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McHugh's Tips for Fostering Creativity in Your Organization

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CREATIVITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

"The creative mind plays with the object it loves."
Carl Jung

This McHugh paper is a short primer on organizational creativity and its role in successful companies. My intent is to coach leaders on how to improve the creative output in their organizations. Many executives spend too little time thinking about creativity. You can make a choice to either foster or suppress the creative spirit. You may not know it, but your actions as a leader can actually discourage creativity. Leadership must be provided by senior executives in order to foster a culture that encourages creativity.

In order to help you in your leadership role, this paper includes *nine tips* on how to encourage creativity, *seven actions* that quash creativity, and *twelve tips* for enhancing your own personal creativity.

CREATIVITY: WHAT IS IT?

Psychologists have studied creativity for ages. Clearly there isn't one definition of what creativity is. For most of us, creativity doesn't mean producing work on a par with Einstein, Mozart or Hemingway. Rather, creativity is a matter of combining old elements with new elements and coming up with something new. Creativity occurs when familiar ideas are reconfigured with new ideas producing an original idea.

Therefore, creativity is about connectedness. Creativity is the ability to perceive the relationship between thoughts, or things, or forms of expression that may seem utterly different, and to be able to combine them into some new forms—the power to connect the seemingly unconnected. Creativity is about making connections between seemingly disparate things. There is nothing mysterious about creativity. We all have creative gifts. Let's examine the differences and connections between innovation and creativity.

INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

Creativity precedes innovation. Innovation can only happen if a company engages its creative people. Innovation is the practical application of creative thought. Innovations are tangible business results that derive from processes that are in place to develop creative ideas into real products or services. Innovations are ideas in action. Let's examine how you can harness the creative spirit of your organization; namely, conduct brainstorming sessions and product development retreats. What are some techniques for fostering creative thinking? Let's discuss a few.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE CREATIVE THINKING

To counterbalance the later section, "How to Quash Creative Thinking," I have written this section. I feel the "Quash" section is more important than the "How to Encourage" section as I have watched many leaders demolish the creative spirit without intending to do so. However, it's best to start with the positive; here are suggestions to help you to foster a creative culture.

- **Encourage Imagination.** Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Imagination helps us see our ideas before they are realized.
- **Encourage Risks.** Peter Drucker said "People who take risks generally make about two big mistakes a year. People who don't take risks generally make about two big mistakes a year." We have a fear of failing. Recognize the fear but encourage people to take risks.
- **Convey Enthusiasm and Energy.** The leaders who inspired me to be creative were enthusiastic and energetic people. I don't mean in a contrived or phony way but in a genuine manner. Enthusiasm can be conveyed in an understated manner yet be effective. So if you are in a leadership position, reflect on your demeanor in meetings. Are you conveying energy and enthusiasm? It's rare to meet a creative genius who is lethargic.

McHugh's Tips for Fostering Creativity in Your Organization

PD-12 ©2017 by John B. McHugh page 2 of 6

- **Ask the Right Questions.** “The uncreative mind can spot wrong answers, but it takes a creative mind to spot a wrong question,” according to Anthony Jay. As the leader you must set the stage by asking questions. Questions need to be asked in order to develop ideas but don’t ask questions with the hidden agenda of killing someone’s idea before it takes shape.
- **Challenge Assumptions.** Make sure every team has a devil’s advocate. Absolute certitude on any subject is a dangerous signal for an organization. All major discoveries started with someone challenging assumptions. (See the section on “Groupthink.”)
- **Be Curious.** Creative people are curious. Lead the way by asking, “I wonder where this will lead?” or “What is behind this thinking?” Bright minds are invariably curious.
- **Remove Barriers.** At the idea formation stage, don’t set up barriers, such as budget, Board approval, or prior unsuccessful efforts. Allow people to ask “dumb” questions, challenge the status quo, and offer bizarre suggestions. If people face a big red light before the creative juices flow, then the output of creative ideas will be nil.
- **Tolerate Conflict.** It is to be expected that educated, bright people will have differing opinions. Most organizations have a couple of people who are at loggerheads on many subjects. Let these people go at it as long as the exchanges are civil and respectful. Conflict can bring clarity and help foster creative dialogue.
- **Have Fun.** “Life is much too important to be taken seriously,” according to Oscar Wilde. It’s OK to joke and have fun once in a while. Groups that have fun and are loose are more creative than somber ones. Laughing tends to change your state of mind which helps you look at things in an unusual way.

BRAINSTORMING

Brainstorming is a method of generating a large number of ideas by withholding judgment until all ideas are thoroughly examined. The theory behind brainstorming is that the right (creative) side of the brain is free to explore new ideas without the left (judgmental) side prematurely criticizing the idea. Brainstorming takes place within the dynamics of a small group.

The ground rules of brainstorming are few and simple. Pose a specific problem for which you require a creative solution. Participants are asked to come up with as many ideas as possible. Participants may not judge any idea that is presented. By criticizing an idea the brain automatically shifts from the creative right side to the judgmental left side. That brain shift quickly puts the brakes on the creative dynamics of the meeting. Let the creative side of the brain do its work.

Brainstorming will yield a rich harvest of ideas for new products and services. People enjoy brainstorming sessions and appreciate it when they are recognized for their contribution. Brainstorming is fun and stimulating. It’s different from the daily routine of an organization. Schedule brainstorming sessions when you can allow enough time for all to participate fully. Rushing through a brainstorming session will not yield the results you’re looking for. As you brainstorm, or participate in any group activity, be aware of the organizational malady known as group think.

GROUPTHINK

“Where all men think alike, no one thinks very much.”
Walter Lippmann

Groupthink is the tendency of groups to conform to group norms and pressure to arrive at the same conclusion. Groupthink can be a serious inhibitor to creativity in addition to being a major contributor to faulty decisions.

Members of the group feel pressure to adhere to group norms. Groups that have an illusion of invulnerability or have members who are intimidated by higher ranking

McHugh's Tips for Fostering Creativity in Your Organization

PD-12 ©2017 by John B. McHugh page 3 of 6

colleagues are subject to groupthink. Group members who all think alike or who are trained in similar disciplines run the risk of becoming insular. Ideas come from individuals, not from groups.

Groupthink allows the organization to avoid dealing with the disruptiveness necessary for creativity. The best way to avoid groupthink is to invite people with different backgrounds to brainstorming meetings. Include a devil's advocate who will challenge the group ideas.

Many faulty decisions are attributed to groupthink. For example, the disastrous wars in Viet Nam and Iraq are prime examples of nefarious groupthink processes. The 1986 Challenger space shuttle failure has been documented as partially caused by a groupthink culture at NASA. Finally, the U.S. auto industry in the 1970s routinely rejected the notion of manufacturing a reliable fuel-efficient small automobile. All the executives in each of the big three agreed they couldn't make a profit on a small car. Japan thought differently.

MANAGEMENT RETREATS

Consider running an annual management retreat. A well-executed retreat will more than pay you back for the time and money invested. Retreats are great places to break down departmental silos and organizational barriers that inhibit growth. To learn more about management retreats, read *PM-4 How to Organize an Executive Retreat: A Vehicle for Managing Change*, 2009, 8 pages.

TAP INTO CUSTOMER SERVICE

Let me put a word in for your customer service (or customer care staff) as an excellent source of creative ideas. First, it is important to understand the vital role of customers to the success of your business.

"The purpose of business is to create a customer" according to the management guru Peter Drucker. Businesses exist to serve customers. Your products exist to satisfy customer needs. The purpose of business is not to make a sale but to create a customer. A customer is someone who has a relationship with your company.

The customer does business with your firm repeatedly. Therefore, in any new product development exploration, be sure to include your customer service people. Customers will not design and develop new products; however, customers will tell you about their needs. Your customer service colleagues have this information. Don't underestimate your customer care people as an excellent source of ideas for new products.

BALANCE BETWEEN CREATIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE

Be sure to balance the creative and administrative in the creative mix. For example, in a publishing company one could categorize as creative the staff in editorial, marketing, art, publicity, etc. Accounting, finance, distribution, customer service, etc. could be categorized as administrative types. You need to understand the full spectrum of creativity in the workplace and bring balance to creative ideas. Successful organizations need the talent of both creative and administrative types to succeed.

HOW TO QUASH CREATIVE THINKING

What is the quickest way for a leader to stifle creativity? Here is my list:

- ***Don't Trust.*** Most of us know the type of executive who needs to check everything the staff is involved in—the micro-manager. A boss who doesn't trust his people will harm morale and ultimately stifle creativity. You must trust people to run with their intuition and to fully develop their ideas.
- ***Question Everything Excessively.*** Ask multiple questions every time one of your people floats an idea. Questions are fine for clarification and concept development, but go easy on questions that are meant to discourage creative thinking rather than foster clarification.
- ***Use a Command and Control Style.*** Require mountains of paperwork and reports. Worry excessively about attendance of your exempt staff. Expect to

McHugh's Tips for Fostering Creativity in Your Organization

PD-12 ©2017 by John B. McHugh page 4 of 6

know what people are doing on a daily basis. View bright, ambitious subordinates as a threat. Hold important information close to the vest and do not share with staff. Command and control styles are used by bosses who do not trust their staff and are probably insecure in their position and job performance. A fixation on control tends to stifle creativity. Creativity is unpredictable, which makes control-oriented executives nervous.

- **Criticize Failure.** Failing is part of learning and ultimately succeeding. People who never fail never try anything. Thomas Edison experimented with thousands of ideas that failed until he found the one idea that worked and resulted in one of his many inventions. In the Siege of Vicksburg, a pivotal battle in the Civil War, General Ulysses S. Grant attempted five assaults on Vicksburg before he could get his army in a position to lay siege to that vital Mississippi River city. President Franklin Roosevelt said in 1932, at the depth of the recession, “The country needs, and unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method, try it. If it fails, admit it frankly, and try another. But above all try something.”
- **Use Killer Phrases.** “Yes, but...” “We tried that before....” “It’s not in the budget.” “Put it in writing.” “Don’t be ridiculous.” “We have always done it this way.” “I’ll get back to you.” All of these phrases are a guaranteed turn-off for your creative colleagues.
- **Foster a Risk-averse Culture.** An executive has the responsibility to prevent the company from undue exposure to risks, and financial risk is always inherent in a new venture. Resources are finite and leaders need to screen risks. However, if avoidance of risk is the norm of your company’s culture, then you risk organizational atrophy.
- **Make Innovative and Nonconformist Thinkers Feel Uncomfortable and Unwelcome.** Mark Twain said, “A man with a new idea is a crank until the idea suc-

ceeds.” Organizations generally frown on iconoclasts. Avoid making creative types feel uncomfortable because of their ideas. All positive change starts with an idea. Respond to your creative employees with sarcastic comments and I guarantee you the flow of ideas will stop in your organization. Your corporate culture will stagnate if it doesn’t welcome nonconformists and iconoclasts.

TIPS FOR ENHANCING YOUR CREATIVITY

How creative are you? Do you nurture your own creativity? Our individual creative ability is like our health; namely, we must take responsibility for it. Here are a few things that work for me.

- **Associate with bright, opinionated people.** Look for colleagues who will stretch your thinking and challenge your assumptions. Hire the smartest people you can find. Do not fear bright, creative subordinates. Hire them and allow them to help you grow.
- **Learn from people with different skill-sets.** I always tried to learn from techies, marketers, accountants, financial managers, and lawyers. All these professionals have a perspective that is valuable. I always look through the eyes of other professionals; for example, ask “How would a marketer look at this situation?” When I was director of programs and publishing at a large association, I used to chat every morning with the CFO to get his perspective on my programs and to get insights into how a CFO/CPA views things.
- **Read fiction.** Fiction is indispensable to the care and feeding of my imagination, I particularly like satire and crime fiction.
- **Write essays.** Writing helps to clarify my thinking and many times the creative process is enhanced as I write. As one writes, one’s thoughts evolve and you can be surprised at where writing will take you in terms of insights and idea creation. As an added bonus, writing is one of the most effective ways to clarify one’s thinking on a subject.

McHugh's Tips for Fostering Creativity in Your Organization

PD-12 ©2017 by John B. McHugh page 5 of 6

- **Read biographies of innovators.** Recent biographies that inspired me were of Thomas Edison, Orville and Wilbur Wright, and John D. Rockefeller.
- **Listen to politicians.** How can you not avoid that given our 24/7 news cycle and oversaturation of cable TV? Watch C-SPAN's coverage of the U.S. Congress. No matter what your political persuasion, you will find most politicians to be creative in distorting reality to serve their ideology and the lobbyists whose interests they represent.
- **Study movie directors.** Movie directors are geniuses at creatively taking a story and magically turning it into a dramatic presentation. Read profiles of directors in magazines like the New Yorker or newspapers such as the New York Times. Watch the Actors' Studio on A&E. Also, on TMC, Robert Osborne will interview directors or host a feature program on famous directors. Listen to interviews with directors on National Public Radio—Terri Gross's Fresh Air regularly interviews directors. Read biographies of famous directors. The biography of Alfred Hitchcock was one I enjoyed.
- **Keep a journal.** Write down your thoughts and observations. Add your interpretation and don't be shy about editorializing.
- **Write down your ideas.** I always carry a small notebook in my breast pocket. When I walk, I sometimes make three or four notes during my jaunt. Sometimes it is a trivial note or other times it could be the nucleus of a great idea. But I know I forget my spontaneous thoughts unless I write them down.
- **Read quotes and aphorisms.** Language is an important vehicle for creativity. When I read books of quotes and aphorisms many ideas come to me. I always enjoyed the quotes from Dorothy Parker and Woody Allen. For something different read Oscar Levant's quotes.
- **Work on changing your perspective.** Look at situations, events, projects—everything—through the eyes of others. Remember that perspective is worth 50 IQ points.
- **Exercise.** I enjoy walking. As I exercise, ideas come to me as insights. You probably experience the same phenomena when you exercise whether you are a runner, swimmer, or perform any sort cardiovascular workout.

CREATIVITY IS WORTH THINKING ABOUT

Leaders would do well to think more about creativity. Nurturing creativity is an important responsibility of leaders. My goal in writing this paper was to stimulate your thinking on this subject and to provide a few suggestions to help you in your leadership role. If you have any thoughts or suggestions, please contact me at jack@johnbmchugh.com.

About John B. McHugh

Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers

John B. "Jack" McHugh is a 40 year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and Media Issues and Practices.

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McHugh's Tips for Fostering Creativity in Your Organization

PD-12 ©2017 by John B. McHugh page 6 of 6

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