

# Challenging the Status Quo: How to Cultivate a Creative Climate

Creativity is essential to a prosperous and adaptive organization. Through the flexibility and novelty that creativity allows, corporations can mitigate internal conflict, keep job variety alive and well, and in general, gain competitive advantage by meeting emergent and often fleeting market demands.

Creativity can be conceptualized as the generation of ideas, problem solutions or insights that are novel and appropriate (Unsworth & Klegg, 2010). Contrary to common assumptions and associations, creativity is comprised of more than those single 'aha' moments, and characterizes more than those 'out of the box thinkers' we all know and love. What is important to acknowledge about creativity is that it is not an outcome, but rather a process requiring ongoing effort and dedication. Moreover, it is a process that everyone – regardless of their disposition toward innovation – is capable of.

By acknowledging this, organizations can mobilize – and maximize - the creative efforts of individuals and teams alike by establishing and maintaining a culture that is conducive to creative engagement. Keeping in mind the impact of creativity to the potential growth of any company, this is paramount. But how?

## The Individual

Organizations should first acknowledge some of the factors that contribute to individual creativity:

*Cognitive Arousal* – employees need to be moderately challenged in their work. Too much difficulty, and there aren't enough resources or flexibility to dedicate to solving problems or coming up with novel ideas. Too little, and the employee won't be energized at all. For this reason, finding the balance between stimulating versus stressful is key, and may require getting to know the individual's needs first.

*Knowledge and Skills* – in order to produce creative solutions or ideas, individuals must first possess relevant foundational knowledge. Without an adequate level of expertise regarding a particular subject, individuals will find it difficult to inject novelty or elaboration into their work. This highlights the need for adequate and efficient training programs. The sooner employees are familiar with the ins and outs of their role, the sooner they will be able to engage in creativity relating to that role.

## The Teams

The next step is understanding how individual creativity can either be promoted or stifled in group contexts. With the increasing popularity of brainstorming meetings, and since it is rare for individual staff members to work completely independently - especially when coming up with creative outcomes – it is important to remember the following:

*Diversity* – various studies (DeDreu et al., 2011) have demonstrated that often times, diverse groups are more creative than homogenous ones. Whether in terms of ethnicity, gender or personality types, diversity sets the stage for meaningful and often innovative conversations that arise from differing opinions, perspectives and ideas.

*Psychological safety* – for groups to generate creative insights, team members need to feel safe to voice their ideas and opinions without the fear of ridicule or rejection. This is what is meant by psychological safety – the understanding that there is a level of acceptance and openness to the new and novel. If a group is psychologically safe, creative individuals will be more forthcoming in sharing their ideas and engaging in creative conversation that gives rise to new group initiatives.

*Pro-social motivation* – in order for a group to generate creative ideas, the individuals which comprise the group must be motivated to share their ideas for the collective good. It is not simply enough to feel safe, but the members must feel as though there is more value in sharing their creative ideas than in hoarding them for personal gain. When individuals share their ideas amicably, the entire group benefits from a richer, more creative process and outcome.

## The Organization: Making Creativity ‘Worth It’

Regardless of individual traits or even group characteristics, ultimately the decision to engage in creativity comes down to a single judgement: Is it WORTH it? (Unsworth & Klegg, 2010). A creative climate is one which facilitates an affirmative response to this question at various levels of the organization. Through core values, training programs and reward structures, organizations can make creativity worth it by:

- 1 Keeping people engaged – since moderate cognitive arousal is required for optimal creative engagement, it is wise to give employees the right amount of challenge to spur on problem solving and insight generation. Not too difficult, but not too simple either!
- 2 Creative requirements – if creativity is a core value, organizations should seek to communicate this to their employees and departments. If employees are to decide that creative effort is indeed worth it, they must first be made aware that innovative concepts are held in high regard by their organization. Consider including creativity requirements or considerations in job descriptions, performance evaluations or other documentation.
- 3 Promote acceptance and psychological safety – make it clear that no questions are stupid questions, and no ideas are without merit (within reason of course!). By fostering an accepting climate, individuals will be more forthcoming with what could be innovative and useful ways of thinking and performing.
- 4 Skills: Give them what they need – In order to creatively engage, individuals first need the basics; therefore it is necessary to develop thorough training programs to assist individuals appropriately in getting up to speed.  
  
Time: Studies also show that tight deadlines or a lack of independence stifles creative potential as individuals feel too constrained – either by time or by supervision – to try new things. When possible, give employees the autonomy and the time to explore innovative solutions.
- 5 *The Musketeer Way* – “All for one and one for all.” Organizations can encourage individuals to share their novel ideas with other team members by utilizing group incentives in place of individual rewards more frequently. By increasing the pro-social motivation of staff, you not only stand to observe higher levels of group creativity, but a more cohesive and amicable workforce as well. Win-Win...Win.

While there are individual, and group-related characteristics that contribute to creative engagement, it is important to remember that creativity is largely a matter of culture. Climate can – and does – make a difference, and it is ultimately it is the responsibility of the organization to inspire and optimize creativity in the individuals that sustain it. Now, go cultivate!

## References

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