

## Harnessing Your Team's Creativity

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Everyone has a creative spark, but many factors can inhibit its ignition. Part of a manager's role is to see the spark in his/her people, encourage its ignition, and then champion its success. In some cases, however, a manager's dampened spirit makes it impossible to recognize creativity in team members. When seeking creativity in others, start by looking inward.

In today's organizations, fresh ideas have become the primary source of differentiation and competitive advantage in the market. Rehashing old formulas does not suffice. When success depends on expanding knowledge boundaries, knowledge management becomes increasingly important.

### What You Need To Know

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**A member of my team is a fountain of new ideas—but instead of contributing, he often derails meetings and wastes time. How can I manage his creativity?**

Some people are naturally creative and just cannot help exploring new territory and concepts. Your team member needs an outlet to channel his creativity so that it may yield innovative and practical solutions. Try to create contexts in which his ideas can be recognized, filtered, and leveraged, so that he can identify situations that are best suited to the exercise of his creative talents.

**I would like employees to have an outlet for their creativity, but our products do not lend themselves to innovation. How can I encourage a more creative environment?**

Creativity does not need to produce transformational or earth-shattering results to be valuable. Creative ideas can be useful to the organization in various ways—for example, devising a new process that improves quality or efficiency, restructuring a business area to enhance the work environment, or finding a superior method of accessing stored information.

Raise the subject of creativity at a management team meeting. Suggest an organizational review with the objective of encouraging creative thinking in every department or business unit. Foster a culture of creative thinking, while conveying to employees that managers value – and perhaps even reward – creativity.

## My job includes identifying and facilitating creativity in my team. This quality ebbs and flows naturally, however, and it is difficult to “switch it on” when required. How can I sustain creativity at a high level?

Focus on creating a supportive environment by breaking routines so that creativity can percolate. Provide opportunities and tools that allow creative thinking to surface. Consciously focus and direct creative activities toward desired outcomes. Invite visitors — who bring fresh, outside perspective — to brainstorming or product development meetings, to provoke new or creative thinking. Familiarity breeds comfort and thus, routines become stale. Introducing third parties can productively interrupt this cycle.

## What To Do

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### Identify the Obstacles

Creative thinking is divergent thinking—a nonlinear process in which our brains make associations and build linkages where none existed before. It allows us to speculate on future trends by expanding the realm of possibility. Managing creativity means filtering these unrealized ideas and directing them toward new solutions.

As organizations grow, the pace of innovation and creativity tends to decrease. In general this can be desirable, because managers need to focus on the business' core products and services. Nevertheless, organizations can go too far and unwittingly construct inherent obstacles to creativity.

Here are some of the obstacles that you may discover in your organization:

- **A belief that creativity is only for some people, not everyone.** Depending on how we feel about creativity, we can either block its expression or give it wings. New ideas are not necessarily based on a rare kind of brilliance. They often emerge simply from thinking about the same old things from different perspectives, and placing them in fresh contexts. This is a talent that anyone can develop.
- **Entrenched belief systems.** We seldom question our belief system; it simply exists in our subconscious. We use a belief system to make sense of the world, to filter and file sensory information according to fairly rigid parameters. We tend not to examine its usefulness unless forced to do so by extraordinary events. Learning to be open to possibilities that lie outside our personal belief system can expose us to creative thought.
- **Fear of failure.** People fear making mistakes and appearing foolish—or worse. This fear can have paralyzing effects, inhibiting innovative thought and nurturing mediocrity. In a fear-driven environment, "right" is rewarded and "wrong" is punished. These so-called rights and wrongs, however, are not absolute, but merely an accepted matter of opinion. Promoting a work culture that applauds creative exploration will help people overcome any fears of failure.

- **Ideas with no practical application.** All creative ideas should be given a chance—not just the practical ones. It may take a hundred crazy ideas before one adds value to a product or service and thus, the business. That one good idea validates the entire process, including the ninety-nine ideas that were discarded.
- **"Knowing" what will work and what will not.** People make judgments based on what they know and what they believe. Judgments can give rise to prejudice, caution, spite, and many other undesirable reactions. Suspending judgment—on yourself and others—is a means of allowing new thoughts an opportunity to be born.
- **"Yes, but ... " cynicism.** Sometimes people automatically cite reasons why something won't work. They're so attached to current reality—and perhaps so afraid of expanding their belief system—that they resist anything new. Your organization will generate very few good ideas if this cynicism is given free rein.

## Overcome Obstacles to Stimulate Creativity

These obstacles can be removed by raising awareness, expanding communication channels, and encouraging team members to reserve judgment until new ideas have been fully and fairly considered. This can be characterized as the skill of listening *for* instead of listening *against*.

### Learn to Listen

Encourage active listening skills throughout the organization. Lead by example—truly pay attention to what is being said and be conscious of your own perceptions. If you don't like someone's suggestion, ask yourself why. Are you so attached to a particular belief that you resist challenging it?

### Encourage "Creative Tension"

*Creative tension* is a concept discussed in Peter Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline*, and in Robert Fritz's *Creating*. It demands that holders of opposing views challenge their entrenched beliefs and open themselves up to the unthinkable or undoable. Allowing room to develop "crazy" ideas makes it possible for extraordinary solutions to emerge.

### Reward Innovative Thinking

In order to create an organizational culture where creativity has free rein, you must reward innovative thinking—whether it produces a result or not. If rewards are contingent on an idea being successful, people will be discouraged from contributing. Ideas can be collected in a number of different ways—casual conversations around the coffee machine, official suggestion box submissions, or structured brainstorming sessions. However you do it, acknowledge contributors for their efforts. Be sure to follow up, too, and let them see how the ideas are being considered or implemented.

### Track Ideas

Prevent the loss of good ideas by creating organizational structures and systems to capture, channel, and track creativity. Don't depend on a few individuals to do the creative thinking for everyone—devise a system to develop and incorporate good ideas companywide.

## Value Diversity

Those who excel at creating are not necessarily the best at implementing. A healthy organization is a diverse one; something rare and wonderful comes from variety. Such a mix of talents and thought patterns may not yield the shortest line between two points, but it's often new and invigorating—and sometimes extremely profitable!

## What To Avoid

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### Creative Processes Are Unfocused

A lot of time, energy, and money can be wasted chasing ideas that have no practical value. In the broadest sense all ideas have merit, but in a commercial setting ideas should serve the business objectives. Harness creativity by developing criteria to determine which ideas to explore further and which to discard. A scattered approach to idea-generation is rarely helpful.

### You Judge Ideas Too Early

Too many good ideas are extinguished by prematurely rushing to judgment. Institutional memory is simply a repository of ideas that didn't work, and it is reinforced by war stories that smother new ideas. Resist authoritative pronouncements on the viability of an idea based on historical experience. Contexts change—what may not have worked in the past may well work now. Create an accepting, open culture so ideas can take flight. Only after an idea has been thoroughly discussed should judgment be brought to bear, in the form of prioritization, synthesis, and analysis.

### You Overanalyze

You can paralyze creative thinking by relying too heavily on analysis. The typical approach to problem-solving—gathering information, organizing, analyzing, prioritizing, forecasting—actually smothers creative thinking. Those well-trained professional instincts may need to be suppressed at the early, creative stages of a particular process.

## Where to Learn More

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### Web Sites:

Creativity at Work: [www.creativityatwork.com](http://www.creativityatwork.com), Edward de Bono: [www.edwdebono.com](http://www.edwdebono.com)

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