

Enabling Creativity and Innovation in Your Organization

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by Steven F. Schulze

Team-building is an art not for the faint of heart. Those of us who have invested time and energy in working to build teams can attest to the struggles we've encountered along the way. Have you ever been in a meeting and heard someone say, "We're not a team; we're only puppets doing the work and taking the heat when it doesn't go right"? How about trying to work with other members who are noncommittal, reluctant to engage in the process and who seem aloof? Worse yet are the bottom-feeders who prefer to "live below the line," entrenched in the organizational pastime of "finger pointing" and "responsibility avoiding" (Conners et al., 1994). These forms of "negative turbulence" can inundate leaders who have good intentions of taking the organization to the next level. To truly engage hearts and minds requires leaders to step out by faith, courage and conviction and be agents of positive change by promoting "positive turbulence" that spawns creativity and innovation in the workplace (Gryskiewicz, 1999). To create a learning environment that gives rise to innovation, organizational leaders must build trust, mutual dependency and authentic relationships. One way to begin the process is to open the conversation by revealing expectations. This article and accompanying work session handouts provide you with an introductory tool for you, as the leader in your organization, to begin the transfusion of creativity into the organization and to remove the same old "been there, done that," "keep it the same" thinking.

The Problem – Why Expectations?

According to Smith and Berg (1987), it is clear that a group can function only if members are able to depend on each other. Mutual dependency allows for successful task accomplishments. Knowledge-creating companies need to make trust and mutual dependency a theme in their policy statements and strategy making. You can start by sharing information on the personal backgrounds of each individual and the experience they bring to your team. Rather than take the risk to push open doors of creativity, leaders can fall prey to what Utterback (1996) refers to as a "wise path of least resistance" which can "create myopia in the ranks of top management" (p. 225). Often, the approach to generate trust has been to maintain an even keel, but people in difficult work settings clam up in meetings and only bring up issues privately.

Seasoned command and control managers are often very "strategy" and "structure" oriented, and therefore, the "systemic illness" within the "cell wall" of the organization blocks receptivity for change and creativity (Gryskiewicz, 1999; Galbraith, 2002). More innovative colleagues will begin with the question fit for those entrenched in day-to-day work, preferring to have systems and roadmaps in place before operating. Others will make excuses when asked to join in or participate, won't open up in meetings, will remain distant and may display an arrogant, know-it-all attitude. Team members wanting to move ahead become frustrated and may vote to remove the obstacle, settle for status quo thinking or find greener pastures to express creativity.

Often, organizations are strapped to react to day-to-day events with little time to be creative, to think or to even reflect on how to improve operations. The result may be to pay big money and have a consultant come in and fix the problems. Without the buy-in from key staff, the result is an exercise in futility, creating more problems than originally intended. Revealing individual expectations to one another can be "turbulent" however, since some may not be interested in building "relationships"—a foundational element in transformational organizations (Von Krogh, 2000).

Solutions – What works well?

To allow employees to become part of the change process, you, as the team leader, can begin by gradually bringing in some positive turbulence to loosen up the group and let go of the controls so team members can feel free to reveal who they are (Utterback, 1996).

To keep individuals from coming at you from all directions and to help infuse creativity into starched, cookie-cutter organizations that have never peered outside the box, recruit a team member, a maverick to act as a wingman. Since “two are better than one,” (Ecclesiastes 4:9) having this support in meetings where new ideas are being presented, helps to facilitate discussions, deflect incoming flack and defer judgment. Personally, I also add a little fuel to rekindle issues smoldering beneath the organizational surface and ask questions such as, “Why?” and “What really Matters?” (Gryskiewicz, 1999; Michalko, 2001). Bringing in a new approach to the routine business plan and injecting some “radical innovation” is necessary to overcome stagnated change processes and cultivate a field for innovative growth (Utterback, 1996). Rather than accept “piecemeal approaches” to the future, using positive turbulence to begin a dialogue can lay the foundation for a cohesive team.

Trying to inject creativity into the workplace without receptivity is like building a house without the foundation – it just won’t stand and endure the harsh elements. This is why it is essential to begin with expectations. If you, as the team leader, are firmly entrenched in historical successes and have no reason to change your thinking, you may also be uncomfortable making radical moves and may prefer to stick with incremental changes. To overcome this, it may be advisable to meet off site away from the distractions of the office, to take a retreat, to regroup, rethink and reenergize. If going off site is not an option, then consider beginning with some thoughts on the importance of trust and dependency to kindle a fire of interest amongst your team members.

Outcomes Expected

Tichy and Devanna (1990) state that innovation may come from “outsiders or deviants,” and cultures requiring “conformity often lack much receptivity to change” (p. 79-81). Expectations are the nutritional supplements needed to make this cell (organization) healthier and should be tried as a prerequisite to launching a creativity session.

One thing leaders may wrestle with in helping transform the organization is getting too close to it. As internal consultants, leaders have a stake in the outcome and must constantly pull back from controlling the flow, avoiding conflict and letting the positive turbulence happen, rather than interfering with the creation process and “shifting the thinking” (Gryskiewicz, 1999). When done this way, the leader’s awareness is keener, allowing him or her to scan the room for light bulbs going off above heads and listening for the “Aha” moment. If leaders get too close (like a moth to a bug zapper), doubt and questions can creep in about one’s impact on the organization. Can I really make a difference? Are they listening? Does anyone get it?

The excitement that colleagues exhibit when they’re allowed to be real, open and honest in disclosing their expectations is uplifting. People see colleagues they have worked with for years in a new light. You’ll hear, “I didn’t know that was important to you.” “That explains a lot about why you do what you do.” “Now I know what makes you tick.” Simply taking time to invest in others creates cohesion, a culture of support and makes everyone feel a part of the process. Showing that you care brings down barriers and helps people connect with a shared purpose. Taking time to listen plants seeds of concern and gives rise to a more caring atmosphere that breeds creativity where people share their vision so others get to know what matters most to them. Ideas can be reframed, bounced off others and innovative creations can bloom. Once implemented, teams need to celebrate accomplishments to further build creativity.

One key to listing expectations is to keep them positive and, like brainstorming, to defer judgment. Even letting the naysayers have their say can build in positive turbulence leading to creativity. Gryskiweicz (1999) states, “Learning to detect weak signals in the distance helps the astute organization to recognize the once unrecognizable” (p. 12). Leaders can use the power in revealed expectations to light a match that illuminates the darkness as well as be “like canaries in a mine shaft” and help avert disaster before it happens (Wells, 2005; Matt. 5:16; and John 15:13).

Starting the knowledge-building process that leads to creativity by introducing an “Expectations Session” can be a bit like David preparing to meet Goliath (I Samuel 17). To most, the task of beginning the culture change seems daunting, but having a few “smooth stones” in your pocket helps. To tackle an organization firmly entrenched in tradition requires a strong faith, quality peers and followers, a leader’s heart, a support network and the Creator of the universe to sustain. I believe one of our greatest obstacles to leading the charge of change and building innovation is the unwillingness to pick up the banner of faith and carry it forward in the face of what appears to be insurmountable barriers. Isn’t it interesting that David didn’t round up numbers of people to confront the Philistine army, but went one-on-one with the spiritually blind leader who was leading the blind (Matthew 15:14).

Today’s business mindset is so technology and infrastructure oriented that we forget it’s the people that really matter. These people are the front-line employees, supervisors, team leaders, managers, superintendents and the directors. Like David, it’s the change leader’s responsibility to gain audience with the executive staff including the director to plant seeds of creativity. Getting there may require the building of a coalition of key leaders, “a cross-functional group” to promote ideas and establish awareness of something positive happening department-wide (Gryskiewicz, 1999). This is similar to what Jesus did walking by the sea selecting fisherman (outsiders) one by one (Matthew 4:18-19).

One key element to teaching others about creativity is to not be overwhelmed by the massive nature of the task. The business world warps our thinking to be in subjection to size, numbers, glitz and prestige of Fortune 500 types. Minimized is the fact that even the largest governmental organizations and corporations are owned and operated by human beings, not machines. Applying a gentler approach and beginning with expectations to promote creativity is similar to the “incremental innovation” described by Utterback (1996). It brings in an aspect of one-on-one attention and care given to the problem source and can yield dramatic results.

Changing the toxic culture of bigger, faster, quicker, flavor of the month fixes means changing the thinking of the people – one person at a time through inspired, “ceaseless incremental innovation.” The way to begin is through expectations (Utterback, 1996). At times, this was the way Jesus transfused life-changing peace into searching, worn out, empty-net souls. Replacing the computers and infrastructure won’t change the culture. Whether you’re the director or the janitor, your attention is toward people. So, to step out by faith and strategically hurl a single smooth stone to the source of the suffering organization, innovation/expectations, must be the first stone in your sling. Throughout this process, however, as change agents, we must remember, Goliath didn’t reject David, he rejected God. “The battle is the Lord’s” (I Samuel 17:47).

Work Session Handouts

Developed from the work of Von Krogh, Ichijo and Nonaka (2000) in their book *Enabling Knowledge Creation*, the following exercises have been modified to build an individualized worksheet for leaders who need to unravel expectations of colleagues. For example, following a creativity session with a group of superintendents, I noticed a gap in their understanding of knowledge enabling and the importance of relationships. This tool proved to be helpful in closing that gap. The process involves a brief discussion of the organization’s principles or values – in this case, those of the Montgomery County, Ohio, Sanitary Engineering Department. This was followed by a brief discussion of trust and dependency and four exercises (tasks) for leaders to reveal their expectations.

Handout 1 [\[Click here to open in PDF\]](#)

Handout 2 [\[Click here to open in PDF\]](#)

Handout 3 [\[Click here to open in PDF\]](#)

Handout 4 [\[Click here to open in PDF\]](#)

About the Author



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