

# How to build a creative team

By Jeff & Chris Davis and the Davis Graveyard Crew

Learn how to put together and work with a small effective creative team from a group of volunteer home haunters that setup one of the largest and most detailed yard displays in the country. How to identify a good fit for the team. Learn how to get members to work together and stay on schedule and perform. Find out how to balance the number of team members with the right amount of optimists and pragmatists. Learn how to emphasize each member's value and teach flexibility.

If you are working by yourself get a team together. Start with 1 or 2 people and build it.

The term "crew" is NOT a title but a name for the group. It is a membership not a privilege.

- The ideal number for a team is seven. A creative team with less members seems to lack critical mass and energy. Too many and it is impossible to get things done.
- There must be a purposeful mix of personalities. To put it simply, there should be at least four optimists and two—but no more than three—pragmatists. The optimists are the dreamers, the pragmatists are the realists. The optimists create the ideas, the pragmatists get them done.
- There must be a high value for truth-telling. If every team knows and practices this value, an ease and confidence with each other develops that hierarchal "brown-nosing" squelches. But the caveat: The truth must be practiced lovingly and carefully.
- There must be a high value on free-thinking. A team cannot be not allowed to react negatively. There must be freedom and permission to think.
- Everyone has an opinion

Leverage the talent and brainpower of everyone on the team. Some of the best props we had in our display came from the most unlikely places, people, suggestions. We're all invested so we owe it to everyone to ensure that their opinions, thoughts, ideas are heard. Building creative products people are only more adamant about their opinions so it's doubly important to let them be heard.

While this practice can be very rewarding and team members have spoken highly of it, it isn't easy. Team members need to have some humility that all great ideas won't necessarily come from them. And that sense of humility is even more fragile when feedback is poorly delivered.

All of this takes time and it isn't fun, but in the end you'll have a stronger team and most likely a better product.

- Build to tight deadlines, the more impossible the better

Building to short and impossible deadlines has a few benefits:

- Gets the team on a cadence

A good cadence can smooth over team conflict, low moral, and more. The sun will rise tomorrow so cry it out or do whatever you have to do tonight.

It's also important to not hold the team to big goals or milestones.

- Forces you to identify and make tough decisions

An impossible deadline inevitably forces the team to make tough decisions. When it becomes apparent that you won't make the deadline you look for a creative solution (Hail Mary pass) or what can be dropped? It makes you re-evaluate many of the assumptions you've made up to this point and many times, reveals pipe dreams you failed to uncover. You may ask what are these pipe dreams - well this is complicated and creative work and many times your mind will make creative leaps which when examined later prove to be impossible. In practice tight deadlines better ensures you'll uncover these sooner and have more time to adjust.

- Allows team members to get creative and sometimes pull off miracles

As part of making tough decisions you'll also force yourself to look at the project and your assumptions from a different perspective. This can lead to breakthroughs of creative problem solving. There has been many times when the team was stumped on a tough problem, only to return the next morning to find someone stumbled upon a creative solution overnight.

All that said, there needs to be an escape button. You're not going to be able to meet all your deadlines (either you aren't pushing hard enough or have too many resources). We aren't building planes here, no one is going to die so you can be a little fast and loose and really push ourselves.

- Emphasize, value, teach flexibility

Building in such a dynamic environment things are bound to change. Trying to manage or stamp out change is almost futile, so we always tried to combat it by being more . As we would say, "Everything is going to change, get use to it." I know how infuriating this can be but it forced the team to be more responsive and never try to bite off more than they could quickly chew.

Finding a solution isn't easy and sometimes the change would hurt the product enough that we had to take an extra day. But as a team we made more deadlines because we were flexible. It isn't easy, but that's what is required in today's environment.

That said, this also puts extra emphasis on communication.

- Understand your Audience

Once a project has been identified it's easier to look at it from a framework and understand proposed solutions. You can more easily prioritize which tasks to do first, which to do later if nothing else works, and which can be thrown out. It's just as important to understand your audience to have a similar framework. Many times we rush ahead, thinking the project's vision explains everything. But I can assure you, late at night when you're trying to prioritize scarce resources or solve a difficult problem you'll begin to question everything. You'll begin to question what type of project you're building.

You need the framework to guide your work. As American Express use to say, "Don't leave home without it".

- Start with, but don't get hung up on the vision

The rule of thumb is to start a project with a strong vision, otherwise the project is prone to change with every whim. You don't want to fall prey to every whim but the rule of thumb has evolved.