CREATIVITY AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE **Vincent Nolan**

'Creativity' and 'Emotional Intelligence' are often mentioned in the same breath, correctly in my view because they are closely connected. In this article I want to describe the specific connections I see between the two, derived from my experience of creative problem-solving and invention techniques (brainstorming and synectics including 'lateral thinking'). These methods are only one aspect of creativity, which might be called functional creativity, as opposed to the expressive creativity of the arts.

The 'Minute Particulars' of Emotional Intelligence

The poet, William Blake (1757-1827) wrote

> He who would do good to another must do it in minute particulars;
> General good is the plea of the scoundrel, hypocrite and flatterer;
> For art and science cannot exist but in minutely organised particulars.

What is true of 'art and science' generally is also true for Emotional Intelligence. The great virtue of creative problem-solving techniques is that they come in 'minutely organised particulars', especially Synectics, as a result of its origins in video-based research and analysis of thousands of interactions.

The findings of this research, reinforced by nearly 50 years of practical application worldwide, are summarised in the attached diagrams of Positive and Negative Behaviours (developed by George Prince, one of the Synectics founders). Along with the findings come specific tools (some of which are described below) to implement the positive behaviours and replace the negative ones. Consistent reinforcement of the positive and elimination of the negative, shown in the Figures 1 and 2 below, has a profound effect on the 'climate' of meetings and organisations.

Creative Problem-Solving Techniques

The original creative problem-solving technique was Alex Osborn's brainstorming, first introduced in the 1930s. Its fundamental feature was to insist on suspending judgement when generating ideas; the result was to produce a large number of ideas in a short space of time. (There is no guarantee that these ideas will include a new solution to the problem under consideration, but there is belief among brainstormers that 'quantity breeds quality').

From the Emotional Intelligence perspective, the most interesting aspect of brainstorming is that the simple expedient of outlawing judgement (whether positive or negative) creates an emotionally safe environment ('climate') which releases ideas. The ideas were presumably in the heads of the people involved, but not expressed before the brainstorming session. It raises the question "what else do people suppress, as well as ideas, for fear of a negative reaction?" I suspect, on occasions, they suppress information which might not be well received (it can be dangerous to be the bearer of bad news!). And also opinions, if they are contrary to received wisdom (though this may not be a great loss – 'opinionated' people tend to offer opinions when it might be more emotionally intelligent to withhold them).

Figure 1 Positive behaviours

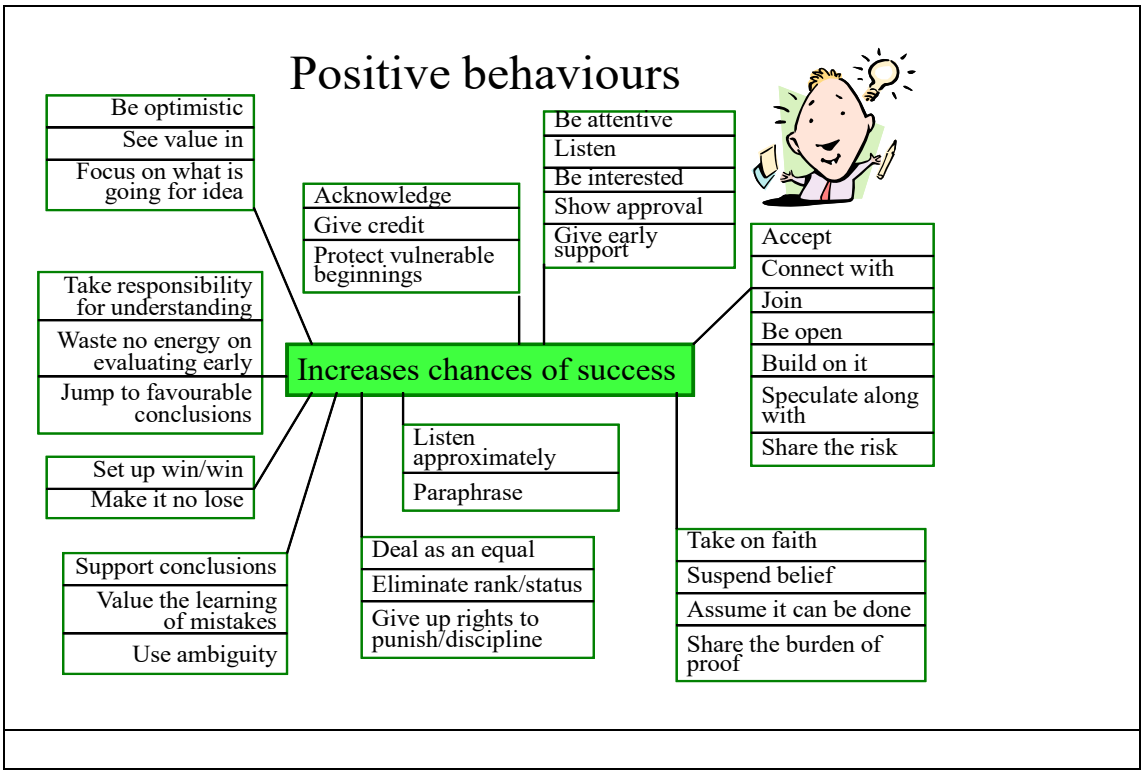
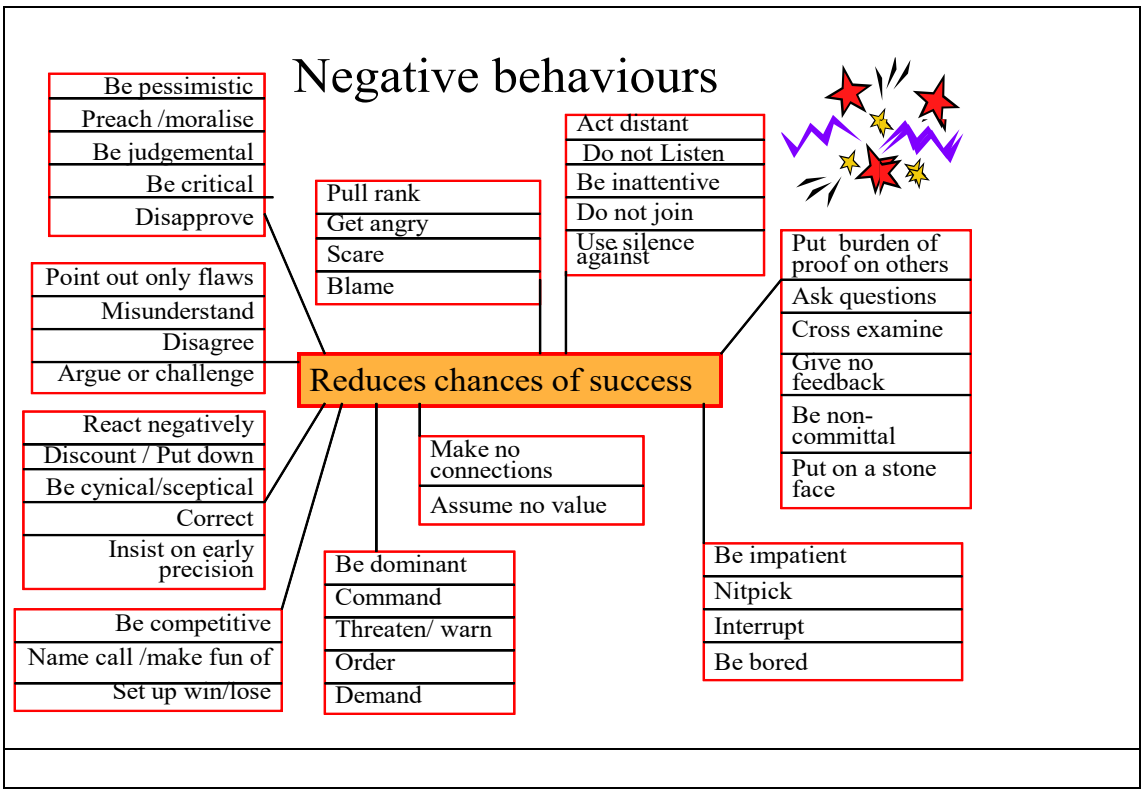


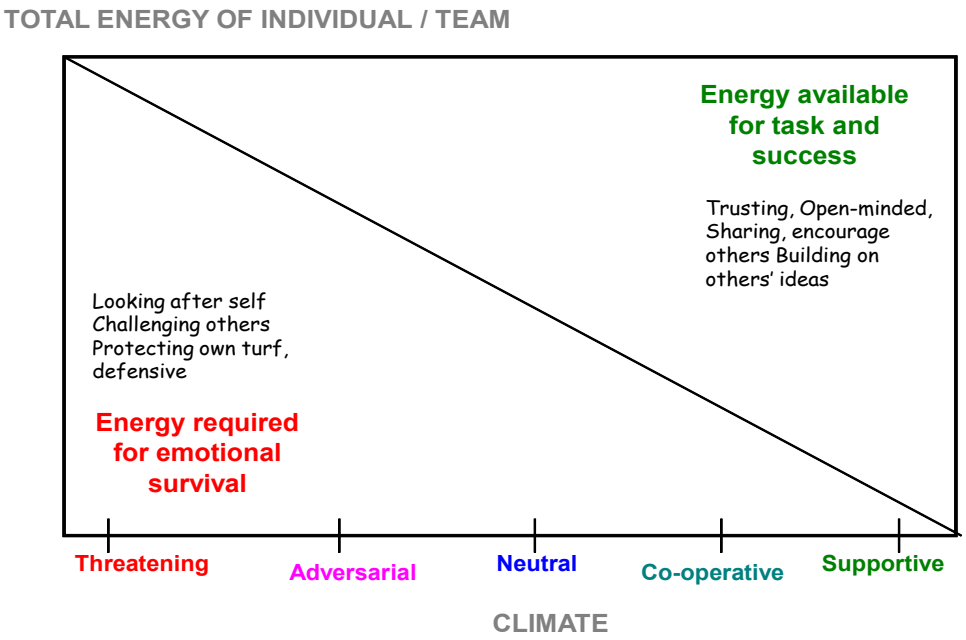
Figure 2 Negative behaviours



'Climate' is a metaphor; it is widely used and understood, but it is misleading in some ways. It implies a phenomenon outside our control; all we can do is respond to it – wear warm clothing, carry an umbrella. But the 'climate' of a team is something created and re-created all the time by the team members themselves, by the 'minute particulars' of their behaviour. ('Culture' is a more accurate word for it.)

And it matters, not only for the health and happiness of the people in the group, but also for its functional effectiveness. The first priority for any group member is to keep him- or herself emotionally safe, and the more positive the climate is, the more individual energy is available for the task the team is engaged in – see diagram below

Figure 3 How to create a climate that promotes creativity and innovation



Maintaining the Positive Climate Beyond Idea Generation

The expedient of suspending judgement cannot be maintained indefinitely – in the real world, decisions need to be made. The Synectics process, which was developed by a group of inventors in the 1950s, provides a way of maintaining an emotionally safe environment even when judgement has to be introduced. To do so, it introduces a process for Idea Development, which takes brainstormed ideas which are new and attractive and grows them into feasible courses of action that have the commitment of those who will implement them

The key features of the Idea Development process are:

- Ideas are selected and evaluated by the person (or persons) who will implement them. They were originally called the 'Client' (after Carl Rogers 'person-centred therapy'); currently the term Problem Owner is more likely to be used.

- The Client/Problem Owner/s must show they 'understand before evaluating' by paraphrasing the idea in their own words and checking that their expression of it satisfies the idea giver. This stipulation prevents misunderstanding – experience shows that as often as not, the idea is not initially understood to the satisfaction of the idea giver, and further clarification is needed. Paraphrase is a key tool of counselling – Carl Rogers again.
- The evaluator must first specify all the positive aspects of the idea (including possible, but uncertain, benefits) – in contrast with the conventional process of evaluating (and rejecting any idea that is not a satisfactory solution) by highlighting its negative aspects
- Having identified all the potential good features of the idea, the Client must then point to the direction in which he wants the idea to be improved (or replaced), usually by converting its major negative into a direction for improvement: "What I most need now is a way to….". For example, if the negative is "too expensive", the direction might be "We need to find a way to reduce the cost" or "Find a cheaper alternative" or "Raise the price of our product". It is the responsibility of the Client to choose the direction they want the development to take.
- The group can then suggest possible actions that the Client can take to increase the feasibility of the idea, from which the client can select those that s/he wants to build into a plan for implementation.

The Wider Implications for Emotional Intelligence

These particular mechanisms have much wider implications for Emotional Intelligence outside the creative problem-solving/invention context. In particular

Personal responsibility The Client/Problem Owner concept is an expression of personal responsibility for one's actions and behaviour and respect for the autonomy of others. It implies that people in organisations are responsible for doing their job as they see fit, subject only to harmonising their activities with those of their colleagues and the values and strategies of the organisation. (I call this Autonomous Teamwork – for a more detailed account, see *The Innovator's Handbook*, pp 245 to 250).

Less obviously, it is the responsibility of the Problem Owners to decide whether they need ideas from others to help them do their job. It is important to check, before offering an idea or opinion, that the recipient is interested in hearing it. Unsolicited ideas and opinions tend to be heard as criticisms and can damage the relationship between the parties.

Constructive Interaction It is helpful to look at any interaction between two people as two events, not one, and the two experiences can be very different. Observation and analysis of many interactions (using video recordings to analyse the interactions with the participants) frequently shows up a mismatch. In particular, there may be a substantial difference between the Intent of the initiator and the Effect on the recipient. All too often, a constructively-intended action is received negatively; for example, 'constructive criticism' (so-called) usually has a negative effect.

This may seem to be an unduly sweeping assertion, but it is borne out by observing the subsequent behaviour of the person criticised: they slip into Revenge mode (often unconsciously) however mild or appropriate the criticism may seem to be. In a problem-solving discussion, the following kind of interaction happens regularly:

Joe puts forward an idea.

Bill says "That won't work – we tried it a couple of years ago (before you joined us, Joe), and it failed.
Joe says "Thanks, I didn't know that."

On the face of it, a polite and constructive exchange – Bill is supplying some relevant new information to Joe. If the transaction is replayed on video, both parties would agree they had no problem with it. However, if the tape is followed for a further few minutes, we will probably notice that Joe has gone quiet (processing his thoughts more carefully before expressing them?). And the moment Bill comes up with an idea, Joe instantly (and vehemently) rejects it. We can conclude that, however acceptable the earlier episode may have been *intellectually,* at the emotional level, Joe has been hurt and takes the first opportunity to get revenge. Revenge Cycles such as this are commonplace in our experience (as is illustrated by sayings like "Don't get mad, get even" or "Get your retaliation in first"). Revenge cycles triggered by apparently trivial incidents can do lasting damage to relationships.

Communication The functional value of paraphrase in confirming that communication has in fact taken place (rather than just assuming that is the case) is particularly important, given that the success rate of communication is far lower than commonly assumed. I would put it at around 50% even in a structured, protected environment. Other studies have put it as low as 25%. It is not surprising that misunderstandings are common and not always recognised. But paraphrase has an emotional benefit too: it signals "You are sufficiently important for me to take the trouble to make sure I truly understand what you are telling me, and fit it into my own frame of reference".

Another dimension of communication is awareness of the potential negative effect of questions. In creative sessions they are discouraged because they can mask implied judgements. ("How much would that cost?" can mean "That would be too expensive"). They can also mask ideas, by checking whether an idea would work, rather than expressing the idea, for others to build on or trigger from.

More generally, it is often uncertain why a question is being asked and this can create anxiety in the person on the receiving end (especially as questions are frequently asked by authority figures, such as parents, teachers and bosses). You may need to say "Why you are asking?" to avoid these negative effects.

Argument and Debate Debate is deeply entrenched in our culture and is encouraged in the education system, but it is essentially a win-lose activity (a zero sum game) and engenders the kind of revenge cycles described above. As such it is highly unintelligent emotionally – it shifts the climate towards the adversarial end of the spectrum. Creativity offers a constructive alternative – namely, to invent a way out of conflict rather than try to 'win' the argument for a particular option. I have described the mechanisms for creative conflict resolution in "Creativity: the Antidote to the Argument Culture" in '*Creativity and Cultural Diversity*' (2004, The Creativity Centre Educational Trust).

Conclusion: Learning to Behave in Emotionally Intelligent Ways

Identifying the links between creative problem-solving and Emotional Intelligence leads me to the conclusion that a good way to enhance EI would be to use the format of the Synectics

Innovative Teamwork Programme, with a shift of emphasis from creativity and invention to emotionally intelligent behaviour. The format of the course is described in the Innovators Handbook (pp. 305-307).

Essentially, the course is based on a series of meetings on topics or "problems" brought by the participants. Each meeting is videotaped and analysed with the participants, with the trainer suggesting ways to enhance the effectiveness of future meetings, particularly by following the Synectics problem-solving model and using the techniques described above

The adaptation required to focus on EI would be to allow the participants to work on any live topics of interest to them (not just topics requiring the invention of new solutions). The ideal group is a working team. One option I have used successfully is to use live meetings as the learning vehicle. If the team is willing to invest some time in learning from the early meetings, they will quickly recover the time invested by having shorter and more productive meetings subsequently and the benefits become apparent immediately.