Gregg Fraley

How to use the structured Creative Problem Solving method

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

Gregg Fraley

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview at this year's innovation and creativity summit, I am very happy to have Gregg Fraley on the line today, Gregg is the CEO of Gregg Fraleys innovations also the author Jack's notebook and noted expert facilitator in the field of creative problem solving, Gregg its lovely to have you with us today.

Gregg Fraley: Thank you Nick, I am happy to be here and looking forward to speaking with you about hot topics creativity and innovation.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect, so for people who don't know you can you give a brief background to where you got started and how you got started in innovation

Gregg Fraley: yes , the short answer is I went to conference in buffalo New York in 1998 and learned a methodology for structured creating problem solving sometimes called cps, more formally called the Osborne Parnes method of creative problem solving and since then I have used structured creative problem solving in my work as an entrepreneur, I ended up writing a book about structured creative problem solving and I currently do a lot of innovation work with fortune 1000 companies to a lesser degree with start ups and non profits.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect and for people who don't know what creative problem solving is, could you give them into what it is, what it aims to do and how it works.

Gregg Fraley: Sure, everyone does creative problem solving every day, if you live a life in this world where you are facing complex problems I think we all are, you have to address challenges, the method that Sid Parnes and Alex Osborne developed basically marks or mimics the process that people would use in an ideal set of circumstances and it's not that difficult or complex, it's just three phases problem exploration, Idea generation and finally planning for action and taking action. So that's the big picture of the process, so the reason you will do it is because there are tools and techniques that you can apply that help you and augment you organic problem solving ability.

Nick Skillicorn: What's the difference between that and what most people would called this traditional brain storming

Gregg Fraley: Well, the term brain storming was actually coined by Alex Osborne in his book applied imagination, brain storming was never meant to be a standalone event and when people do brain

storming sometimes today, it is a standalone event and they don't do enough to prepare themselves for the idea generation part of brain storming. So I mentioned those three phases of exploration, ideation and actual planning and so a lot of people skip the exploration bit and soon they know they are not doing enough research, they don't do any imaginative thought around problem framing which is probably the most powerful thing you could do to improve your brain storming results, so what is commonly called brain storming is typically very often done poorly or just wrong by the likes of the original inventor of the process and I am sure you have seen the articles in Forbes and different publications that say oh we are brainstorming this at work, they are right in the sense that it doesn't work if you don't do all of the steps that really are required to make it work properly, so that's the short answer to sort of redefining brain storming as a more come complete room deter mish kind of process where you don't lead that research and problem finding and so fault before you get into the brain storming

Nick Skillicorn: So let's take it back to what we want to talk about n the summit and that's the creativity side of how people come up with ideas, what through your work helps creativity and what harms creativity

Gregg Fraley: Boy that's a 64000 question isn't it, I think it starts with attitude, a lot of people don't believe they are creative and if you don't believe you are creative you are basically programming your own mind not to be creative and so the first thing I would suggest to people is start thinking of yourself as creative or at least having creative potential, because that leaves a door open for your creativity to sort of cut loose and flow. So I think attitude is where it begins, in a way it's a choice, I don't believe creativity is just a muse that blesses you or it's just a gift of God that occasionally touches you, it does feel like that sometimes, I understand that. It's more of a choice because if you choose to be creative and if you say that to yourself and if you apply your mind to complex challenges and you really do apply it and you keep applying it and you keep re applying it, then solutions will come to you. Creativity is hard work sometimes, flashes of insights are often the results of months and months and even years of preparation of the mind and the brain and so forth in order to come up with those flashes of insights, beyond that I think a lot of folks do not have good access to their own creative flow. So if you think of creativity as a facet valve of water, if you don't turn that valve on now and then, oil that valve, when you do ask you mind for creative ideas or something and you try to turn it on, it comes out with that very slow stream of rusts of water and so the more a person explores that creativity and its self expressed in everything that they do, the more likely it is when you turn on that facet of creativity, it's likely to give you some flow of ideas that might be helpful towards your course.

Nick Skillicorn: It's such a truth that you talked about attitude and mindset and some people you come into a large company and creativity as a subject scares them because they have been brought up through school and college and the Hr department to give the right answer and avoid mistakes at all cost and here comes someone like you saying you should be more creative and turn your faucet back on, it's going to scare a lot of people.

Gregg Fraley: Yes I will add that a lot of management types will say that they will want creativity, they understand the value of it because they know that creativity is a building block for innovation, they say it but they don't really behave it and because creative people quote and unquote by the way I think everyone is a creative person but the classically creative know people who are more self

expressed, who are artistically oriented are threatening because they represent a lot of control from management, so much like the teachers in our grade schools, managing a class of 35 to 40 children control is important and so authority figure and the teacher often asked to focus on that first because they can try to teach you anything. Really the kind of the opposite is true in terms of creativity, access to a playful mindset, a playful headset is where it flows from, and so if only educational systems focus on learning as play, then we will be preparing people better for creative and innovative work environments.

Nick Skillicorn: Do you believe that with little help and inspiration and may be some tools that we will talk about today, even people who feel like they are not creative can become more creative and generate better ideas in the work place.

Gregg Fraley: Absolutely, absolutely I mean that's sort of my whole life's work in a certain way, like I said earlier it starts with choice and then once you have decided you want to be better at creativity, you want to be more creatively effective, then there is a lot of things that you can do, learning structured methods is one thing and learning some more simple tools and techniques and behaviors are the others

Nick Skillicorn: Is there any chance we can talk about some of the tools and techniques, because I am sure some of the viewers and listeners would love to get some things they can try out to actually get the benefit of becoming more creative

Gregg Fraley: Yea, I mean let's start with a very simple one which is note booking or journaling, everyone has a lot of ideas every day, Tony Bizzans said one of your country mates over there, tony bizzzan said the average person has sixty five thousand thoughts a day, now a lot of those thoughts are idea, they zip up your mind, sometimes you are barely aware o what you are thinking, one of the things that can help you more creatively effective is to start listening to your own mind, your own inner dialogue and writing things down. So if an idea pops up to you related to a challenge you are working on, that's your mind trying to give you some ideas, so you should write them down in a note book. A professor at Brooklyn university, a guy named Cohen, whose first name I can't remember do a study and he found that people who did journaling and note booking were by that one behavior fifty percent more creatively effective, one thing, simple thing and what you notice when you start journaling, I am a big fan of doing this myself, I keep a journal with me even when I am out jogging, is that you not just start noticing ideas, but you start noticing questions and you start noticing fears and fears are they starting point of creative problem solving because the things that you are most afraid of are often the biggest opportunities that you have. What we try to do with fear is suppress it and actually what we should do is like kind of invite it into your kitchen for coffee because that's where really great things can happen. So note booking is one simple behavior that anyone can adopt starting now, the second thing which is easy to say but it's much harder to do is kind of practice a mindset of deferred judgment. I think a lot of people know who had any brain storming training that one of the principles of brain storming is to defer judgment until you have sort of finished with the listening part. But Sid Parns said to me he should defer judgment is actually very powerful, it's a way of life because if you are in constant judgment mode what you are basically doing when you judge things is that you are ruling out possibility and it doesn't mean never judge for instance who his personality turns you off, one of the things that most of us do is kind of go I don't like that person, they are weird or there is something wrong with them and you kind of rule them out and say I am

not going to be friends with that person and I am going to avoid communication with that person but if you defer judgment what you might learn is that they are going through a rough patch or something or they maybe are by behavior but they are very smart or interesting once you get past that initial person who knows there might be someone who could be a business partner for you or could be someone who could contribute ideas to something you are working on and its true for all sorts of situations and things and when you defer judgment basically you are leaving the doors of possibility open longer and you give a brain a chance to kind of not just react but to really understand what things are and what they might do for you. So that's another behavior that actually takes practice, you have to think of judgment before it automatically

Nick Skillicorn: before we go on to the next point, can I just ask you a question and this is related to the whole concept of brain storming and ideation and there is research that which suggest that defer judgment and not vocalizing any critic might actually result in fewer, original and exciting ideas, so how do you fix this concept of constructive criticism if you are telling people to not provide any judgment.

Gregg Fraley: There is a reason why the original inventors of brainstorming came up with this idea of not critiquing as you go and the believe that I have is that is helpful because when you get into ideation, flow is important because if you are working in a group in particular or even working alone, there is a flow that happens when you talk about the faucet of creativity earlier, when you turn it on and you let it flow, you get into a stream of cautions where more ideas come out and I believe if you stop and critic as you go you slow down the flow. I am not against critic of ideas, in fact I am all about critic of ideas once you have them. So it's my believe that you should jam ideas first in flow and then you should critic them afterwards. You can have all the discussions that you like, you can have all the arguments and debate that you like and sometimes that can be indeed very fruitful in terms of exposing the pros and cons or concerns related to an idea. There are very mature people out there who can do a bit a debate and dialogue in ideational flow, but I think that require a level of team work and trust that most groups don't have. I am thinking about partners that I had in the nineties in the software ventures and we would get into debates in the middle of a brain storming session and sometimes it did in fact help us in improving ideas, it was only because in the group the people were very generational as a kind of way of life. Even when you hear an argument from someone you are thinking okay but the way to address that is and then you add on the idea but you see not everyone is like that. Most people default mode is critic and analyze and critiquing and analyzing is the opposite of ideational flow.

Nick Skillicorn: So when they feel critics, then either they will get defensive or they will get quiet and that again is terrible when it comes to generating new ideas

Gregg Fraley: Yes absolutely, I'd like to broaden the notion of what brainstorming is beyond a group thing too, you see all those articles that are somewhat nay saying about brain storming, they define brain storming as a group thing. I believe that it should be a with groups but also be done alone. So of the most effective brainstorming is one where the group is prepared by doing brain storming alone first doing research and coming up with ideas and then bringing them into a group and sharing. So it's alone and together in my opinion. In virtual systems also can admit brain storming sessions and how they value in terms of being more inclusive of more people that are the real thing. But any way the research around the need for debate as you go I think is questionable I think that

there is still much to be learnt there and one of my things is that I do improvisational comedy, interesting, to me its taught me the value of flow and the value of flow and the value of corporation and group thought. Not that I am a fan of group think, I think that that coming up with contrary ideas is often a really great provocation for stimulating creativity, but improve is all about flow and corporation in the moment and I found after doing three years of improvisational stuff that something clicked for me in terms of my ability to unwind my own spontaneous stuff just to come out. Sometimes the best thinking is actually not thinking and I learnt that in improve and I don't know how I would have learnt it in any other way.

Nick Skillicorn: We have actually got quite a few improve thought leaders t the summit and they can back up what you talk about and I am sorry about breaking your flow by diverting this plan, should we continue with the techniques, we have talked about note booking and we have talked about differing judgment what else can people entry out

Gregg Fraley: Well a simple premise and this is a sort of leading in the CPS is alternating or separating divergent thinking from convergent thinking, so our make lists of ideas and you make list of questions you want to answer fist and then you go back and review the debate ad discuss later and so I think that separation even in your own mind with your own challenges can be really helpful. So that's a simple thing that is actually a sort of instill facilitation to if you are in a meeting an there is a lot of debate going on and you are not getting anywhere and one of the simple things that you can say is to participate in that meeting and say let's make a list first and then critic it later, you will find that you get a lot more information on the table to discuss, that can be very helpful. So that is another behavior really. Tolerance for ambiguity is really important I think, there have been a lot of test and studies around people's ability to stay open to possibility. People want to resolve conflicts, people want to resolve challenges and sometimes the rush to fix something or to resolve it prevents you from having a better solution, so staying open longer often leads to better results, that uncomfortable feeling that you have though when there is tough situation and you are letting it role on and that's the best thing to do, change is often un comfortable, change is where our opportunity lies both as an individual and as an organization sort of inviting change and being comfortable with being un comfortable, its actually a really good thing. Gosh beyond that I guess getting into CPS is where I will go now. So we talked about problem exploration, idea generation and action planning. Within exploration, one of the first thing you need to understand about what you are doing is what do you really want, what do you really wish for and I think it's important to understand that what the best possible outcome is because it gives you kind of a vision to aspire in your own mind, even if you really have a dreadful problem or something that is really complicated, if you can get your imagination on how it's going to look when it's done, it almost gives your brain a little bit of a preview of coming attractions in terms of setting your mind on wanting to solve that actual problem. Sop spending time imagining best possible outcome in Cps. The next step is turn over every rock and relate to your challenge and really good research. Often times this is where problem and solutions come right up because you have a misunderstanding of what is going on. Design thinking which is a method that I am sure you have heard of really starts with customer or consumer or problem owner empathy and sort of putting yourself in the shoes of the problem owner and really getting into the depth of what's happening g and what is. Here sometimes it's a Google search sometimes it's a observational research, sometimes its interviews, whatever you have to do like reading which is under rated in today's teen age but reading the boring white paper that someone wrote thirty years

ago about something can be really enlightening as to where you should take your mind focusing on the challenge. I guess the next thing on problem exploration is framing up the challenge, it's interesting how this is both the most powerful thing you can do leading yourself to great solution and it is also the thing that is most ignored and taken for granted. The classic format for problem framing is the phrase how might we so if I was trying to generate more income, I will simply say how might I generate more income as a starting point. Most people even if they get that far from doing better sort of a vague notion of I need money but problem framing is an art form and if you spent time thinking about a challenge for instance better income, you might come up with insights that are very interesting and leads to better solutions. So I might reframe my problem to how might I reduce expenses, how might I better utilize my resources, how might I reach my talents, these are other ways to look at the general problem that you came into a situation or a problem solving session with. So I like for instance resources because I have always find that if you focus on making money that never seems to come but if you look at what you love to do and do more of that,, then money seems to come from out of nowhere. So I would choose that as my problem frame to good ideas, so now that I have a good problem frame that I intuitively feel is good now I am ready for actual brain storming. With brain storming, one of the tools that I mentioned already is note booking, let me add on that a little bit. Everybody thinks that great ideas can happen in one brain storming session, and actually one of the reasons brain storming gets a bad reputation is because that's not really likely. Effective brainstorming actually takes place over a period of time and the longer time you give it and the more focus and attention you put on a problem frame, the more likely it is that you are going to get to some place innovative, so a lot of time it's just that simple. Don't plan a brain storming session for next Friday and then not tell anybody about it, not tell anybody what the problem frame is, not giving them any orientation. Tell them a few weeks in advance and give them the time to think about it and do a little research jams and ideas and then when they get to the brain storming sessions, they are already sort of one notch from where they would have been if you haven't done that preparation work. So give it time, I truly believe that more ideas do usually end up with better ideas because your mind has to go through all the obvious answers of something first before it gets to something truly unique. People have said o well, all that quantity is useless but actually it's not useless because it's a building block to quality, that's my believe and some people might dispute that but base on my experience.

Nick Skillicorn: I agree with you, what I have talked about with my clients is that I do love researching to how the brain form ideas, there is a lot of biases that the brain goes though, unfortunately it has evolved to such a degree that its very good at essentially working on other part that once it starts sensing patterns and because of that it becomes very good at coming up with the right solutions that it knows is going to work. So if you set anyone a challenge to come up with ideas, the first thing that the brain is going to come up with is everything it knows that works because those are very efficient for the brain to come up with and only once you have literally listen to that and say okay what else is there, you have basically empty the easy bucket and you need to start like scraping around in the other buckets that you didn't know exist.

Gregg Fraley: That's right, I whole heartedly agree and I think that research bares that out.

Nick Skillicorn: So what about now that we have talked about creativity, how do you actually turn creativity into innovation in a cognitive perspective, how do you get teams to be more innovative

Gregg Fraley: another sixty four thousand dollar question, the simple answer and this is very simple its projects. People ask me how do we change our innovation culture here at xyz corporation and they want to do qualitative or assessments on innovation culture and those are interesting to do and sometimes those assessment can be helpful in identifying challenge areas and problems and road blocks and stuff. But the only thing t5hat really changes culture is project, it's sort of stupidly simple but I truly believe that if you really want a change or shift your culture toward more innovation, the best thing you can do is get into a circle of innovation circle, so form a team, get a mandate from management, I have seen innovation fail because there was no communication with the people in charge, at the end of the day they will disempower you in a minute if they think that you are doing things with their time and their money that is out of control. So sort of get a permission and get a mandate and talk through that. I have a document I could send people if they are interested, it's basically a contract that you will have with upper level management to go forward with an innovation project. What you are asking them for is the permission to look at opportunity areas in other words what projects do you do, once you decide to do innovation, the projects are the key and successful innovation has to do with what projects you choose to do. So for instance are you choosing a project that is basically about new and improved another which you have a product line, you have a brand, you have an offering, small improvements are actually the easiest form of innovation to actually execute and it's something you should do. Everyone talks about disruptive innovation, but disruptive innovation is actually not that frequent and yes it's the holy grail of innovation yes should seek it but you should also seek new and improve as a way to refresh your brand and renew your product line so forth. So selecting a project is key, so your communication with management should have to do with okay where do you see us having huge opportunities and or incorporating what market research you may have about what your consumer or your customer wants. So there are clamoring some particular feature and that might be a direction to go. If you have done research into some trend in your industry that your company isn't addressing in any way then that's a bigger picture, more disruptive kind of starting point for a project. Organizing a team and having a rue leader that can lead an innovation team I think it's essential and a leader should be a person who understand innovation process, who is a relatively good facilitator or at least have the resources to hire a facilitator if necessarily, the team itself should be diverse so different types of thinkers in the group, people who are great prolifers and analyzes, people who are great researchers, people who are real idea people in the classic creative sense and the implementers, people that are often left out of innovation teams because if you don't get something to market then it's never going to pay off for you, I mean the difference between creativity and innovation is, creativity is a feeling and a capability where as innovation is nothing if it is not delivered, it is delivering some actual value of solving some actual problem that's kind of the definition of it. So diversity of team members, a lack of willingness to confront to difficulty and challenging things and that could be even conflict within the group, one of the things that hold back many innovations teams is that they are unwilling to confront their own conflict and until they do that they are not going to be highly productive. So that kind of fearlessness I think it's really key. So if you have a project idea and you are moving forward and I think you need to get into a process of ideation coming up with ideas that address the issues or address the opportunity and then doing quick tests, sorts of the lean philosophy of prototyping, checking in with the market place and seeing if your concept holds water and if it doesn't then reiterate it and come up with one that does and rapidly iterating in cheaper ways as possible to test concepts and once you got something that is resonating

with the market place or the customer or whatever, then you move it into the more expensive research and development steps are typical in an innovation process. One mistake I think people make though, they got an innovation team and they come up with this brilliant idea and then they toss it over the wall to the research and development crew and then it disappears forever. I think that team leader even if he is not or she is not involved in research and development needs to stay involved to be ready to rescue a project if it deserves rescuing and to problem solve let's say the engineering group or the packaging group is trying to put up a product together for market and stay involve just means you are increasing your success of getting involve in an actual innovation to this, checking back with the management I think it's important so once you have got something that requires your resourcing beyond some sort of some seeking money for an innovation team, I think you really want to have a dragon den type of pitch to management and it's not just because of the drama of it or the fun of it because those kind of pitches are actually really fun and interesting, I think that it's a way to get management on board for the further resourcing that any innovation typically requires. So pitching them and getting their feedback and fine tuning a concept and then either getting the thumb up or the thumb down on the project, there are great ideas that don't deserve to be put into play, it might be at the market too soon, it might be that the solution isn't elegant, it might be that the organization doesn't have the skill to put it together so there are a lot of reasons to say no to projects. I think that Steve jobs once famously said that was is job to say no to all the project ideas that came out and just select the very few that do get to move forward. So pitches to management and then once that is done and you have moved the product or service along whoever is finishing it even if that's you, then you need to get back into a circle of picking another new project for continuous innovation. So the circle of innovation I think is really important and the faster you can spend that front end of innovation circle, the better off you are going to be.

Nick Skillicorn: Gregg it has been a hugely detailed, fascinating looking to how companies can improve their innovation, we are coming up to the end of the session, what I like to ask all the expert is that if you can give an viewers and listeners one tip and one actionable piece of insight that they can try out either this afternoon or this week to actually start getting value about what we talked about, what would it be

Gregg Fraley: Well go back to what I mentioned already which was journaling and note taking and what I have noticed though is that since I have started saying that years ago is that there are some wonderful tools now for recording your ideas, there is the live scribe pattern which is a really interesting product, a lot of these work slates, the ipad and so forth are great ways to capture ideas. Not just note taking in the sense of writing long hand notes but explore challenges with your note book o with your ipad or whatever, it is visual in a way as possible learn mind mapping. Mind mapping is an incredible tool for problem exploration and that can be a real augmentation to the basic idea or recording ideas and recording questions as they come up for you and your dialogue, internal monologues stream if you will.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect, we are also going to get all the links to your resources and to where people can find out more on the screen, Gregg can you just quickly tell us where these links are going to take people.

Gregg Fraley: Yes, well the most basic one is my personal brand website for Gregg Fraley's innovation which is www.greggfraley.com so that's the starting point, so I have a blog there with

about five hundred articles all related to creativity and innovation so there is a deep resource there you can search and if you have questions about things like problem framing or challenge mapping or mind mapping or note taking or behaviors and mindset that's all there on my blog. The other website to look at is the company started in London seven years ago which is called kiln, so look at www.kilncoicom. Kiln is the company I formed with Kiln Hammer PhD and we have a set of products and services thee related to innovation and team building and so forth, so those are the website.

Nick Skillicorn: It's been fascinating speaking with you today and thanks for coming and I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

Gregg Fraley: Looming forward to it, Thank you so much for the opportunity, have a good one.