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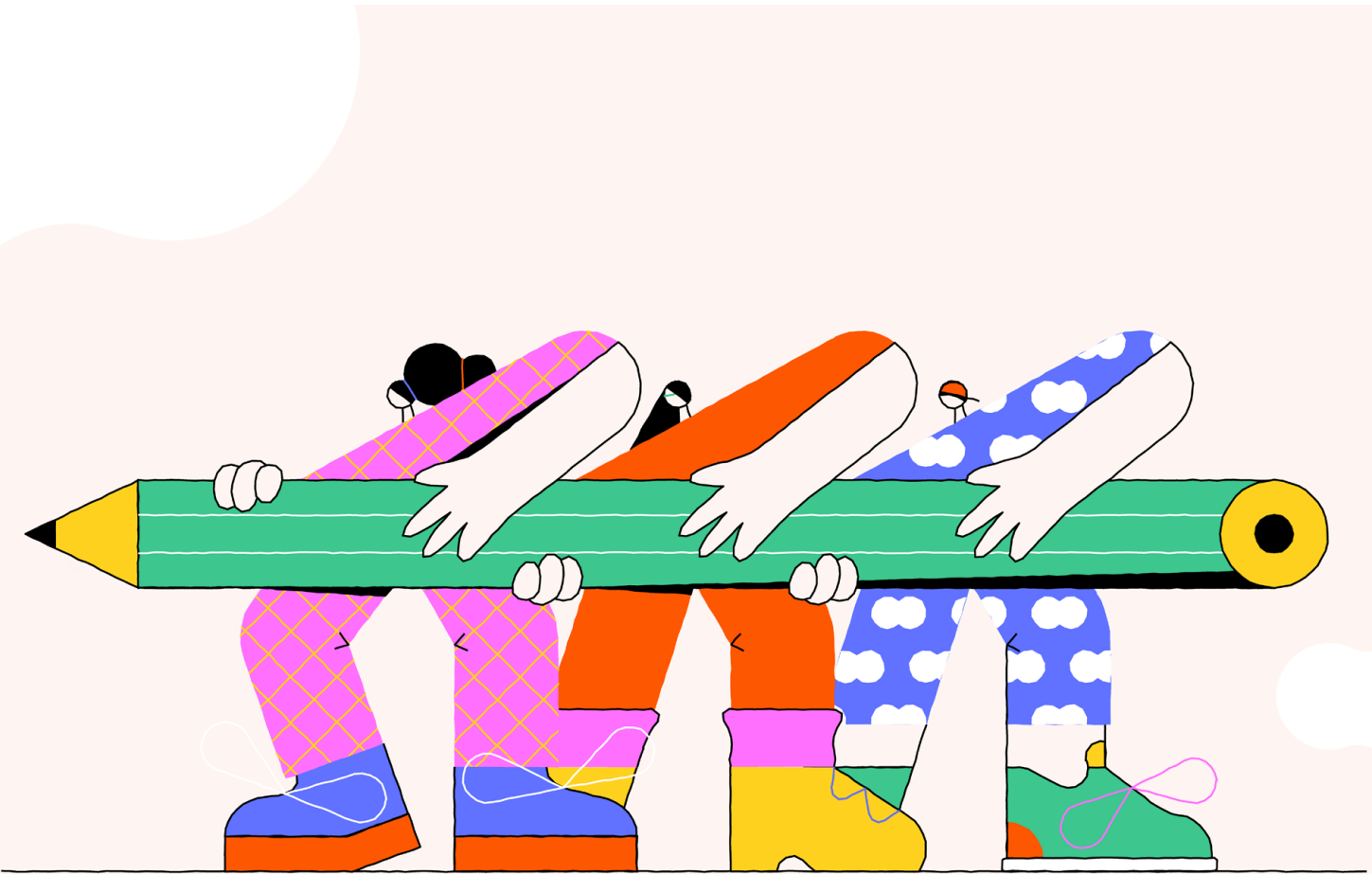
10 Habits of Highly Effective Creative Leaders

If you're like other creative leaders at growing companies, you probably have more projects going than you can count.

You're juggling myriad relationships with team members, upper management, other teams, and outside vendors. You likely live deadline to deadline, under pressure to deliver high volumes of quality content and maintain brand differentiation — all on a tight budget.

Today's creative leaders — including creative directors, design directors, art directors, and other managers of creative teams — have so many different responsibilities that the job can sometimes feel overwhelming.

To top it off, creative leaders often have a background in art or design, which means their creative skills are strong, but they lack training in management. Being a good creative isn't the same thing as being a good creative leader, and the transition can be bumpy. As Jeremy Carson, a creative director at advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi, has written, when you become a creative leader you aren't in charge of making creative stuff anymore — you're now in charge of making others make creative stuff.

In other words, as a creative leader, your main responsibility is to manage people and processes. Effective creative management involves everything from inspiring a team, to managing workflows and budgets, to optimizing output and collaboration. That can feel like a lot to handle, but a few key strategies and tools can transform your day-to-day job from a treadmill of meetings and tasks to a satisfying balance of relationships and productivity.

Here are ten tips — five for connecting with people and five for managing processes — to help you master your role as a creative leader.
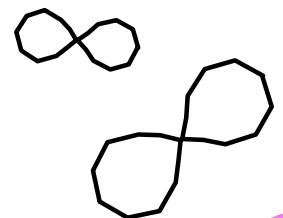
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Connecting with people

1 **Develop strong relationships in and out of your organization.**

"As a creative director, building relationships is your number one priority," says Josh Souter, an executive creative director at Adobe. "It's not doing great work. It's not winning awards. All of that stuff comes later."

Building relationships might involve taking initiative to start conversations and get to know colleagues on both a professional and personal level. It might also mean offering to help or collaborate on projects, thanking people, and calling out good work. Most of all, it involves building trust with people at all levels of the organization.

Charlie Pearson, a creative director who has worked at a variety of companies and now runs CP Design, has a simple key for building trust: "I never miss a deadline. That's number one."

Gaining the trust of upper management can give you more latitude to take creative risks, and developing relationships outside the organization can also yield dividends. For example, being on good terms with vendors at creative agencies can come in handy when you need extra support or a quick turnaround, and getting friendly with competitors can give you an inside track within your industry.
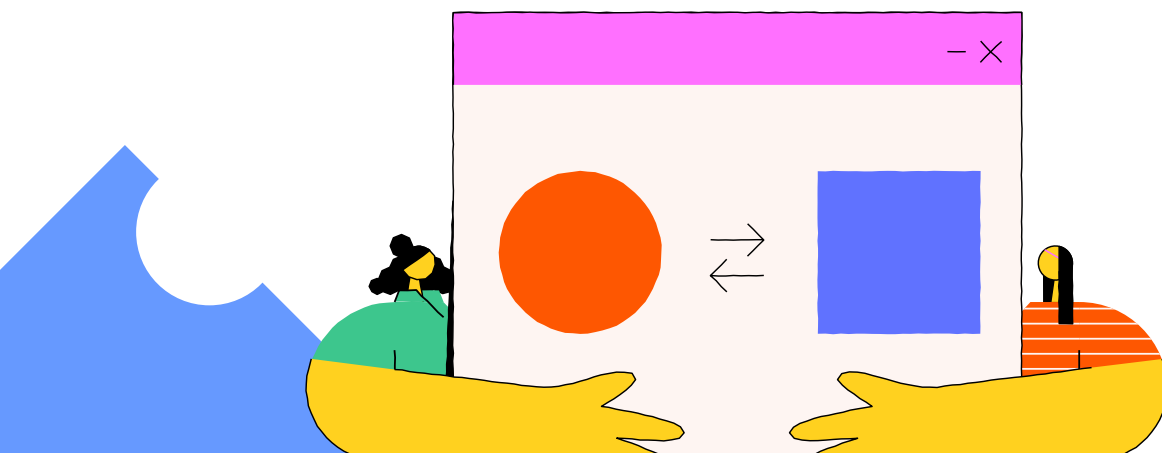
2 Respect and empower your team.

Remember, your job as a creative leader is not to make creative things — it's to nurture creative people who make creative things. That means establishing a culture where people feel empowered and inspired.

"You've got to respect people," says Pearson. "You've got to make people feel empowered. Otherwise, they don't have confidence." And without confidence, it's hard to do good creative work. One easy, inexpensive thing a leader can do to build self-confidence in team members, according to Pearson, is to give them business cards. "It makes them loyal. It costs virtually nothing, but gives so much. It empowers them. They feel like they belong to the team."

Empowering people also means letting go of creative control. "As a creative myself, I always struggle with allowing people to be their own creative," says Pearson. "It's difficult to let go, but you have to. You've got to allow them to have their flair. Yes, there is a risk. But you've got to respect people's abilities and capabilities, understand how people work, and be sympathetic to them."

Souter says businesses often have objective, number-based goals, while creative teams have subjective goals, like becoming better designers. Setting objective goals that align clearly with the goals of the business can allow creative leads to step back and let their teams produce.

> "My hope is to get to a point where I'm not very involved in their day-to-day. My goal is to give them the broad guidance that they need and then check in and adjust based on if they're hitting their goals or not."
>
> **Josh Souter**
>
> Executive Creative Director
> Adobe

3   Master the art of giving — and receiving — feedback.

Feedback is one of the most effective ways to help people grow, but it can also sting — especially for creatives who are personally invested in their work. Effective creative leads know how to mentor people with feedback that focuses on building strengths rather than fixating on weaknesses.

Some keys to giving effective feedback include:

- **Be specific:** Point to concrete examples rather than speaking in generalizations.

- **Be timely:** Share your observations while the experience is still fresh.

- **Be constructive:** Create a vision for future work rather than tearing down past work.

- **Be empathetic:** Show that you understand the other person's perspective.

You'll also be on the receiving end of feedback as a creative leader, from your own team as well as from management and other teams. Whether it's about your designs, ideas, or performance, a thick skin can be a valuable asset that allows you to use feedback constructively rather than spending precious time nursing your bruised ego.

Some tips for receiving feedback include:

- Listen without interrupting.

- Be aware of your responses, including thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions.

- Be open to different perspectives and ideas.

- Reflect on how you can use the feedback to grow.

- Thank the person for their thoughts, whether or not you agree with them.

4 Develop curiosity and empathy.

True empathy is more than understanding another person — it's opening yourself so deeply to their experience that you feel what they feel. A passionate curiosity about others' experiences will prompt you to read, watch, and listen widely to stories that help you understand the world and empathize with other people — including your customers. And the more you focus on your customers' needs, wants, and pain points, the more effective your creative work will be.

"Anytime you have a presentation of work, bring the end customer into the room with you in any way that you can," says Souter.

He describes a project early in his career working with a client that struggled to understand their young, diverse audience. "We had a meeting where we literally brought in lifesize cardboard cutouts of two customers and put them in a chair in the room. We had names for them." When the client questioned certain suggestions, Souter and his team would point to the cutouts and say, "What do you think Jonathan and Katie think about that?"

"It was this incredible way to immediately gain credibility and authority. And as a creative director, you want credibility and authority when you make recommendations."

Josh Souter

Executive Creative Director
Adobe

## 5 Engage in your industry beyond your organization.

Following the top people in your industry and studying their work will help you spot trends, get inspired, and learn best practices you can bring back to your organization.

Pearson remembers a conversation early in his career with one of the "giants of the creative world," graphic designer Sir Alan Fletcher, founder of design firm Pentagram. "When I first met him, he said to me, 'There's no such thing as originality.' I was taken aback by that. He said, 'Nothing's original. Everything's been done before, but it's about how you assemble it. That's the original part.'" That insight stuck with Pearson and greatly influenced his career.

Engaging with thought leaders in your field is also an opportunity to share your knowledge and showcase your team's work. But there's a fine line between a thoughtful exchange of ideas and an obsession with self-promotion.

"There are two types of people," Pearson says. "Some people go through their whole careers doing everything they can to self-promote." Often, these people don't add much value to their companies even as they succeed. "But then there's the real workhorse who just does the job without complaining, turns up every day on time, does the work, and just muddles through. And without that little bit of self-promotion, they'll get bogged down and remain where they are all their career."

Strike a balance by focusing on innovative work and interesting ideas no matter where they come from — ideas that you can apply and experiment with in your daily work.
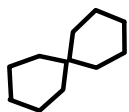
Managing processes

6 **Learn the basics of business and management.**

Your background may be in art or design, but every creative director's goal should be to understand the business they work for, Souter says. When you know how your team fits into the larger picture, you'll be in a better position to advocate for your team and deliver better creative work. You'll also be able to offer unique insight on business strategy based on your creative perspective.

For creative leaders without a background in business, this means expanding your knowledge base. Think of your skillset as a T-shape: The top of the T represents the breadth of your knowledge on a number of topics, including business strategy, while the vertical part of the T represents your depth of knowledge in one thing — your creative trade.

To broaden your skills and flesh out that top part of the T, invest time in reading, talking to others in the field, or even getting formal training in business strategy and leadership.

Souter suggests another creative approach: "Get yourself invited to business meetings that aren't about creative, but about the business, the financials, and the HR issues." He mentions Chris Sacca, a self-made billionaire investor who worked at Google early in his career, where he crashed as many high-level meetings as he could. "He would basically go into meetings that he shouldn't be at and say, 'Hey, I'm here to take notes for you all.' And so Eric Schmidt and Larry Page would be in there, and they'd be like, 'Well, okay, he's here to take notes.' And then he would take notes and give them a readout. And that was the best business education he ever could have received."
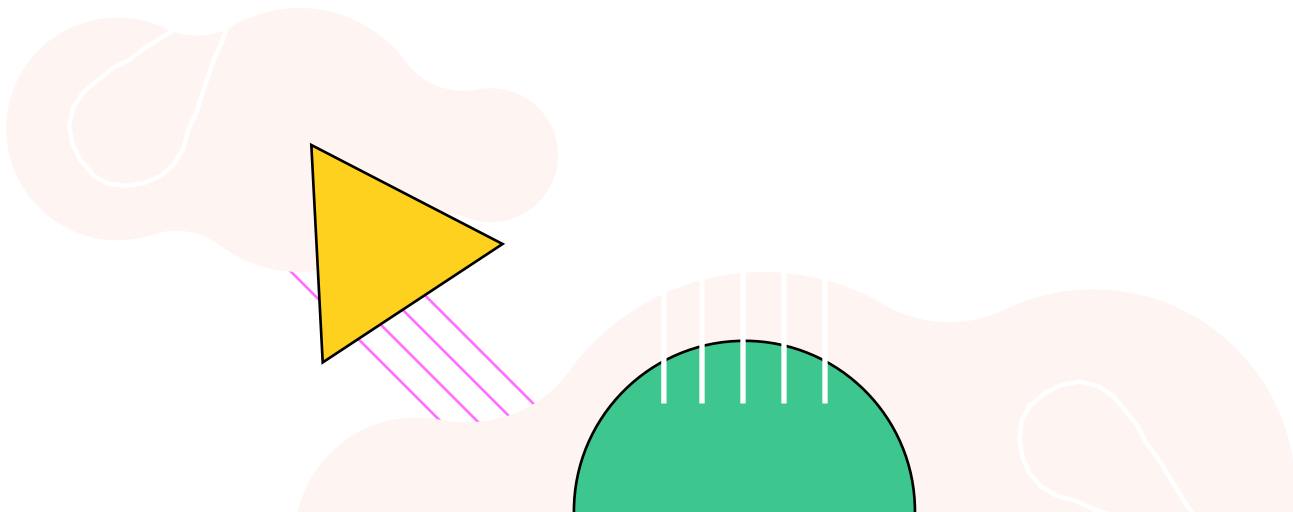
7   Embrace your role as guardian of the brand.

The buck stops with creative leaders when it comes to making sure a brand doesn't slip. If your company doesn't already have brand guidelines, make it your first priority to create them.

"That's the number one job before you go anywhere," says Pearson. Otherwise, "it's like going on a trip without having a map. It's just insane. If I get a brief from a company and they don't have brand guidelines, I know it's going to be a problem because there aren't any parameters. It could take four times as long." In cases like that, Pearson advises the company to put the current project to the side and focus on brand guidelines.

"It doesn't have to be much — it could just be five pages, but it irons out all the things, like iconography, typography, color palette, treatments. Brand guidelines are immensely helpful because without them, you're dead in the water."

Charlie Pearson
Creative Director, CP Design

Once you have brand guidelines, don't be afraid to enforce them. You may have to say no to some creative ideas, but the resulting brand integrity and streamlined ability to collaborate will more than compensate.

8   Create workflows that empower.

Regularly assess your team's workflow by zooming out to take a bird's-eye view of the entire process. Where are the pain points, and how can you eliminate them? Are there opportunities to better sync or integrate tools? What can you do to keep the pipeline flowing easily?

Souter calls this "fixing the machine." For example, if a team is building a website, then the product is webpages and the machine is the people, processes, and relationships that build the webpages. "What I don't want to do as a creative director is go into a creative review and sit down and say, 'I don't like this button color. I don't like this image.' And get really in the weeds on the actual creative. I want to be fixing the machine."

Fixing the machine means making sure your entire team has the support they need to deliver high-quality work and meet business objectives. "The minute my focus goes down to an individual webpage, I've stopped looking at the machine and the machine is starting to rust. But if I can build a strong machine, it will spit out those webpages," Souter says.

That doesn't mean you ignore problems with specific assets, but it means your solution is systemic. For example, a team member may need extra training, or the process may need to change. "I say, 'This page is subpar. What led to that? Let's fix that part of the machine.' Not, 'Let's go back and fix that page,'" Souter says.
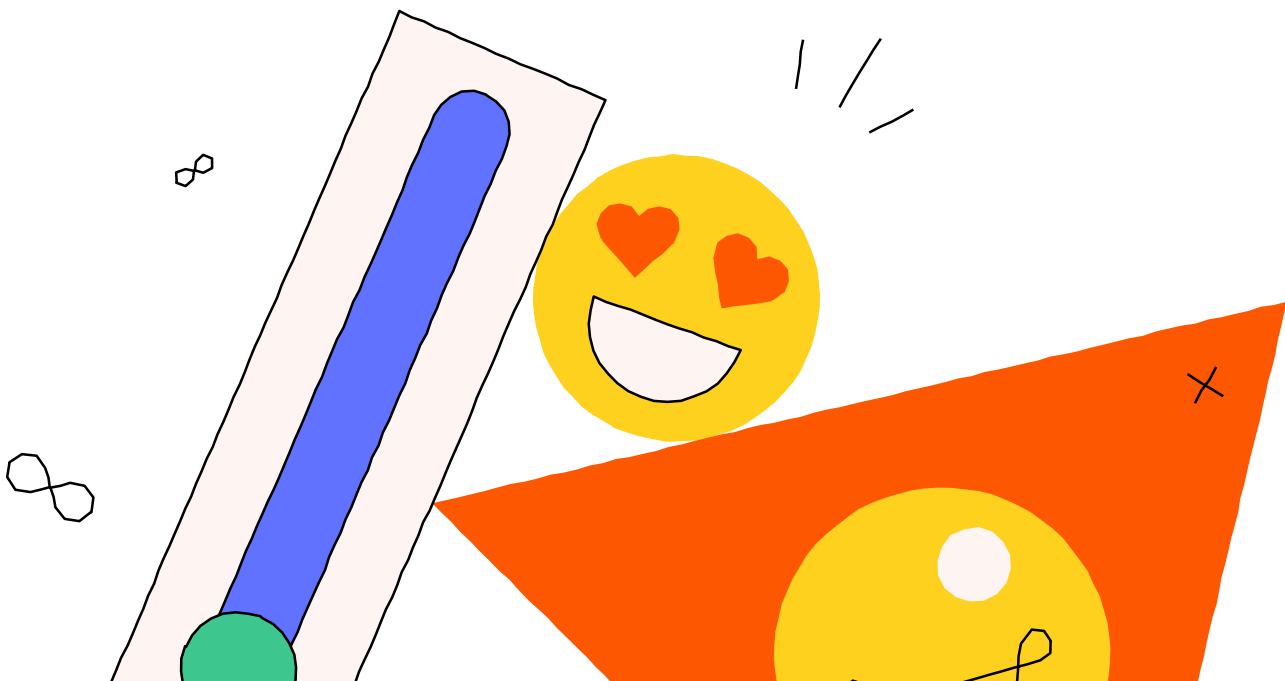
9 **Be adaptable and reinvent your processes continually.**

Most people resist change, and it can be frustrating when business goals or strategies shift in the middle of a creative project. But if you see change as an opportunity for introspection and innovation, you'll always be a step ahead.

"Everything changes all the time. Everything," says Pearson. "You can't get too comfortable. You've got to always be refining, always improving." The key to smart change is to listen to your people, he says. "Listen to their qualms and the things that irritate them about processes. You can't go wrong if you're always listening and trying to improve."

Souter describes a shift one of his creative teams made when their processes became outdated. They had traditionally used a "first in, first out" method of responding to requests, but over time, they were inundated with work. "It created a really chaotic creative environment that added a lot of cognitive load. The teams never knew how much work there was, how it was all related, and what the priorities were, because something else would come in, and the noisiest thing would be the priority."

They switched to a two-week sprint model that allowed them to prioritize and track projects more efficiently. As an added bonus, the new system allowed them to align more closely with their engineering team, which also used a sprint model. That solution may not be right for every type of creative team, but the principle is the same: be responsive, adaptable, and constantly evolving.
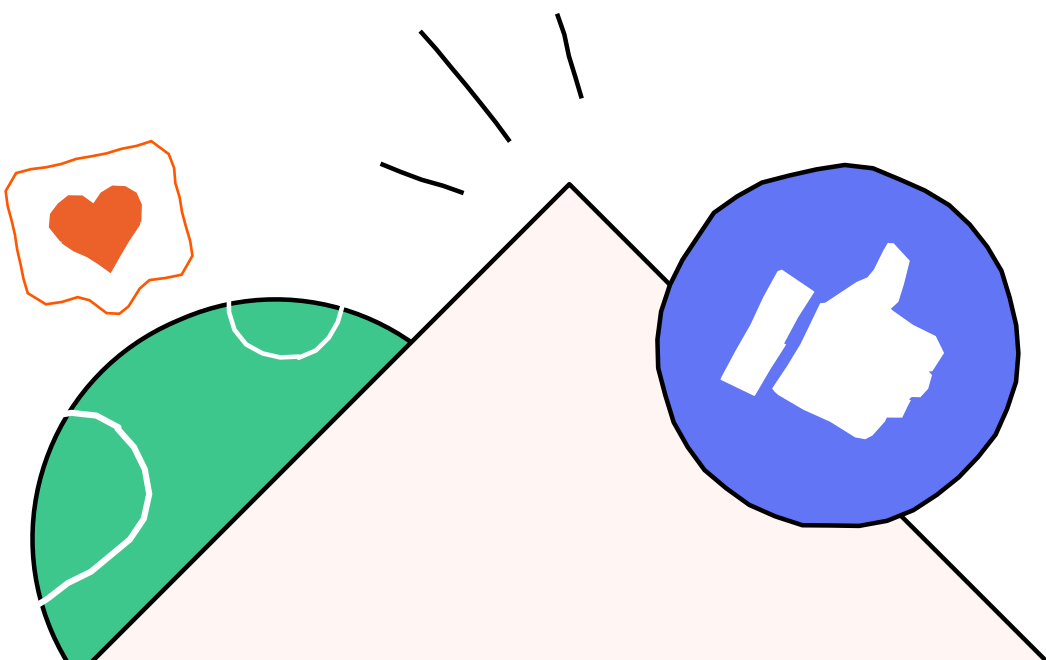
10   Make sure your team has the right tools.

Technology is at the top of the list of things that are constantly changing. Stay up to date on the latest technology to make sure your team has what they need to perform. For a creative team, that could mean anything from software, to resources like libraries and stock photos, to storage space or integrated communication tools. If you want to empower your team to create high volumes of high-quality content, make sure all the tools are easily accessible and up to date.

To take your team's productivity to an even higher level, look at how the tools they use impact not only design, but also collaboration. Is it easy for team members to give and receive feedback and work together on projects? How do their tools impact collaboration with other teams across the organization?

Souter's team found a way to use technology to eliminate friction between his team of designers and their internal partners. Product managers were asking for new design features with each project, and the design team was providing them, but the engineering team was frustrated that they were always building things from scratch.

The solution: Souter's team created a library of templates that product managers and designers could use as building blocks for every project. It saved the engineers hundreds of hours and linked two tools that now automatically update one another. "It gives us an incredible amount of velocity," Souter says. "Now we have a system rather than trying to build new things constantly."
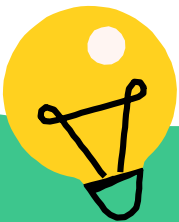
Being a creative lead is a multifaceted job.

For those from a creative background, learning the art of leadership can be intimidating. But the good news is that managing relationships and processes can let you flex your creative muscles in new ways. The trick is to find different methods of connecting with people and fresh perspectives on processes and tools. By creating a few new habits, you can reap personal and professional rewards as you become a highly effective creative leader.

Adobe can help.

Adobe's Creative Cloud for teams gives you the world's best apps and services for empowering creative teams. This complete creative solution comes with 20+ industry-leading apps for design, photography, video, and web, including favorites like Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. Creative Cloud for teams also helps you stay in sync with Creative Cloud Libraries, 1TB of storage per user, integration with other business tools, and premium-level support.

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