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Management Insights



The Real Challenge in Fostering Creativity
By Norah Bolton, President, Dynamic Thinking

As organizations try to improve their success in the marketplace, the new cry is for creativity. Outdoor adventure, improvised drama, simulations of all kinds, loosening up by flapping your wings like a chicken -- these are new elixir that will somehow let the genie out of the bottle.

As organizations try to improve their success in the marketplace, the new cry is for creativity. Outdoor adventure, improvised drama, simulations of all kinds, loosening up by flapping your wings like a chicken -- these are new elixir that will somehow let the genie out of the bottle.

It's a misguided approach for two reasons. People are already creative but the organizations that they work for don't have systems to respond to their ideas for improvement or innovation. If the organization wants to reap the benefit of their creativity, stressing personal development may not be the best way to address the problem..

Alan Robinson and Sam Stern have studied the question of creativity from the organizational perspective and have come up with a wealth of entertaining stories and positive suggestions in their recent book, Corporate Creativity, How Innovation and Improvement Actually Happen. (San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publications, 1998).

A company is creative, they state, when its employees do something new and potentially useful without being shown or taught. The result is an improvement in the way something in the organization is done now or it can result in an entirely different approach.

In response to those who want to hand pick the right group and form a creativity elite, the authors contend that the approach simply won't work. In their research they found that it's impossible to predict who will be creative, -- and for that matter, in what way, when, where, and how. What they do know is why.

What all employees share is an ability to get interested in something. And when that interest is pursued on the job, the results are often amazing.

The most remarkable story concerns a mother of three working part time for the state government of Massachusetts. She found a small clause in federal transfer payment legislation that ultimately allowed the state to claim an extra half billion dollars in the first year and two hundred million each year in subsequent years. Such a person would never be viewed as a potential high flyer in the creativity stakes. The miracle is that anyone listened to her because the natural response to a part time clerk would be, "Don't be ridiculous". Ironically the state later proposed a piece of legislation that would limit the employment of any part time worker to a maximum of ten years. The woman had been there for twelve.

Official stories of innovative breakthroughs often stress the single accomplishments of a lone ranger at the top of the organizational ladder single-mindedly pressing ahead. The truth is much messier. Ideas can languish for years. Often the really innovative result comes from someone starting out in the company who doesn't have the expertise to know that something can't be done and tries to do it anyway.

Rather than fixing the uncreative employee, Robinson and Stern want to go to work on the uncreative system. Their prime example of how not to do it is the Soviet Union, who in 1990 employed half the engineers in the world. A bad system, they say, will beat a good person every time.

They also want us to get over the idea that the creative person is a social misfit, who behaves and dresses eccentrically and loves to break all the rules. Work consists of both the routine and the non-routine. Certain activities have to be planned and performed with consistency. Quality, safety and efficiency are paramount.

Creativity results when something unexpected happens and someone reacts to it because he or she has sufficient interest and knowledge to do so. It doesn't mean that superior intelligence or expertise has to be present or the willingness to take extreme risks. And the first insight is probably a small one. Funnily enough

financial rewards haven't worked particularly well and one company found that by eliminating modest financial rewards for good suggestions the ideas actually doubled. Creativity is its own reward.

The first attempt to create a system for dealing with good ideas was the suggestion box "C now the subject of countless cartoons with drop through slots to waste baskets beneath. Nevertheless the authors have found suggestion systems that have a positive effect. The Japanese system of kaizen is designed to encourage employee involvement and managers are held accountable for participation. In one company the participation rate actually reached 100%.

The authors outline six principles for encouraging creativity. These are alignment, self initiated activity, unofficial activity, serendipity, diverse stimuli and inter-company communication. Here are some ways to implement them.

Alignment means that every employee understands and contributes to a company's key goals. At the most basic level it means that everyone is committed to reducing expenses and maximizing revenue. At a more advanced level it means recognizing opportunities for new developments at the company level and acting on them.

American Airlines is an example of a company with an effective creativity structure. There is a division dealing with it at head office, but they also have field representatives at every location. The latter are volunteer positions, whose role is to encourage suggestions for improvement. Such persons are given special opportunities for personal development and a network of people focused on creativity is the result.

All ideas are sent to the creativity office; it must evaluate each one within a given period of time or the idea lands on the CEO's desk. Ideas are presented on a simple form in writing. Good ideas are put in force automatically. Bad ideas are often an opportunity to correct some basic misunderstanding. The department is adequately staffed and audited in terms of its own productivity in the same way as any other division of the company. Nevertheless participation is only at 8% as opposed to 100% in some Japanese corporations.

Ironically, suggestions for improvements actually limit new ways of doing things. That role is better fulfilled by self-initiated activity where employees are free to explore ideas on their own and develop them. This demands tolerance on the part of the company and the willingness to provide modest resources and staff as small ideas grow. Companies that do not offer specific rewards obtain better results.

Linked to this is unofficial activity. A secretary to the president of an organization noticed that one component of an item purchased by the company seemed extraordinarily expensive. On her own she obtained a spec on the item and asked for quotes from local suppliers. The cost per item came in at \$17 instead of \$650. She had no purchasing authority, but she forwarded her idea to the purchasing department.

Serendipity is a word that we use to describe accidental but pleasurable events but the authors stress that its original meaning is somewhat corrupted. What it should mean is the ability to bring knowledge and experience to unanticipated events and see their significance and possibility. Countless inventions have their origin in just this kind of accident.

Diverse stimuli means taking advantage of learning and experience both on and off the job. The movie, Babe came about after an Australian heard a reviewer laugh her way through a British children's book while tuned into an in-flight audio channel. It took several years of digital technology development and the use of 64 animal trainers and 48 piglets to make it happen several years later, but the seed of the idea was born in a moment of relaxation.

Some companies give employees sabbaticals to undertake individual and group projects. California based software programmers form bands and play and socialize recreationally. Conferences outside one's normal areas of concerns, interaction with people from other units, travel and hobbies all have resulted in improvements in the way companies do business. So does reversing typical roles. The most senior officials spend one day a month manning the phones in customer relations in one progressive company.

Finally improvements in communication within the company do wonders. The work of a creativity office is not to manage new ideas but to bring people together who could contribute. Ideas need a home. The team that works on them, however, can work in different locations, cities or parts of the world. Internet based communication makes it possible for ongoing discussion and research.

The emphasis throughout is on systems that react to the why -interest and curiosity. When companies truly respect the creative potential of 100% of its workforce and introduce systematic ways to respond to it, creativity will unleash amazing potential for improvement and innovation.

Tools like those distributed by my company can play important roles in the creativity process. VisiMap has been used for years by individual researchers to organize and structure their ideas. Newer versions have the capability of linking to internet and intranet sites where people can connect with others interested in the same areas. As an idea interface, it can capture aspects of problems and newly forming concepts without getting in the way of the thinking process.

Finally when ideas have reached a level of structure that they can be developed on a project basis, VisiMap offers immediate export and import with project management software so that ideas can be further developed and refined or returned to the drawing board for further structuring.

Assessment tools like the HBDI help companies identify the thinking preferences of their employees and deploy them to maximum advantage. Work teams composed of similar thinking styles may produce good work, but they are unlikely to produce great results. For that, you have to value and expect the best from the most unexpected sources. If you do, the final results can be truly breathtaking.

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