

## GETTING CREATIVE ABOUT CREATIVITY

Ask people about who is creative and they will usually tell you artists, musicians, writers, and so on. The same person will probably say that they themselves are not creative, although this is not true. In fact, everybody is creative. This also means you.

Where do new ideas come from? Creativity is an essential part of the work environment. New inventions, new products, and new patents are the result of creativity. But creativity is not limited to company business. It can be as simple as figuring out a way to get to work more easily, or deciding on what to buy your child for her birthday.

But what is creativity? And how can we apply it effectively?

### **Can't quite put my finger on it...**

All innovation, or the implementation of new ideas, derives from creativity of some kind. Anything new and useful to the organisation comes with a creative spark. Creativity is the development of these ideas.

Some jobs, such as advertising, research and development, or design, have more creative elements than others, but there is room for creativity in almost every job.

Creativity is a hot topic today in the economic downturn. Do a search at Amazon for “creativity at work” and you come up with over 6,000 matching results. How can companies save money, how can they make more money, how can they survive through the economic downturn? Even layoffs are becoming creative. In many companies, people are not being fired, but have been asked to take unpaid leave.

As a manager, you may be alarmed to note that creativity requires time, hard work, and lots of mental energy. It also requires organisational commitment to the idea. Companies which keep their employees so busy there is no opportunity for creative thinking stifle it.

### **How to be creative**

Given that you and your colleagues have the opportunity to do so, here are some ways you can encourage creativity in your workplace.

#### *Brainstorming*

One of the best-known ways to generate creativity is brainstorming. The main point is to generate as many ideas as possible. It is usually run with a few rules in mind: no criticism, censorship, or judgement is allowed. Freewheeling, or saying whatever comes to mind, is encouraged, as is the combination of two or more ideas to produce a third. You set a volume and time limit (e.g. 100 items in ten minutes) and see what happens.

### *Using fantasy*

Describe a problem in terms of a fantasy story or fairytale, with the usual cast of good guys and bad guys. If this is done as a group exercise, it can help describe relationships that were not clear earlier.

### *Reversal*

Ask the opposite of what you want to ask, then apply the results. For example, if you want to increase your sales, ask: “How can we decrease our sales?” The answers could be have untrained salespeople, cut down on after-sales service, close down our shops. Already you have some insight: this particular question produced a list of things that companies typically do during times of recession to save costs. Ironically, they are also things that will reduce your sales, and ultimately, sabotage your business. So you know you shouldn’t do those.

Not all ideas can be used. Even some of the most creative people in history, like Leonardo da Vinci, Thomas Edison, and Picasso, produced rubbish. But one of the principles of creativity seems to be volume: the larger the number of ideas you generate and the more crazy they are, the more unusual connections and links you can make between previously unrelated ideas, and the more likely you will come up with something that actually is useful.

## **Effects of creativity**

If you tap into the creativity of your employees, you will discover things you did not know before. Not everybody in the organisation can know about every little detail, and the people doing the actual work interacting with customers may have some good ideas to streamline processes and make things more efficient.

Let’s say your company always provides feedback forms for your customers, but you never get any feedback. Management might think that you simply have a lot of happy customers. No news is good news, right? Wrong. Your salespeople can ask the customers why they don’t give feedback. What if the customers then said that the feedback form is a lot of nonsense?

The salespeople can enquire into it. Perhaps the customers would prefer to give face-to-face feedback, rather than writing on a paper that they believe nobody reads. This changes the feedback process, which has multiple beneficial results: the customer gives the feedback they would like to, your company gets the information they want, and you are able to make changes to your product or your service, which in turn keeps your customers happy, and maybe even brings in new ones.

You will also stimulate motivation. Some companies reward their employees for suggestions which have resulted in an efficient change, using money or time off work or even a promotion. Sometimes the reward is intrinsic: now the work is easier to do, thanks to a better pen, or faster computer, or more space, or a less hectic schedule. Just allowing your employees to do their jobs in an innovative way can make them more satisfied and make your company more productive.

## Conclusion

Some people are naturally creative and some jobs even require it, so these people might not need extra stimulation to come up with creative ideas, since they are so practised at it. But the facts are that everyone is creative and you can tap into that. In some cases, you may need to encourage it more explicitly by generating creativity in meetings. You saw some examples of this above.

A lot of organisations become far too bureaucratic as they grow, stifling innovation and creativity with rules. Red tape is an unfortunate result of organisations: there must be some or else the company would operate in chaos. Sometimes management worries that employees will waste too much time producing useless rubbish. And it's true that not all ideas can be used. However, trying out something that doesn't work tells you something: you now know one more thing that doesn't work. Edison didn't stumble on the filament to the lightbulb on his first try.

Remember that allowing employees the freedom to be creative can have very beneficial results: happy people who stay and don't leave, more satisfied customers, and a positive influence on the bottom line – an increase in profits, because creative ideas have helped your business more forward.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

*Creativity in all aspects of life*  
<http://www.creativityforlife.com/>

*Creativity at Mind Tools*  
[http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN\\_CT.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_CT.htm)

*Inspiring quotes about creativity*  
<http://www.quotationspage.com/subjects/creativity/>

Next time, we will be discussing a situation in which you might need some creativity: managing conflict.

*Further reading:*

Bratton, J., & Gold, J. (2007). *Human resource management: Theory and practice*. (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dick, B. (1991). *Helping groups to be effective*. Chapel Hill, QLD: Interchange.

Osland, J.S., Kolb, D.A., Rubin, I.M., & Turner, M.E. (2007). *Organizational behaviour: An experiential approach* (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

West, M.A., & Farr, J.L. (Eds.). (1991). *Innovation and creativity at work: Psychological and organizational strategies*. Chichester, England: Wiley.