

Overcoming Barriers to Creativity and Innovation:

One county government's strategy for change

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by Wayne Oppel

“The challenge for senior managers in the government sector is to provide incentives and support to call forth more creativity and innovation from their employees,” according to Sanford Borins, Professor of Public Management, University of Toronto, in his book, *The Challenge of Innovating in Government* (2001). Part of that challenge, he says, is to develop a creative and innovative organization and environment that encourages innovation. He sites the lack of financial reward, the political environment, stringent organization controls and public concerns about government as major barriers to creating an innovative organization in the public sector.

Another barrier to creativity and innovation found in many organizations, including my own local county government, is decentralization. Although the strategic decision to physically separate departments, giving them autonomy over their work routine and internal leadership can, in some organizations, work extremely well in spawning freedom and creativity -- in others, it can create huge barriers. According to Michael Michalko, in his book, *Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Business Creativity* (1991), “all human experience is expansive and omnidirectional, including the future. Because future is not linear, you cannot prepare for it with one single plan – so that you can develop future fruits.” It’s not that decentralization blocks creativity – it doesn’t. Rather, some organizations simply need to take into account additional obstacles that may arise from a decentralized structure.

For example, in my local county government, at first glance, decentralization appeared to be a step forward in allowing autonomy within the departments; however, this autonomy created an organization that did not communicate effectively internally. Although there were general guidelines for policy and procedure, department heads had full autonomy in the operation of his or her department, and communication with the county manager was spotty at best. This unfortunately reinforced the barrier between the departments and senior leadership.

To assist the county government with determining the best course of action, I conducted a three-hour brainstorming session with department heads using Michalko’s “ThinkPak” (1994) card system. Designed to break the normal and habitual way of thinking, and to explore new ideas and old ideas in a new way, “ThinkPak” helped us discover the primary strategic barrier, which was lack of communication between 1) department heads and their employees and 2) departments and the county manager. The result of this barrier, as determined in the brainstorming session, was apathy, high employee turnover and high absenteeism among hourly employees.

Decentralization works well to improve work-flow and decision making; however, department heads had not seen the need or concern to involve their employees in the process. Instead, the lack of communication and involvement created layers of negativity and low self-esteem among their employees that seemed to smother

the human spirit. Self-esteem is sunlight for the human spirit, as the sun is to plants. Without it, both will wither and die.

Creativity was not encouraged nor, in some cases, required as part of daily job performance. Creativity in the workplace can express itself through fresh thinking, seeing things in new ways and acting on new ideas. Expressing creativity is living the passion, being an artist in all areas of life and making life a work of art – even work.

The cost to the county has been tremendous due to the loss of man hours (1,162 hours for 2004) and the hiring and training of new personnel to fill existing positions after 19 hourly employees and two department heads resigned and took positions with surrounding county governments. This loss of employees equates to a loss of 62 years of collective experience, productivity, job performance and customer satisfaction, which is much more costly than any dollar amount.

So, how do we remove this barrier?

Several recommendations came out of the brainstorming session.

1. Create a committee led by the Human Resource Department to address employee concerns.
2. Create an employee training and creativity forum for department-wide brainstorming sessions and training opportunities for employees, expanding employee awareness of organization-wide operations.
3. Establish a formal recognition system for job performance and beneficial suggestions and an award system for creativity and innovation by employees, including a provision for a bi-annual brainstorming session by department, to revisit and discuss problems, concerns and generate creative ideas and innovative solutions.

August 2002's edition of the "Harvard Business Review" (HBR) was devoted entirely to innovation. Of particular interest to the HBR editors was the ability and will of organizations that had been able to sustain creativity and innovation throughout the organization over many years. Those organizations have programs that promote creativity and innovation and liberate the creative resources that are available to them through their employees. These organizations are reporting a number of associated benefits such as:

- Employees who are more committed and better aligned with company objectives.
- Improved employee moral and staff retention.
- Cost savings and a reduction in waste.
- A safer working environment.

Ethicon, Inc., a Johnson & Johnson Company has made a significant commitment to recognition of their employees. "Our organization is very aware of how important the human spirit is to the success of our business." Said Donald Bowers, director of public affairs at Ethicon, the world's leader in surgery solutions. "And one of the ways to touch the human spirit is to recognize it – whether we take the time to recognize people with an award, a pat on the back, or with a letter – we are telling all of our associates how important they are to our enterprise."

4. Senior leadership should use the following procedures, as set forth in Professor Borins' book, *"The Challenge of Innovating in Government,"* for recognizing and rewarding individual and group innovators and for creating innovative organizations.
 - **Support from the top.** Organizations succeed when leadership encourages innovation from all levels of the organization. When senior leadership communicates and articulates the organization's mission and reinforces their commitment to innovation, they empower their

employees, giving them the scope to experiment with new ideas and helping them draw the connection between similar innovations and the current needs of the organization.

- **Reward innovative employees.** Support innovation by rewarding the employee who develops successful innovations via creative ideas. Using group incentive awards in addition to achievement awards to recognize groups or individuals for implementing cost-saving ideas will evoke entrepreneurial spirit, which in turn will heighten energy and push the creativity of the human spirit.
- **Embrace diversity.** Seek employees from different backgrounds and organizational levels to use their skills and experience to solve problems. Sometimes innovation will come from frontline employees who have an intimate knowledge of the work process and who are often best able to create solutions. The American Red Cross Corporate Diversity statement, reads, “Great achievements are not born from a single vision but from the combination of many distinctive viewpoints.” This diversity of people within an organization is what cultivates imagination, initiative and energy of the human spirit to make a great organization even greater.
- **Learn from the outside.** Seek out and benchmark best practices from the private as well as the public sectors by bringing in outside experts, consultants, facilitators and by participating in professional networks. It is also important that senior leadership supports and encourages learning. Employees should be encouraged to attend internal and external seminars, workshops and conferences to build creative knowledge.
- **Experiment and evaluate.** Innovation often involves failures as well as successes. When failures occur, senior leadership should be quick to recognize them, learn from the mistakes and make corrections while looking for creativity and innovation. On the other hand, when experimentation leads to success, senior leadership should give innovation awards for creative ideas that become innovations.

Research conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers in a 1990’s innovation survey has shown that sustained, effective deployment of creativity in any organization requires, first and foremost, commitment from the leadership supported by a strategy that engenders new ways of thinking across all parts of the organization’s culture and structure.

The county government has the opportunity to take this as a challenge to change established attitudes and patterns of behavior. Management can take the lead in modeling new patterns of behavior that will encourage others to believe that it’s no longer a waste of time to think creatively, even though this will mean breaking some of the rules and conventions that have become barriers to creativity in the organization. Stepping outside of the cultural norms can be a bit scary, but there are those in the organization who will share the desire to become more creative and who may also be willing to share the risk.

Organizations have a tendency, as we have seen here with the local county government, to be left-brain dependent, relying on logic, reason and rationality. But, by allowing the creative energy of right-brain thinking to express itself more easily, they will begin to experience a flow of latent creative ideas that has the potential to transform the organization.

Michalko, in his book, *Cracking Creativity: The Secret of Creative Genius* (2001) states that “Seeing what no one else is seeing – when you look at problems using several perspectives instead of one stabilized view, you bring forth a new understanding of the possibilities.”

Building an organization that makes a governing commitment to grace and truth will provide the freedom for workers to make mistakes and grow with an accountability that will accelerate change in people in the workplace. It is the responsibility of the organization and its leadership to provide such an environment.

Imagination is a priceless asset that enables each and every one of us the ability to envision a better, new or different outcome. And it is this potential that organizations need to stimulate and foster among all of their employees, sooner rather than later, if they're going to develop and grow.

About the Author

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