HERDING TIGERS

BE THE LEADER

THAT CREATIVE

PEOPLE NEED

TODD HENRY

HOW TO DRAW
DARTH VADER

There is always a well-known solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.

—H. L. Mencken

Southern heat will make you do crazy things. In this case, the sweltering locale was Disney World, and the act of crazy was ducking into a gift shop to catch a break from the sun. I don't know about you, but I tend to avoid gift shops at all cost. I believe that they are designed solely for the purpose of grabbing me by the ankles and shaking me upside down to claim what's left in my pockets, after I've already spent the equivalent of the price of a nice compact car just to get into the park.

My family strolled the aisles, and I discreetly slid to the side of the store to get out of the way. I found myself standing directly beneath an air conditioning duct, and as I basked in my personal igloo, my eyes were drawn to a bright red T-shirt a few feet away. At the top of the shirt were the words "How to Draw Darth Vader," and

underneath were step-by-step directions for sketching the Sith Lord. (If you'd like to see it, go to toddhenry.com/darth.)

Panel one: "Start with a head and body." (Above was an illustration of a crude body and a simple trapezoid for the head.)

Panel two: "Add a cape." (Again, a crude, illustration of Darth Vader's cape.)

Panel three: "Draw the face, gloves, and boots." (A third crude, cartoonish illustration showing the rough outlines of these things.)

Then, the final step.

Panel four: "Add details and some shading. FINISHED!"

Above these words was a *perfectly* photo-realistic drawing of Darth Vader, light-years (ha!) more sophisticated than the previous three panels. I still laugh to this day when I think about it.

I find the T-shirt funny not just because of the surprise ending, but because it is a great analogy for how leadership advice is often dispensed:

"Have a clear vision!"

"Hire talented people!"

"Listen more than you speak!"

And voilà! Brilliant work pops out the other side, no?

Well, no. The *actual* mechanics of leading creative work are way more complex than our neat, plausible clichés can handle. There is very little black and white, or even shades of gray. Challenges to leaders of creative teams appear in shades of brown—a blending of multiple colors to the point that it's difficult to discern what the original colors even were. Creative work must be figured out as you go, and the most sought-after people are those who can shape the chaos into form, meaning, and value. There are no "easy steps" or "magic principles." The "magic" happens between panels three and

four, and it's really just the result of a lot of hard work by super-talented team members (who make it look easy).

If you've picked up this book, chances are that you are responsible for leading the kind of work I just described. You have talented, creative people on your team, with all the extreme highs and (occasional) frustrations that accompany them. You spend much of your day figuring out how to harness their collective focus, energy, and creativity to produce value for your organization and your clients. When everything is going well, you love your job, but when the work starts going off the rails, you start wondering whether you should look for a more sanity-friendly line of work. ("I wonder if the post office is hiring? Or the DMV?")

You've probably heard it said that leading creative people is like herding cats. I *strongly* disagree, and I find the analogy demeaning. If you've hired brilliant, driven people, it's more like herding tigers, powerful beings who cannot be corralled but must be carefully, individually, and strategically led. However, many creative leaders I encounter don't have a clear framework for how to do this. They are promoted from within their organizations and suddenly find themselves leading people who were once their peers. Their only example of how to lead is *their* former manager, who was a total jerk (or a pushover, or a brownnoser, or if they were lucky *maybe* was a great leader). So regardless of how talented they might have been as team members, once promoted into a leadership role they find themselves asking: "Now what?"

This book strives to answer that question.

At the risk of telling you something you already know, there is tremendous pressure that comes with leading creative work. You have to juggle multiple stakeholders (your clients, your manager, your

team) while somehow discerning the right strategy out of a thousand and one possibilities. You have to manage the egos of the highly talented and opinionated people on your team while simultaneously holding them accountable for their shortcomings. You are asked to stretch limited resources into something ("Superb!" "Amazing!" "Stupendous!") that the world's never seen, all while keeping your team sane and prepared for the next project kickoff, which is in, oh, a few days. And, as an afterthought, you also have to somehow manage your own career aspirations. In short, you are asked to do the near impossible.

And you probably love it. It's in your blood. Even in your most frustrated moments, you wouldn't have it any other way. You get to work with gifted people doing unique work for (generally) appreciative people. However, that doesn't lessen the stress that results from a few unique challenges that leaders of creative work experience.

Opacity. At some point, you've probably heard the phrase "Let's let the 'creatives' handle that." It's as if there were some mythical box where complexity goes in one end and amazingness comes out the other. You're handed problems and told to "do your magic." Often, this is because the creative process is opaque to your stakeholders and clients—they don't see the many decisions that you had to make and the ideas you chose *not* to act upon. They often just see the result. To some extent, this can be an advantage because you don't have to justify every choice you make. On the other hand, it can also work against you when you are expected to work miracles with too few resources and too little time. Worse, if you go above and beyond and exceed everyone's expectations once, those expectations rise next time ("You did it last time—why can't you do it again?"). As the leader, it's your job to shine a bit of light on the process and help your stakeholders understand your team's abilities, capacity, and constraints.

Insecurity. It's not always the case, but often with creative people comes the ever-so-unpleasant parade of big egos and big insecurities. There is a tremendous amount of personal risk and vulnerability involved in doing creative work. Because the work is highly visible, when you ask the people on your team to try new things and step outside their comfort zone, it means that they instantly become a target for critique. If someone on your team is leading with her ego, she might become defensive about her ideas, dominate every meeting, and remain closed off to information that runs counter to her "gut." If someone is leading with his insecurities, he will play it safe and refuse to stand up for his ideas, even when he knows he's right. Either way, people aren't bringing their best ideas and work to the table.

As the leader, it's your job to manage the delicate balance of ego and insecurity on your team and to challenge people to lay down their guard in the pursuit of the team's mission. You have to be part drill sergeant, part fan club president, and part therapist. Mainly, you must carry the fire for your team and speak life and courage into its work so that team members feel permission to take risks and grow.

Subjectivity. Oh, and by the way, your final product will likely be judged by someone who gives you either a thumbs-up or thumbs-down, often based on little more than personal opinion or that of a committee of stakeholders. Even when based on research and sound reasoning, creative work is frequently qualitative in nature, so it can feel like you are shooting at moving targets while simultaneously switching weapons. On top of this, you have to manage the shifting expectations of your manager, client, and team while steering them toward a resolution that will satisfy everyone. (No pressure.)

Because of these unique challenges, creative leadership can feel lonely, and it can seem that no one else understands the pressures

you face. You take criticism for unpopular decisions even though you know they are in the best interest of your team. You have to make snap, high-consequence judgments in the face of uncertainty because, well, *someone* has to do it. Unbeknownst to everyone around you, you regularly sacrifice your own ego in order to allow your team to stand in the spotlight, because it's the right thing to do.

But please know that your sense of being alone is a lie. There are countless others who are out there braving the storm and striving to do right by their team and their clients. Also know that it is possible to have a thriving team that communicates clearly, fights in a respectful and productive way, pulls together at critical moments, and strives to do work that pleases your client *and* that you are creatively proud of as well. To get there, your team needs you to lead.

You see, although everyone wants to *be* the leader, far fewer are willing to actually lead. Leading is about more than just hitting your objectives; it's about helping your team discover, develop, and unleash its unique form of brilliance. That's why, although all good leaders are effective, not all effective people make good leaders.

A good leader of creative people accomplishes the objectives while developing the team's ability to shoulder new and more challenging work. Both are essential. If you accomplish your objectives, but the team requires your direct input on every decision, then you've failed to hit the mark; you are a bottleneck, and your team is probably cursing your overcontrolling nature behind your back. If your team consistently hits its objectives but isn't growing creatively, you're just teaching your people *how* to do things without teaching them *why* the tactics work. They will eventually grow bored and leave.

I spent the formative years of my career on both sides of the equation: as a creative pro and as a leader of creative teams. It's

tough to do work that you're proud of while also juggling organizational issues. Frankly, I was overwhelmed (read: terrified) when I first stepped into a leadership role, and I wish I'd had the benefit of a book like this to show me I wasn't alone. (That's why I'm writing it!) I've also had a unique perch over the past decade, as I've worked with creative teams and leaders across dozens of industries, listening to the stories of their struggles, their successes, their failures, and their aspirations. During that time, I've interviewed super-talented leaders from diverse industries about how they do what they do. This book aims to share what works and addresses many of the complaints I've heard from creative pros about where their leadership is failing them. In fact, many of the stories in this book are from people who have cornered me to share their experiences.

Now, it's important to note that no book can offer complete, tailor-suited advice for you or your organization. I'm not trying to. All advice is local. Instead, I'm aiming to provide you with a handful of frameworks through which to see your own choices as a leader, as well as some very specific tactics, conversations, and rituals to help you gain better focus, protect your margin, and earn trust from your team. Adapt them as needed. Some chapters may not resonate right now, whereas others will convince you that I've placed a hidden camera on your office wall. (Look over your left shoulder—hi!) That's how it should be. Your situation is unique. My hope is that you'll revisit this book as new issues arise and when you need to remind yourself that you're not alone. Perhaps you'll pass it on to peers and even your team in order to discuss how you can create a healthier, more focused culture.

In order to lead others effectively, you

Although everyone wants to *be* the leader, far fewer are willing to actually lead.

must first lead yourself. Despite your great intentions, all of your qualities—both good and bad—are only amplified through your leadership. As goes the leader, so goes the team.

This means that if you want to reach your full ability as a leader, you must get your internal and external worlds aligned. To deal with the chaos of creative leadership, you need firm footing, which is precisely what the remainder of this book is designed to help you obtain.

REFINING YOUR LEADERSHIP MIND-SET

When you transition from a frontline role to a leadership role, you must make a major shift in how you think about your work. You are no longer responsible solely for your own projects, your own career, and your ideal workload. Instead, you must focus primarily on how to equip and resource others. You will be tempted to control the work of your team by stepping in and doing it yourself or by telling people what to do instead of letting them solve their own problems. Engaging in these bad habits—often out of insecurity—only shrinks the capacity of the team. This approach doesn't scale beyond you.

In the first part of this book, you will learn about the basic mind-set shifts that effective creative leaders make and how to reinforce them with regular checkpoints. Some of these principles are counterintuitive and certainly countercultural, which is why many leaders fail to embrace them. That's also why the first several chapters (2 through 5) will require a bit of deep thought and personal introspection. Shifting your mind-set is difficult, especially if you already have a bit of leadership experience under your belt. I'm warning you in advance that you'll be tempted to skip over concepts and not

engage with the questions. *Don't.* Those who are willing to spend some time with these chapters will go to another level in their leadership and will win the trust and respect of their teams.

DEVELOPING YOUR LEADERSHIP MECHANICS

What you know matters little if you don't put it into practice. Great leaders have great rituals. In the second half of the book, I'll describe practical methods for honing your team's focus, managing team members' time, and maintaining trust, as well as weekly, monthly, and quarterly practices that reinforce your ability to lead. You'll see how intentional conversations can defuse tension before it explodes. You'll also learn how to manage your team's energy so that team members aren't going through the constant cycles of crash, burnout, and refresh that plague so many creative teams. You'll see how the best leaders inspire their teams with new ideas and help team members spend their time on effective activities, not just efficient ones, so that they're making investments in the future.

As a side note, I know that you're probably already buried in work. The last thing I want to do is pressure you with new exercises, conversations, and rituals. Through-

> **Great leaders have great rituals.**

out this book there are dozens of such things that you can apply to help you in your role, but please don't allow my suggestions to overwhelm you. Take what resonates and is useful, and implement those first. Then implement a few more. This book is intended to bring you freedom, not to create a whole new layer of work.

However, the strange paradox of creative work is that freedom often comes through structure. You need boundaries to define how

you spend your focus, time, and energy. That's why it's important to have rituals that anchor your life and your leadership.

THE RITUALS

When researching to write a book about creative leadership, you quickly discover that everyone has an opinion. However, I tried to heed advice from my grandfather: "If you want to know someone, don't ask what they think, watch what they do." Therefore, I tried to observe the specific tactics and rituals that great leaders use to help them gain clarity and unleash their teams' creative brilliance. In general, the end of each chapter breaks these rituals and practices down into three buckets: weekly, monthly, and quarterly. Taking just a little bit of time on a regular basis to check your mind-set and mechanics will ensure that you never veer too far off course.

Weekly rituals are designed to help you review the patterns of the past several days and plan for the following week. They will mostly guide you with tactical decisions about which conversations you need to have with team members, which tasks you should be focusing on, and which priorities should be occupying the majority of your mind space.

Monthly rituals are designed to help you consider larger patterns, including team dynamics and resource allocation, overall team focus and energy management, and team health and inspiration. The rituals that you engage in monthly are perhaps the most important to the operation of your team.

Quarterly rituals are primarily about you, your leadership, your own development, your goals, and where you are leading your team and yourself over the coming months. They are designed to help you take a longer look at your ambitions, areas of potential misalignment

in your own life and on your team, and how you might need to real-locate your focus, assets, time, and energy over the coming quarter to better position you for success.

Readers of my previous book *The Accidental Creative* will notice that these rituals correspond with the checkpoints (weekly, monthly, quarterly) that I recommended in that book. Over the past several years, I've received many comments from leaders saying that they had adapted the checkpoints in *The Accidental Creative* to their personal leadership needs. Some of the practices in this book are actually derived from what these leaders reported worked well for them. Others are practices that I learned from the leaders I interviewed in the course of my research. All of them are tactics from the front line, designed to help you close the gap between panels three and four.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

First, a warning: I'm going to expect a lot from you. The stakes are simply too high for you and your team for me to speak vaguely, and chances are you're not looking for more inspirational slogans to hang on your office wall. You need practical, tactical ideas that will help you gain clarity and will take your leadership to the next level. That's what this book is designed to give you. Because of that, it might feel a little overwhelming at times. There are many questions to answer and exercises to engage in, and you simply won't have time to do all of them at once. Do the ones that fit your current situation and skip the ones that don't. However, do *something*. It's not what you know that's going to change the game for you and your team; it's what you do about it that matters.

That said, some chapters may resonate deeply with where you

are right now, and some chapters simply may not click as much. That's perfectly fine. I encourage you to move through the book at your own pace and to engage in whatever way best meets you where you are at the moment. If you need to read half a chapter at a time, or just a section, that's great—do it. This isn't a race, so take it at your own pace.

One more thing: talk to your team about the concepts in the following chapters. If you'd like to read and discuss the book as a team, you can download a free workbook at toddhenry.com/herd ingtigers. There, you can also sign up for the Leader List, which is a short, weekly e-mail newsletter designed to help you apply the book's principles throughout the year.

IF YOU DON'T LEAD, WE LOSE

The decision to lead, by *someone, somewhere,* is the point of origin for every great thing that has ever existed. You only discover what you're truly capable of as your influence scales.

I hope that this book helps you to be brave, to pour yourself into your team, and to realize your full measure of influence in your life, your organization, and the world. Most of all, I hope that you choose to embrace the leadership mantle and to dedicate your life to unleashing the brilliance of the creative people on your team, because in doing so you will create a body of work that extends far beyond your own reach.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT CREATIVE PEOPLE NEED

A company in which anyone is afraid to speak up, to differ, to be daring and original, is closing the coffin door on itself.

—Leo Burnett

PRINCIPLE: There are two things creative people need more than anything else: stability and challenge.

First, let's discharge the myths about creative people that saturate the workplace. You may not think you believe any of them, as you were probably the target of these same myths at some point in your career, but it's easy to fall into the trap of generalizing the people on your team when you're under pressure to deliver results. You've probably heard something like: "They're just so difficult," or "You have to treat them *soooo* carefully," or "Don't bruise their precious egos."

Yes, there are certainly creative pros who regularly exhibit behaviors that feed these myths. In fact, you might even work next to someone who exhibits all of the behaviors I describe below. The

problem is, we often use the isolated behavior of a few dysfunctional people to make broad assumptions about entire groups. Further, the problem with many workplace stereotypes is that they often point to symptoms rather than the core issues.

Perhaps some creative people *appear* to be difficult because the expectations for a project keep changing midstream, after they've done a tremendous amount of conceptual work that will have to be rehashed just to get back to the starting line.

Is it possible that what comes across as ego is merely a response to their craft—which they've spent years mastering and cultivating— being challenged at a moment's notice by someone who has given their hard work a total of ten seconds of distracted consideration before scrapping it?

Much of the dysfunction and tension that exists in the workplace is the result of highly creative people's needs not being met. If you step back and examine the patterns, you'll find that a lot of bad behavior occurs when there is poor or inattentive leadership.

FIVE MYTHS ABOUT CREATIVE PEOPLE

There are a handful of commonly held misunderstandings about creative people that I regularly encounter when talking with leaders. Like any stereotype, there are some elements of truth in all of them, but they oversimplify reality and create a lot of roadblocks to healthy collaboration. In addition, when you hold any of these myths to be true, even subconsciously, it can affect your ability to give your team what it truly needs from you.

Myth 1: Creative people just want total freedom. I hear this all the time from leaders who come from less traditionally "creative" roles. There is a standing belief that creative people want to remove

all boundaries so that they can have a wide-open field to play in. This perception is often the result of creative people on their team having pushed back against overly constrictive boundaries or challenged a direction with which they disagree, but it's not indicative of what most creative people truly want or need from their leadership.

The truth is that creative people want boundaries. They *crave* boundaries. A wide-open playing field is not helpful to the creative process. Although it sounds strange to many people, the most common complaint that I hear from creative people is that they lack a predictable environment in which to do their work. (More on that below.) They know that they need clearly defined boundaries and resources so that they can focus on doing what they do best.

However, when forced to choose between being overly restricted and completely free, creative people will choose freedom, which is not always in their best interest. Thus, striking a healthy balance is your role as the leader, and it's essential to good collaboration.

Myth 2: Creative people care only about how "cool" the idea is. Another persistent myth is that creative people aren't concerned with the result, and they just want to work on something that feels cool and edgy and lets them exercise their creative muscles. This is also largely untrue. Most of the highly creative people I encounter are professionals and are very concerned with results. They understand that results equate to revenue, which equates to more work (and an on-time mortgage payment.)

However, they also get frustrated when an obsession with practicality means prematurely sacrificing creative possibility. Settling quickly on the easiest and most apparent answer and then moving straight to execution might seem like an efficient use of resources, but it often means failing to bring the best thought and effort to the project, which is demoralizing to the team. Over time, this approach

is a recipe for burnout and turnover, both of which cost the organization dearly.

Myth 3: Creative people lack analytical ability or business acumen. I've heard the equivalent of "Just focus on making things look good, and let me worry about the strategy" tossed out in a meeting. Not in those words, of course, but the sentiment is still there. The truth is that most creatives have a well-honed analytical process, which is essential to their creative process. It is often a circuitous one, analyzing many sides of the problem at once, rather than the linear, straight-line analysis that many strategists use. Consequently, it often yields insights that others have overlooked.

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The kind of systems thinking that creative people provide is of tremendous value to the organization and should be welcomed at the table during strategic discussions. As we'll see in a later chapter, inviting input into the process is also a way to reinforce trust on your team.

Myth 4: Creative people are either egomaniacs or completely insecure. It's important to distinguish between actions and traits. Yes, many creative people respond to a change in an important project or to a difficult conversation by posturing or leading with their egos. Some completely retreat into themselves and need constant reassurance that they're on the right track. However, don't think that this is how they would prefer things to be. Many creative people have developed learned responses to unhealthy organizational dynamics, and they are simply acting out of self-protection.

Again, this isn't always the case. I've run into some remarkable egomaniacs out there, and there are some people who lack simple

self-confidence. However, more often than not these exhibitions are an attempt to communicate that there is something they aren't getting from you or the organization.

Myth 5: Creative people tend to be flighty or flaky. One of the common misconceptions about highly creative people is that they are quick to jump ship when a more interesting idea comes along. They will work hard until they are no longer interested, and then they'll lose interest and phone it in so that they can work on the idea they really like.

The truth is that most highly creative people are extremely committed to their craft or area of specialty, but they can certainly be distractible if not led well. There is a method to their madness, though, and because they tend to be more aware of stimuli in the environment and tend to be able to make loose connections between them more easily, they can quickly get off track. This isn't a bug; it's a feature. This awareness and ability to see patterns can be of tremendous benefit if it can be channeled into the work that the organization values. However, you need to do your job as a leader and regularly communicate your values, the problem you're trying to solve, and the existing constraints for the project so that the team understands its parameters well.

I realize that I have been painting with a broad brush. Are there creative people who want total freedom? Of course. Are some flaky and unable to focus? Sure. Are there creative people with overinflated egos? You bet. However, holding these broad stereotypes about creatives does more damage than good, and you can't let them persist inside your organization. You need to fight for and defend your team. Every creative pro is unique and will have to be strategically and intentionally led, but there are a few things that most of them need in order to thrive.

WHAT CREATIVE PEOPLE NEED: STABILITY AND CHALLENGE

As a leader, there are two key things that creative people need from you more than anything else: stability and challenge. Stability means that the environment around them is as predictable as it can reasonably be so they can focus their creative instincts on solving the actual problems the work presents instead of wasting them trying to resolve the uncertainty of the work environment. Challenge means that they are given the chance to engage in work that stimulates them, allows them to grow, and instills a sense of personal accomplishment.

The Components of Stability

To be clear, stability doesn't mean that there will never be last-minute changes or unexpected curveballs. Of course that will happen. You cannot predict client demands or organizational shifts every time. However, your team needs to see that you are doing your best to create an environment in which those distracting and demoralizing shifts are kept to a minimum so that they can pour themselves fully into their work. There are two key components of stability that you should focus on, and that I'll be addressing them in various ways throughout the rest of the book: clarity and protection.

Clarity. Your team needs you to be clear about your expectations, even when you are uncertain that they are the right ones, so that they don't have to worry about rework or wasted time. Many leaders waffle or get very unclear when they are uncertain because they don't want to be wrong or they are trying to protect themselves. This is the kiss of death in creative work, because ideas that lack

precision lack punch. They will wither and die. If you want your team to do great work, you need to take the first risk by giving it clear direction.

Take Stephen, for example. He was a designer for a small creative team. Because of the time-consuming nature of his work, even slight changes to the direction of a project could mean hours of re-work, even though it didn't seem like a big deal to the organization's leaders. However, the problem wasn't the changes; it was the cavalier way in which they were made. It was typically late in the project before leaders would make a subjective decision about what they liked and what they didn't, which meant that Stephen would have to come in early or stay over the weekend to keep the project on track for delivery. Stephen came to resent these changes; he wasn't angry because the decisions were made, but because they were entirely avoidable if there had been more diligence in setting clear expectations early in the process. Instead, there was always a "wait and see" approach, and Stephen was inevitably the one who paid the price. Over time, he lost his passion for his work and would simply wait for his manager to tell him what to do rather than putting much effort into the early stages of the project. This meant, of course, that the team wasn't getting the best out of him, and his own personal satisfaction with his work plummeted. It was lose-lose.

Even if Stephen's manager given him clear direction from the start, worked to get buy-in from the organization's leaders at key moments in the project timeline, and fought to keep everyone focused and invested throughout the process, it's still possible the direction might need to change at some point. However, Stephen wouldn't have felt devalued and taken for granted and would likely still be a thriving member of the team. Clarity about expectations and stability would have made a huge difference in his experience and the

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quality of his work. Unfortunately for the organization, Stephen has since taken his talents to a company that better appreciates the unique challenges of creative work.

Clarity also means providing your team a predictable space in which to do its work. Creativity requires healthy, well-defined boundaries. Unbounded freedom is not helpful, especially when doing work that requires risk. Are there clear terms of engagement, systems, processes, and principles for collaboration, or are they perpetually shifting with the political winds of the organization? Do you back up your words with actions, or is your team constantly wondering when the other shoe will drop? Is it clear what your words actually mean, or is there dissonance between perception and reality?

Finally, your team needs to know what you value, what that means with regard to your expectations, and how that behavior will be rewarded. There's nothing more demoralizing than spending weeks working on what you believe to be a critical project only to realize that it didn't really matter as much as you had originally thought. Similarly, it's maddening to work hard and play by the perceived rules of the team only to find out that the game was rigged from the start, and you're never going to get the promotion that was dangled in front of you.

You want your team focusing on the uncertainty *out there,* not the uncertainty within your own organization. Clarity allows team members to have the mental bandwidth to do their job with excellence.

Protection. Stability is not just about clarity. I can yell to you:

"Hey! I have a really clear view of a crouching lion that's about to attack!" while standing at a safe distance, but it doesn't really help you. You also need my protection, which I am in a unique position to provide because my point of view gives me advance warning that you don't have. Your people need to know that you have their back and that you will stand up for them when the time comes. This means that you are willing to fend off needless organizational demands and ensure that they have the time and bandwidth to focus on doing their most important work. It also means standing in the gap for their ideas and defending your team instead of throwing people under the bus when things go awry.

A young account manager told me that one of her managers always spoke bravely in meetings about how he stands up for the team and would empathize with what it had to go through because someone higher up in the organization had changed his mind. All of those brave words counted for nothing when one day she overheard him casually blaming the team for a failure that was really *his* fault, and she realized that his protective stance was just posturing. In truth, he was selling out the team for the sake of his own career.

If you want the team to take risks and do great work, people need to know that you have their back. You have to stand up for them, and you can never throw them under the bus. The quickest path to irrelevance as a leader is to sell out your team *one time*. If you do, you will never regain its trust.

The other element of protection is using your leadership perch to protect the resources and space your team needs to do great work. Although you can't ward off every outside influence and demand, you can make every attempt to intercept those demands before they rob your team of its precious focus, time, and energy. People need to

see you consistently going to bat for them, not just protecting your own self-interest.

Again, you cannot provide a perfectly stable environment for your team. The workplace is rife with uncertainty, and there are tectonic shifts (and just plain difficult clients) you cannot avoid. However, adopt the mind-set of protector in the areas where you hold sway and don't allow the preventable stuff to steal from your team.

When your team lacks stability, whether that means a lack of clear expectations or a sense of vulnerability because it isn't being protected, people are likely to take a "wait and see" approach, similar to the one Stephen took in the story above. This likely means that the team's most fertile creative time, which is at the beginning of the project when possibility is still abundant, will be wasted. Instead, people will simply home in on whatever is practical once a direction is finally set.

They're not going to take a creative risk until you do first. And you can't expect them to. After all, if you're not willing to stick your neck out, why should they? And that leads us to the next important thing that your creative team needs from you: challenge.

The Components of Challenge

In general, creative people love to be challenged. They thrive when doing work that causes them to use new muscles and experiment. They want to feel like they are pushing to the edge of their abilities while still maintaining control. However, challenge isn't just about throwing your team into the deep end of the pool and walking away. There's much more to it.

Permission. Your team needs your blessing. Team members

want to know that you not only want them to take risks, but that you expect it from them. They need to hear from you that you want them to stretch their skills and develop new ones. If they don't sense permission from you, they might do these things anyway, but it will always be while looking over their shoulder. They will rarely go all in, which is likely to result in subpar, rehashed work.

Once, when I was leading a creative team and sensed that it wasn't feeling as much permission from me as I'd like, I created a bumper sticker that read "Safety Is Not an Option," and I plastered it all over the office. (In retrospect, a *bumper* sticker dismissing the importance of safety was probably not the best form for the message. But I digress.) The sticker was intended to communicate that safe, predictable work was unwelcome and that anything that didn't make people feel a little bit nervous was probably too "down the middle." Of course, I didn't mean that they should throw caution to the wind and take stupid risks, but my words gave implicit permission to try new things and live with the gut-churning feeling of probing new territory. Everywhere they turned, they saw that message reinforced.

Without your express consent, your team will always worry about whether they are venturing too far out of bounds. Demand calculated risk, and remind them often. However, you also need to set clear expectations for your team so that it understands the kinds of risks you want. Again, to experience full freedom, your team needs clear boundaries. This allows people to put their full effort into the work without worrying about whether they are unknowingly crossing a line.

Perhaps the most important signal of permission is an environment in which it's not only acceptable but expected to challenge the process, ask questions, and walk headfirst into conflict instead of

shying away from it. When you reinforce a culture in which ugly truth is discussed rather than buried, then is worked through as a team, it creates a bond of trust that is difficult to break. Your team members need to feel explicit permission to say what's on their mind, in a respectful way, so that everyone can get on with the work instead of dancing around the real issues.

Faith. Finally, creative people need to believe that you have faith in them. They want to know that you believe they are capable of accomplishing what you've charged them with, because there will be times when they may not believe it themselves. They will rely on you for encouragement. A key way that you signal your faith is by allowing them to *own* their work rather than micromanaging them. Challenge them; then allow them to do what they do best, with regular feedback loops and an open door in the event they have questions or issues.

Not only that, but you have to back up your words with actions. Faith that is merely spoken isn't real. You can say wonderful things about people's abilities, but if you still tend to look over their shoulders every minute of the workday, then they won't believe you. As anxiety inducing as it may be from time to time, you have to cement your faith in your team by establishing expectations, clearing the path, and then getting out of its way.

People who lack challenge will grow bored and begin to drift to greener pastures, fearing that their best work is dying inside them. However, if you keep their fire stoked, pushing them to take risks and grow creatively, then you will earn fierce loyalty through good times and bad.

We could call this combination of stability and challenge a kind of "bounded autonomy." There is freedom of action and decision and

a degree of challenge presented by the work itself, but that freedom is bounded by clear expectations, principles that guide the creative and decision-making processes, and established and fair timelines for completion of the work.

The Challenge/Stability Matrix

As mentioned before, your creative team needs both challenge and stability in order to thrive. Sure, it can get by for a season without one or the other, but if left without one (or both) for too long, the team will eventually begin to wither. This is because creative work requires a high degree of emotional risk, meaning that the people doing the work are putting some amount of their own intuition, expression, and perception into it.

	LOW STABILITY	HIGH STABILITY
HIGH CHALLENGE	ANGRY	THRIVING
LOW CHALLENGE	LOST	STUCK

HIGH CHALLENGE + HIGH STABILITY = THRIVING

When your team has a healthy mix of stability (clear expectations, established systems, protection from peripheral demands, etc.) and challenge (permission to take risks, work that pushes it, freedom to ask questions), it comes alive. You've created fertile soil in which it can grow deep roots and thrive. Creative teams operating in an environment of high stability and high challenge are poised to produce its best work.

HIGH CHALLENGE + LOW STABILITY = ANGRY

When your team has a high degree of challenge but low stability, your team will grow tired of the unclear expectations, last-minute work thrust upon it, and low level of protection from organizational politics. Over time, team members will become jaded and angry that their talents are being used for the benefit of someone else in the organization while they are considered dispensable. Over time, you will train them to simply wait for you to tell them what to do instead of taking initiative and owning the work.

As anxiety inducing as it may be from time to time, you have to cement your faith in your team by establishing expectations, clearing the path, and then getting out of its way.

HIGH STABILITY + LOW CHALLENGE = STUCK

It's great to have a measure of predictability about your work, but when it comes at the expense of challenge, creative people get bored quickly. You might think that you're doing the right thing by not pushing your team too hard, and there are certainly seasons in which you should create margin for your team (more on that in a later chapter),

but that season can't last too long; otherwise, your people will go looking for greener pastures. They will feel stuck.

LOW STABILITY + LOW CHALLENGE = LOST

I've never encountered a team that stayed in this quadrant for any length of time, except those in companies that are on the brink of going out of business. However, suffice it to say that when creative pros experience no stability in their organization, and there is no challenge to the work, they feel lost and overwhelmed.

As you consider the state of the people on your team, which quadrant do you think best describes them at the moment? Are you encountering a lot of anger and frustration from your team? It could mean that there is a lack of stability and that people don't sense the clarity or protection they need from you. Is your team bored or stuck? It could mean that people don't feel appropriately challenged. (I hope that no one reading this falls into the "lost" quadrant, but if so, it might be time to job hunt.)

Understand that creating an environment in which your creative team can thrive isn't just about increasing job satisfaction and personal accomplishment. There is a tremendous return on investment in maintaining a healthy, functioning, and productive team rather than having to constantly hire and train new employees. On top of that, when the team gets the stability and clarity it needs, the creative people on your team will produce work that is of greater value to your organization and clients and thus will help you achieve your career goals as well. It is a win-win all around, but it begins with you dedicating yourself to being the kind of leader the creative people on your team need. To do that, you must focus on your mindset and your mechanics.