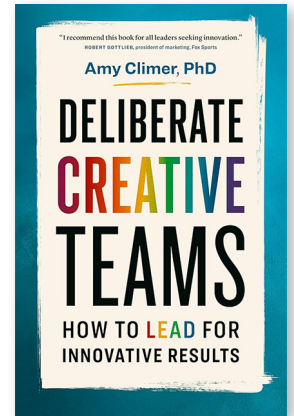


# Executive Book Summaries®

## Deliberate Creative Teams

How to Lead for Innovative Results

by **Amy Climer, PhD**



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(or So You Were Told)

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### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Are you finding it difficult to spark fresh ideas within your team? Do you wish your group could approach challenges with more imagination and deliver stronger solutions? By fostering deliberate creativity and innovation, you can unlock your team's true potential and help them generate groundbreaking ideas and unparalleled results.

Written for leaders across industries, from senior executives to HR professionals and project managers, *Deliberate Creative Teams: How to Lead for Innovative Results* aims to do just that by offering a clear framework for cultivating a workplace where innovation is steady and reliable rather than occasional.

Author Amy Climer, PhD, an experienced consultant and researcher in the field of innovation, emphasizes that creativity is not a matter of chance but the result of deliberate effort. Drawing on years of coaching and research, she presents the Deliberate Creative Team system, which is built around three core elements: a shared purpose, healthy team dynamics, and a structured creative process. When combined, these factors empower leaders to tap into their team's full creative capacity and consistently generate impactful results.

### IN THIS EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY:

- Learn how to build a clear, shared team purpose that inspires creativity
- Strengthen team dynamics to foster trust, collaboration, and openness
- Apply a repeatable creative process that transforms ideas into results
- Cultivate a team culture where creativity and problem-solving thrive daily

### Introduction: You're Not Creative (or So You Were Told)

Nearly everyone has had someone, at some point in their life, tell them they are not creative. It may have been a teacher, a parent, a boss—but always someone they believed had more wisdom than they did. The message gets buried deep in our psyches, and we believe it, especially if it happens at a young, impressionable age.

Then all those people who were told they were not creative grew up and entered the workforce. Nearly every job requires some creativity, yet many employees have no idea how to be creative. Not only do they lack the skills for it, but they also deeply believe they cannot be creative. This is a serious problem that hinders innovation around the world.

#### Creativity Is Innate

For years, I kept experimenting with the best ways to teach creativity. At first, I focused only on individual creativity, but then I started combining my background in experiential education and team development with teaching creativity to teams.

I saw that teams could indeed become more creative with training. Developing creativity in teams could reverse the mangled messages so many of us received about creativity. If we reversed those messages and developed team skills around creativity, teams could effectively navigate the complexities organizations were facing and bring positive change to their customers, clients, communities, and even the world.

#### Deliberate Creativity Together

Through my research and consulting work, I have learned so much about creativity and innovation. The underlying premise is that creativity will not happen by accident. It is only through deliberate work that you will be more creative. A process and a system for being creative have emerged from how we as humans naturally solve problems. I call it the Deliberate Creative Team system.

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### Chapter 1: Why You Need to Innovate Now

Without the removal of a brain tumor at Mayo Clinic in the 1970s, my mom would have died long before I was born. It is because of Mayo's innovative approach to medicine that I exist. For me, innovation is personal.

For Mayo Clinic, innovation has always been at the core of their identity. Because of their innovative approach to

medicine and their drive for improvement, they have saved millions of lives, and their inventions and discoveries have affected nearly every human on Earth.

Mayo Clinic understands that innovation is a system.

Specific strategies, techniques, and tools make up the system for creativity. Creativity and innovation emerge by following a deliberate process, a system that allows individuals and teams to identify challenges, generate new ideas, develop those ideas, and then test and implement them.

The bottom line: Both creativity and innovation are the result of a process that leads to a product that is novel and valuable.

#### Innovate on Demand

As a leader, your job is to guide your team to identify problems, find new ideas, develop solutions, and implement those solutions that lead to positive change. It is a big challenge, but quite doable—because if you understand how team creativity works and you know how to bring out the best in your team members, then you can lead them to collaborate toward true innovation.

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### Chapter 2: Not by Magic or Chance

Two important things should be noted here:

- Creativity is a teachable, learnable skill that is available to nearly everyone.
- When we follow a system for creativity, we produce more creative and innovative results.

#### Creativity Is About Solving Problems

Creativity is not about drawing; it is a skill, a process, and a system. It is also less about innate ability; rather it is about working intentionally to solve problems and create new solutions to meaningful questions. It is about thinking in a new way and accepting that there is no one right answer. To develop these skills, you and your team members must learn how creativity works.

#### Creativity Must Be Taught

Our beliefs about creativity need to catch up with research, which is crystal clear: creativity training works.

Creativity training positively impacts communication, the fluency and originality of ideas, the ability to evaluate and implement ideas, attitudes toward divergent thinking, as well as the financial bottom line. For instance, one study

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reported that a manufacturing plant saw a decrease in expenditures of \$40,000 per week based on one change that came about from creativity training.

### The Deliberate Creative Spectrum

A team's ability to innovate falls along a spectrum. Below, the Deliberate Creative Spectrum describes five levels that teams progress through. As teams move up the ladder, their creativity grows, and their impact increases.

- 1. The Destructive Creative Team:** Starting at the bottom level, destructive creative teams are destroying creative efforts. Team members quickly shoot down ideas in meetings, talk about the way things have always been done, and work to maintain the status quo. They may not intentionally be demolishing creativity. They might mean well, but fear of change drives their response.
- 2. The Stagnant Creative Team:** Up one level are teams that are stagnant in their creativity. They may be thriving in other aspects of their work. Perhaps they are highly productive or successful at sales, but they do not strive to be creative. They do not necessarily destroy creativity, but they are not contributing to it either.
- 3. The Sporadic Creative Team:** The sporadic creative team strives to be creative, yet they do not always know what to do. They value creativity so they try various approaches, use their intuition, and sometimes have success that leads to positive changes. But they do not know why they were creative or how to do the same things again.
- 4. The Sustainable Creative Team:** The sustainable creative team uses a clear process to harness creativity. The process is reliable and repeatable, and team members understand how to apply it in a variety of contexts. Therefore, they can be creative and produce innovative results with consistency.
- 5. The Scalable Creative Team:** The scalable creative team knows the creative process so well that its members can impact not only the colleagues and clients they directly work with, but also those in other parts

of an organization. They become creative evangelists and a model team to follow. They teach others throughout the organization how creativity works.

### The Deliberate Creative Team System

A team's ability to innovate is not based on team members' level of education or their personalities. Instead, it is based on how the team members work together; the interactions and behaviors within the group, and the process they use to innovate.

What, more specifically, leads to team innovation? Building on the previous seventy years of research, I conducted a study to look at what teams need to be creative together. The outcome was an assessment tool called the Deliberate Creative Team Scale, which measures a team's behaviors related to creativity. The results of the research show that teams need three factors to be creative:

- **Team Purpose:** A team's collective focus, shared goals, and commitment to reaching those goals. A clear sense of purpose is critical to the success of any team, whether striving to be creative or not. It helps you prioritize projects, manage your energy, and focus on what matters.
- **Team Dynamics:** The behaviors and interactions within a team and the relationships among team members. Creativity requires risk, and if team members do not have strong team dynamics, they will not take the risks needed to be more creative together.
- **Team Creative Process:** The team's use of the tools, techniques, and strategies needed to be creative. This includes the structure of team meetings, the way the agenda is designed, and how problems are presented and approached. Without a clear, shared process, the team will not advance to the sustainable or scalable levels of a Deliberate Creative Team.

## Chapter 3: The Source of Innovation in Organizations

Teams are such a big part of our lives. They allow multiple perspectives, skills, and expertise to come together and meld

brainpower to achieve powerful results. Most significant projects, plans, and goals are too large and multifaceted for an individual to approach alone. Therefore, teams have become the quintessential unit of high performance—and one of the primary sources of creativity and innovation in organizations.

Multiple studies have observed a trend toward collaborative research and innovation in recent years. In an analysis of 2.1 million patents and 1.9 million research papers over five decades, research produced by teams has increased significantly compared with research by individuals. The more complex our world is, the more critical teams are for innovation. They tend to generate more innovative ideas than individuals because team members bring diverse perspectives and expertise to address challenges.

### From Cooperation to Collaboration

The difference between cooperation and collaboration is essential. Cooperation is when team members support each other, share ideas, and have mutual respect; but they are, in the end, working independently and results are evaluated independently.

Collaboration is about mutual accountability and trust. Team members become interdependent, working together to produce something new. They move from sharing ideas to generating new ideas together. This work is deeper than cooperation. When teams can truly collaborate, they can be creative together.

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## Chapter 4: The Clarifying Force of Team Purpose

The role of a team is to collectively work toward a shared purpose. “Purpose” may also refer to vision, mission, legacy, dream, goal, performance results, or calling. In each case, the purpose is different, but all teams have—or should have—a shared purpose.

However, in many cases, there is no discussion of it. Perhaps the team leader has a general idea, but it may not be clear to all the team members. When the purpose is clearly defined, members can adjust their approach to best meet that purpose and, in turn, produce better results for the team.

### The Power of Team Purpose

Team purpose is the group’s collective focus. It also encompasses shared goals and the team’s commitment to reaching the goals. Without commitment, goals are just a list of targets that a team does not *share* responsibility for. And commitment

is not possible without shared goals, because what would the team be committing to?

How about your team? Have you talked about your purpose? If so, how recently? I recommend at least once per year and regularly referencing it throughout the year so it stays fresh in everyone’s minds.

### You Must Be Clear

For a team to be clear on its shared purpose, the leader needs to be clear. This may seem obvious, but it does not always happen.

For teams, sometimes a clear purpose comes from supervisors or others who are higher up. Sometimes you need to go forth with minimal guidance and figure it out among yourselves. Whichever the approach, be careful to not throw up your hands when you do not get a clear answer from above. Take the time to work through it together.

### From Shared Purpose to Shared Goals

Sometimes teams have a clear, shared purpose, but they stop there. Without creating goals, the purpose may feel nebulous or wishful. Goals are how we know we are getting to the purpose. They are especially valuable in a creative team because they provide a way to communicate with each other and ensure alignment.

Additionally, shared goals only count if they are written down. Team members are not going to remember them. We have too many other things in our heads. Make teamwork easier by writing down tasks and goals. Develop your goals as a team, and then make them visual with a spreadsheet or project management software, at the top of each meeting agenda, or on the whiteboard in the work area. Pick what fits your team’s style.

### A Cycle of Purpose, Goals, and Commitment

Once you have clarified your team purpose and recorded your team goals, your team will work on developing its commitment. The collective sense of purpose can unite a team and bring about great commitment. Team commitment can be defined as “the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular team.” There are three characteristics of team commitment:

- A strong belief in and acceptance of the team’s values and goals
- A desire to work hard on behalf of the team
- A strong desire to remain a team member

Trust and psychological safety are necessary if you want to have strong communication and for the team to engage in creative abrasion.

## Chapter 5: The Key Ingredients in Team Dynamics

If you want your team to be creative together, they need to work well together. It seems obvious, but obvious does not mean easy. Strong team dynamics require emotional intelligence, empathy, and vulnerability to get to moderate or high levels of trust, communication, and creative abrasion.

Of the three elements teams need to be creative together (team purpose, team dynamics, and team creative process), team dynamics is the hardest and most complex, but the results are worth the work.

### An Environment of Trust

Trust is a tough thing. It takes time to build, although it can happen faster than you might think. It can also be lost quickly, sometimes in just one moment. This makes trust somewhat precious. Trust and its close cousin psychological safety are necessary if you want to have strong communication and for the team to engage in creative abrasion—especially for teams striving to be creative together.

Psychological safety, sometimes called participative safety or group trust, is where team members feel emotionally safe to share their ideas, perceptions, and opinions. The environment is interpersonally nonthreatening, and team members are motivated to be involved in decision-making. Teams with higher levels of trust and psychological safety can engage in the real work needed to be creative together and produce innovative results. The key to building trust is creating an environment with a high level of psychological safety.

Different types of interpersonal trust are important for teams. Gloria Barczak, a professor at Northeastern University, and her team researched how trust impacts team creativity. She points out two types of trust:

- Cognitive trust refers to “one’s willingness to rely on a team member’s expertise and reliability.” It is when team members believe another member will do what they say they will do.
- Affective trust is “the confidence one places in a team member based on one’s feelings of caring and concern

illustrated by that co-worker.” It is sometimes called vulnerability-based trust. It is also the belief that I can be myself and bring my best self to the team.

When teams first form, cognitive trust is most important, but as teams mature, affective trust increases in relevance.

### On Conflict, and Why You Need It

In creative teams, some conflict is needed because disagreements can lead to deeper thinking around creative challenges. But conflict can be challenging. It can be hard to know when to embrace conflict to help the team better solve a problem, or avoid it because the conflict signals an underlying issue that needs to be addressed.

### Relationship Conflict versus Task Conflict

Teams may experience two types of conflict:

- Relationship conflict – when team members disagree with each other because of personality or identity (for example, race, gender, sexual orientation).
- Task conflict – when team members disagree about the work itself. This may include which idea to pursue, how to move forward with an idea, or if and how to gather more information.

While relationship conflict is not helpful and is distracting from the real work, task conflict is welcomed in creative teams, because disagreements can lead to deeper thinking around creative challenges. A moderate amount of task conflict highlights different perspectives and can unearth potential problems and issues that, if explored early, can be avoided or mitigated.

Moderation is the key here. Too much task conflict and a team will never agree on anything and will not get anything done. Too little task conflict and teams risk entering into groupthink, which can be dangerous.

The sweet spot teams aim for is called creative abrasion.

### How You Meet Matters

Open communication between team members increases psychological safety and trust, as well as creative abrasion.

Sharing knowledge, information, and ideas is critical for teams to develop new solutions to challenges and innovate when needed.

For many teams, a big part of open communication takes place during team meetings. Team meetings are the time when the full team is together, usually focused on their work and the present challenges. Whether it is a special meeting convened to explore a problem or a regular weekly meeting, the norms, structures, and expectations of those meetings will play a big role in a team's ability to innovate together.

### Avoid Being Insular

While internal team communication is important, like many things in life, it is best in moderation. If team members communicate too much with each other and only with each other, they become too insular. They need exposure to diverse perspectives. They need to communicate with those outside their team.

In addition, communication that is too centralized can also decrease creative performance. For instance, if team members must always relay information through a supervisor or other person, or if approval needs to be given for nearly everything, they will stop asking—and therefore stop innovating. The process is too cumbersome. Impromptu direct communication is essential for creativity.

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## Chapter 6: The Transformative Power of Team Creative Process

One pervasive myth is that creativity requires wild abandon or recklessness and that too many constraints inhibit creativity. In reality, creativity, and especially innovation, follows a fairly consistent, structured process that involves identifying a problem or challenge, finding solutions, and then implementing one or more of those solutions.

The creative problem solving process includes a series of operations, actions, norms, tools, and techniques, as well as the spirit in which they are approached. The process is the method of working together. This includes the way team meetings are structured, the way the agenda is designed, how you track progress on tasks, your approach to projects, how new ideas get considered, and more.

### Diverge, Then Converge

Understanding the difference between divergent and convergent thinking and when to use each is foundational to the creative process.

- Divergent thinking is about generating lots of ideas and perspectives. It is when you think big and bold. You go in different directions and follow various tangents. It may occur in a free-flowing or spontaneous manner. It is the classic brainstorming technique where wild, wacky ideas arise.
- Convergent thinking is where you narrow all the ideas down to the best ones. You evaluate and critique; you compare and analyze. The focus is on looking for the one “right” answer.

All of us use both divergent and convergent thinking, but the key is to be deliberate about which one you are using and when.

We are trained in one way and then asked to be another once we “grow up.” If you feel like you are not creative or that you struggle with generating new ideas, you are not to blame. Creativity has been trained out of you. The same is true for your team members. You all need to be retrained in divergent thinking.

Follow these three tips to enhance your team's divergent thinking skills:

1. **Be clear about your mode.** One of the best ways you can think more divergently is to be clear with yourself and your team about when you want to engage in divergent thinking and when you want to engage in convergent thinking. Designate a certain amount of time for diverging. When the time is up, move into converging and evaluating the ideas.
2. **Use a variety of techniques.** Mix it up beyond the classic brainstorming. Using a variety of ideation tools and techniques (e.g., brainwriting, SCAMPER, associations, and forced connections) stimulates different parts of your brain and leads to more diverse ideas.
3. **Follow the divergent thinking guidelines.** These guidelines promote staying in that divergent space and ideating more readily. The guidelines are:
  - **Suspend judgment** – The key word here is “suspend.” Do not evaluate the ideas at first, including your own. You will get to judge them in the convergent phase.
  - **Seek wild ideas** – You never know what the next best idea will be. The wilder you get, the better.
  - **Combine and build on ideas** – One of the great values of collaboration is that you

# Now comes the hard part: Do the work. Build your skills to lead your team on this journey to be a Deliberate Creative Team.

can combine and build on each other's ideas, perspectives, and brilliance.

- **Go for quantity** – Quantity leads to quality. You are ultimately looking for the best ideas, but chances are the best idea is not the first one or even the tenth. Keep going and push yourself to generate more ideas.

## Creative Problem Solving: The Process

Creative problem solving (CPS) is a process designed to codify our natural creative process. First developed by Alex Osborn in the 1950s, over the years, CPS has been heavily researched and refined down to four main stages:

1. **Clarify** – narrowing in on the specific goal, wish, or challenge that will be explored. This includes gathering data and determining the questions that will lead to solutions.
2. **Ideate** – generating ideas to solve the challenge.
3. **Develop** – selecting and further refining the few promising ideas that will lead to solutions.
4. **Implement** – identifying resources needed, actions to be taken, and how to overcome hurdles related to implementing the best idea(s), then getting started.

Teams who use CPS can be more creative and generate more innovative solutions. For smaller problems, the entire process might take an hour. For bigger problems, the process might take months or even years, with small cycles of the process happening throughout.

## Chapter 7: From Creative Inspiration to Innovative Integration

Contrary to the popular myth, Newton did not discover gravity in a single “eureka” moment after an apple hit his head. By 1666, he had already spent years studying math and physics and developing mathematical theories that led to calculus. His understanding of gravity unfolded over twenty-one years of hard work, dead ends, and divergencies.

There is so much to glean from this story about Newton. First, we tend to be most creative in areas where we have a moderate or deep understanding. Second, inspiration is helpful for innovation, but it is just a small part of the process. The hard work that follows inspiration makes something a reality. While ideas might pop in your head when your brain is idle, that eureka moment is only the beginning.

## How Purpose, Dynamics, and Process Intersect

Earlier, we explored the three elements of the Deliberate Creative Team System: team purpose, team dynamics, and team creative process. These elements don't operate on their own—they intersect, and when they do, they lead to motivation, collaboration, and alignment.

- **Motivation:** The intersection of team purpose and team creative process is motivation. To increase your team's motivation to innovate, clarify your team's purpose, invest in creativity training, and develop strong creative processes. Your team members will increase their skills and find the creative process more meaningful and rewarding.
- **Collaboration:** The overlap of team dynamics and team creative process leads to collaboration. When team members collaborate, they meld their intellect and skills to collectively create something new. The hardest part of collaboration is that it requires each individual to have a reasonable amount of interpersonal skills. As you develop your team dynamics and use intentional processes to be more creative, you will increase your team's ability to collaborate.
- **Alignment:** When teams have a clear purpose and strong team dynamics, they reach a creative alignment that drives their motivation and increases collaboration. As you get clear on your team purpose through shared goals, your team members will feel more committed to the team. That commitment also increases as the team dynamics improve.

This is the Deliberate Creative Team system. Enacting the system requires team members to develop skills and competencies along the way. As they grow together, the system

becomes a framework, a methodology, and an approach. The system takes what at first seems like a nebulous process reserved for a few with the “creative gene” and turns it into an explicit, clear approach the team can follow to be more creative.

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### Chapter 8: How to Clear the Path for Creativity

There are many barriers to being creative. These include lack of time, scarcity of resources, a discouraging company culture, and limited internal beliefs. As a leader, you want your team to eliminate these barriers.

#### Find the Time

There are typically two big challenges with time. The first is an organization using outdated processes and procedures that could be streamlined to free up more time. The second is that as people begin new initiatives and new processes, they do not let go of the old ones.

Do your employees and clients a favor and update your procedures to be efficient and eliminate those that are no longer needed. A great approach to making this change is to use the creative problem solving process to clarify the issue, generate new ideas, develop them into solutions, and finally implement the new changes. And for everyone’s sanity, please use modern technology.

#### Budget for Innovation

Innovation is never in the budget. Budgets are built around last year’s ideas, situation, and plan. You cannot be innovative if you stick to the budget. Do yourself a favor and next time you write a budget, include a line item for new ideas. Perhaps something evolves that then becomes a significant income stream, improves an inefficiency, or leads to an important change.

#### Measure What Matters

When teams number their ideas, they generate more ideas. Since having more ideas leads to better ideas, numbering them makes sense. When you first start ideating with a team, aim for a certain number of new ideas. Depending on how much time you have, start low, maybe thirty-five or fifty ideas. As you gain more experience or if you have more time, aim for one hundred or more.

#### Abandon the Status Quo

It takes a little rebelliousness to be creative. Creativity is about abandoning the status quo. It is about letting go of

some people’s favorite phrase, “We have always done it this way.” If those seven words are like a sword to your heart and cause pain deep in your belly, then you are rebellious enough to be creative. The challenge is you have to push back against “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Some people cannot tell it is broken. The process is so ingrained in their head that they no longer notice it takes fifteen steps instead of three.

#### Set Up for Successful Change

Adaptive problems resist simple technical solutions because they require a change in human behavior. They may require individuals to shift their identity, learn new skills, or let go of old habits. They are much harder than technical changes.

As a leader, when you want to lead a change, you need to assess if others will be threatened in any of these areas. Then you decide if you need to approach the problem as an adaptive or technical problem. If you can get that part of the approach right, your change efforts will be much more successful.

#### Take Risks

The challenge with doing something new is that it has not been done before (at least in this context) so you cannot know if it will work. Be willing to take the risk and try. Organizations that have a culture where failure is acceptable, and even encouraged, tend to also foster the most innovation. You want to set up systems and opportunities where failure is okay.

#### Expose Limiting Internal Beliefs

You likely experience imposter syndrome from time to time. So do your team members. While you cannot get in their heads and control their inner thoughts, you can provide encouragement and tell them when they are doing a good job. Tell them you are proud of them and that you value their work. Perhaps talk about imposter syndrome as a team. Most importantly, do not let your inner critic, your self-doubt—whatever you want to call it—stop you from getting creative and serving those who matter with your innovations.

Barriers to new ideas, new approaches, and new ways of doing things are normal. They are part of our human experience. The barriers are part of what makes innovation risky and challenging. They also make you stronger and more resilient, and they make innovative wins so much sweeter.

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### Chapter 9: For Humanity

Innovation is not about us. It is not about the accolades or rewards or getting our name on the patent. It is about

serving others. It is about changing lives and doing good in the world. When we focus too much on ourselves, our work is not as strong or impactful. When we focus on serving others, it leads us to profound results. If you keep in mind who you are serving, it can keep you motivated and focused on innovation.

Creativity is about identifying problems and finding solutions and doing that over and over again. You now know how to lead your team to be deliberate creatives. You know how to cultivate your team purpose, facilitate strong team dynamics, and lead the team creative process.

Now comes the hard part: Do the work. Build your skills to lead your team on this journey to be a Deliberate Creative Team.

Work together to learn to be more creative. Learning together builds team trust and cohesion, and you already know how important that is. When your team gets clear on its purpose, builds strong team dynamics together, and everyone knows and uses the creative process, then creativity will flourish. That creativity will lead to innovative results so that you and your team can positively impact your clients, customers, communities, and even the world.



**Dr. Amy Climer** is a thought leader and consultant specializing in innovation and team development, helping organizations unlock creative potential to drive innovation. As founder of Climer Consulting, she has worked with clients such as Mayo Clinic, the US Department of Homeland Security, FOX Sports, and the University of Wisconsin. She holds a PhD in leadership and change from Antioch University, where her research produced the Deliberate Creative Team Scale, a tool for measuring team creativity. A TEDx speaker and Certified Speaking Professional, Dr. Climer is also the creator of Climer Cards, a popular tool for creativity and team building. Based in Asheville, North Carolina, she balances her consulting work with outdoor pursuits, including leading whitewater canoeing courses and woodworking.

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