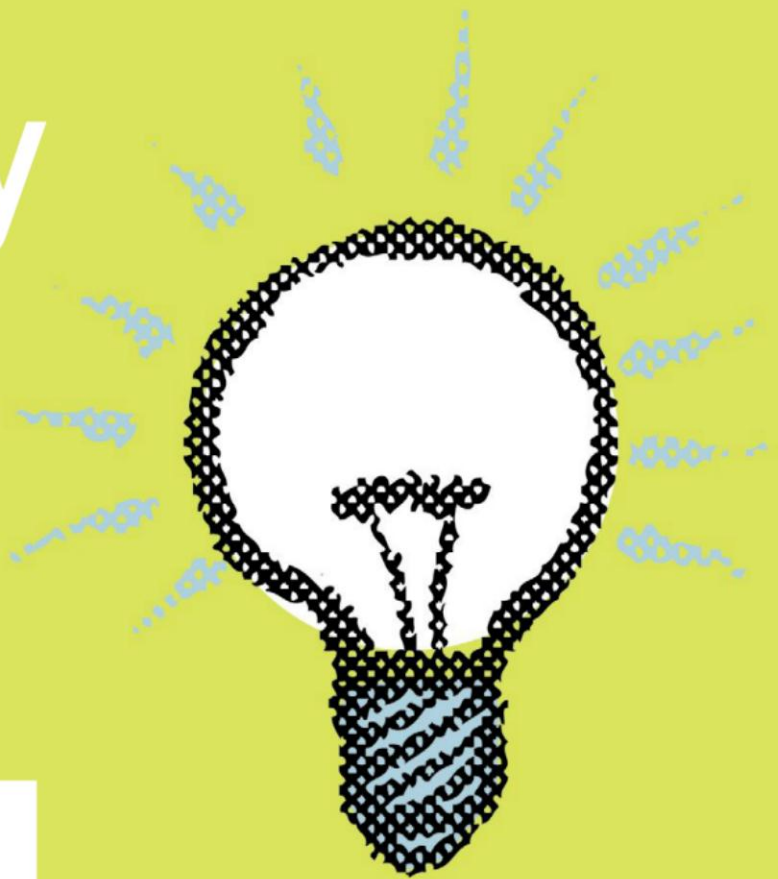
Every summer, somewhere in the back office of a church is a children's ministry worker striving to come up with the most creative and crazy ideas. This runs the gamut from themes, activities, programs and lessons to songs, skits, crafts and special events. Oftentimes it's a nonstop flurry of brainstorming, research and maybe even a little bit of "borrowing" of others' ideas. While these leaders work to develop new and creative ideas, they must fight the tendency to cling to what is comfortable, normal and the perceived "right" way to do things.

At the end of the day, just about every ministry leader sits somewhere in the balance of wanting to try something new, creative and potentially powerful while acknowledging the safety of what's normal, accepted and safe.

So, what do we do?

The adage is true that if everybody is thinking alike, then somebody's not thinking. But many children's and youth leaders face the exact opposite dilemma. If someone is thinking *too* differently, that someone may be out of a job.

How do we spark new creativity without jeopardizing our ministry? How do we inspire a new creativity without leading a ministry off course? Such an approach is possible, but it requires work. It also necessitates an appropriate allocation of time and energy to the creative process.



The first place to start is to recognize that God has placed you where you are for a very specific reason. He has given you the ability to lead, develop and create. Your job—as a worker and as a follower of Him—is to take that ability and run with it. Be creative based on how God has equipped you.

So what does this creativity look like?

Creativity is pure. To be truly creative, we have to start with a blank slate. The definition of "create" is "to come into being as something unique that would not naturally evolve or that is not made by ordinary processes." This doesn't mean you need to throw your existing ministry plans away and start everything from scratch. It does mean that you need to be willing to drop your preconceived ideas of what should be, would be and could be right and start with a new canvas for you and your ministry. Just like our Creator, we must be willing to venture beyond what has always been in existence.

The closer we get to the Creator, the more creative we should be.

Creativity is original. The temptation is there. You see what works somewhere else and want to replicate it where you are. This is where a good check for your motives is in order. Ask yourself, “What about this idea is appealing? What are my motives for wanting to use it?”

Of course, ideas stem from other ideas. But being creative does not imply that we simply copy a ministry plan from another church that God seems to be richly blessing. 2 Chronicles says that “*the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.*” Certainly this includes those who seek God’s unique, original ideas for the ministry in which He has entrusted them.

Creativity is honest. In our weakest moments, we are rarely honest with ourselves. When it comes to ministry planning, we are often tempted to lie to ourselves in an effort to make something work that really just isn’t going to work. For example, let’s pretend you visit a friend’s church, and the pastor is publicly honoring the children’s ministry workers. “What a great idea!” you think. “I will suggest that my pastor do this exact thing.” But your pastor’s temperament leans toward individual praise, which people appreciate all the same.

At the end of the day, we need to be honest with ourselves and the circumstances in which we work. You may have devised the greatest ministry idea on the planet, but if it’s not right for your church environment, team, and culture, then it’s no longer a great idea. At the least, it’s wrong for where God has placed you in this day and time. To be creative, we must realize that whatever we are developing has to fit the setting where God has positioned us.

Creativity isn’t formulaic. Browse through enough books or magazines (even this one), and you’ll quickly convince yourself that certain formulas or plans are the only true and

right way to conduct ministry. Every organization has had its successes and created a plan that is tempting for you to follow.

But creativity doesn’t follow a specific formula. Neither does effective ministry. Ken Canfield, founder of the National Center for Fathering and a professor at Pepperdine University, once said, “God opposes those who say, ‘This is the formula to follow.’” It is a bold statement, but there is truth to it. The details of ministry planning and programming are not a one-size-fits-all approach. Allowing yourself to feel like you have to plug into a certain formula is both uncreative and unreasonable.

Creativity isn’t chaos. Thinking about creativity sometimes leads us to believe it is the polar opposite of structure or order. Nothing could be further from the truth. Consider God’s creation of the world. It had both structure and a natural rhythm to it.

If you or someone on your team has a creative idea, ask yourself, “How does this fit into our current system and reality?” Even in the midst of original thinking, you need to ensure that it plugs into an overarching plan for what you do and why. Keep in mind that creativity is not random and without order. When it comes to leading a ministry, chaos doesn’t do much for anyone or anything.

Creativity isn’t perfection. Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert cartoon strip, once said, “Creativity is allowing ourselves to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.” This brilliant commentary reflects the necessity of constantly learning and not striving for perfection.

Often in ministry we as leaders have a fear of failure that can prevent us from even executing a plan. Allow yourself to make some mistakes. In the learning process, you become shaped and developed not just as a leader but also as an individual. Over time, you may discover that some of those “mistakes” that you never planned in the first place turned out to be some of the greatest ministry opportunities you ever experienced. Take the pressure off yourself to feel perfect and discover the ministry artist that God created you to be.

Creativity is yours. God put you in a specific place and a specific time with specific people for a specific purpose. It is no accident that you are where you are. You will make mistakes, but God can redeem them for a purpose. Allow

#7 Praise God with a Giant Kazoo

Collect ½" pieces of PVC in an assortment of lengths 6" - 10", and lots of elbow joints. The kids can connect about 8 pieces of PVC. Then add one T-joint that has a 4" diameter piece of plastic grocery sack covering the top hole (secured with a rubberband). Blow into this T-joint and you've got a giant kazoo.



yourself to think independently and freely, making plans based on who you are and who God has made you to be.

Own your opportunity to think about what ministry plans would be best at the place you serve. For instance, what you did at a previous church may not work here. Think about what is going to be most effective where you are today. The best plans from 10 years ago may or may not be the best plans for today.

Evaluate and consider the people with whom you serve. Remember that God has a perfect purpose for the work you are doing. Rest confidently in that truth!

Close to the Creator

I was once in a panel discussion with Michael Tait of *dc Talk* and *Newsboys* fame. One of the main discussions was creativity in the Christian music industry. (This was about 10 years ago, before many of the strides we've fortunately made to date.)

Michael made a profound point that has stuck with me ever since. As Christians, he conveyed, we are to draw ourselves closer and closer to God. That's what we do. We must remember that God is the Creator of all things. Put the two together and, ultimately, the truth is that Christians should be the most creative people around. The closer we get to the Creator, the more creative we should be.

That statement should be our most valuable takeaway in the process of considering creativity. Our foremost responsibility is to draw closer to Christ Himself. Don't do this merely as a means to an end. ("If I do my quiet time every day, I will become more creative.") Make it the end itself. At the end of the day, everything we think, say, do and develop should flow out of our relationship with Him. **K**

Kevin White is operations manager for Awana Lifeline, a fathering and men's ministry of Awana. He has served in youth ministry for over 10 years and yet has a growing love for children's ministry. Why? Because God has blessed him with two girls—one age 3 and another due this fall.

Natalie Sum enjoys the process of adding to Kevin White's work. Though she did add some ideas to this article, her main contribution was editing, some fun bantering with Kevin and collaborating in the creative process. Creativity is something she enjoys while working as an instructional designer in the Awana U.S. Training Department.