



## **Creativity Produces Revival: Reviving Stagnant Organizations Using Creativity**

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### **Abstract**

Creativity plays a critical role in the ability of organizations to thrive long-term. Companies which do not acknowledge its importance experience great difficulty managing change and adapting during times of change. Rapid advances in technology and stakeholder proclivities can cause uncreative organizations to become stagnant and eventually die. Leaders can orchestrate revivals, however, with the reintroduction of creativity into organizations. To accomplish this, they should ensure that the organization's structures and systems are conducive to creative processes, model creative behavior, and encourage ongoing creative activity. In doing so, leaders produce thriving, competitive organizations which are adept at creative thinking, nimble in times of crisis, and which have continuous, robust pipelines of creative ideas from which to draw.

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The phrases "Be creative" and "Think outside the box" have been used in organizations so much, they hardly have real meaning anymore. Organizations *want* their employees to be creative and innovative, but, often, leaders fail to do what's necessary to foster true creativity and innovation. Creativity, as defined by Gary Oster in *The Light Prize*, is unfettered play. It is the ability to toy with a challenge, problem, or perceived opportunity, contemplating it from various points of view to come up with a solution. The service or product that results from creativity, and which positively impacts the organization's bottom line or standing in the industry, is called innovation.

Creativity and innovation are the essential factors at play when an organization is birthed since its very existence is the result of an idea that was implemented to provide a solution to an existing challenge or problem. The two factors become no less salient to the organization over time. In fact, they play a critical role in the ongoing survival and prosperity of organizations. Without them, organizations fail, falling victim to their competitors or changes in the industrial landscape. There is hope, however. The introduction of creativity into a dying organization can give it better chances of surviving and thriving.

### **Without Creativity, Organizations Perish**

When organizations become stagnant, the cause may not be laziness or incompetence on the part of leaders. Rather, the decline may occur because leaders have either forgotten the importance of creativity or they have become accustomed to success. Both ways of thinking are dangerous to the survival of organizations. Leaders of uncreative organizations are only able to focus on routine production and the current state of the organization. They are generally able to get employees to complete daily tasks successfully, but they encounter frustration from employees when pressing them to reach organizational goals. While the organization may be able to function *in situ*, leaders are unable to find ways to cause it to grow and move forward. The lack of creativity in organizations leaves leaders and followers with little recourse for discovering new ways to achieve the vision of the organization beyond doing what has always been done.

Organizations that have historically enjoyed success can also suffer from lack of creativity. Since it is the habit of the organization to succeed, its leaders lack the proper resources upon which they can rely when the organization ceases doing so. Having not consistently flexed their creative muscles, leaders of historically successful organizations are caught unaware by and are unable to recover from crises and disruptive technologies, and they are unable to successfully navigate organizations through times of uncertainty. They find themselves puzzled as to why the solutions they have previously employed are ineffective, and they find it challenging to come up with ways to achieve the organizational success they have always known. Expert Edgar Schein advises that followers of historically successful organizations are simply unable to conceive the possibility that the organization could fail; they perceive that what has been will always be. When the organization does begin to fail, however, leaders' and followers' deeply held beliefs about the organization are shattered, and they are left not knowing what to do.

The creative ruts that organizations experience start at the top and trickle down throughout the organization. A general lack of excitement becomes pervasive in the organization, and as a result, the organization takes on a culture of complacency. Followers find themselves less satisfied and less committed to work, and eventually, leaders notice that followers are only doing just enough to get through the workday. Followers lose passion for their work, they no longer seek to go above and beyond for the organization, and they stop contributing new ideas for completing tasks or achieving organizational goals.

This lack of new, creative ideas causes followers to become disconnected from the vision of the organization, resulting from the perception that their only purpose in the organization is to produce. They leave the attainment of the organization's goals to the "higher-ups," and they begin to believe that they have little or no influence on the progress of the organization. This shift in organizational expedites the downfall of many organizations because the lackadaisical approach to its operations causes the organization to become sluggish and unable to respond to changing times and circumstances.

Without creativity, an organization simply cannot keep up with its peers and competitors, and it will certainly never excel among them. As the organization falls increasingly behind in technology, leaders find themselves struggling to understand the rapidly changing advancements that are profiting other organizations, but which are foreign to theirs altogether. This handicap leaves the organization with an inability to grow and ultimately causes its death.

Leaders whose organizations have lost creativity often wonder why leading has become so difficult. Followers are uninspired, and goals are increasingly difficult to reach. Despite a powerful organizational mission and an impactful vision for the organization, leaders find it hard to achieve the results they expect and desire. They may consult various professionals and resources which are meant to facilitate change, but nothing seems to give the organization the push it needs to return to the success it once had. Without environments that facilitate creativity and innovation, however, organizations will struggle, and their leaders will become increasingly frustrated.

### **Creativity Breathes Life Into Organizations**

While the approach to creativity and innovation may differ between countries and regions, its importance remains constant. Whether generated from the creative individual or the collective, organizations must be able to consistently tap into ideas that will allow them to remain relevant and competitive. Effective, creative leaders around the world acknowledge and understand that creativity describes a collection of processes in which anyone can engage, given the opportunity, direction, time, and support. Ultimately, creativity in organizations results in people doing new things in new ways to add value to the organization and enhance the lives of those who contribute to the organization creatively.

Creativity is often leaned upon when there is an organizational problem or when a change is required for survival. It can and should be employed, however, as a salient part of an organization's evolution and growth, as it makes significant contributions to individuals, organizations, and society. An important driver of organizational progress, creativity is a useful tool in developing innovative solutions which result in productive changes for organizations.

Creativity allows organizations to go beyond simply reaching their goals. While it definitely gives organizations a competitive advantage, it benefits the followers who comprise them, as well. As followers are encouraged to contribute their ideas to the organization, they become more connected to the accomplishment of the organization's vision and goals, and they perceive that they have ownership of the organization's success. This perception motivates and inspires followers to regularly consider challenges in the organization and devise solutions.

The value leaders place upon the constant generation and discussion of new ideas allows organizations to be flexible in their thinking and agile when it comes to problem-solving. Moreover, as followers become increasingly comfortable with discussing their thoughts, organizations are able to generate pools of new ideas from which to draw. As a result, organizations are constantly refreshed with new ways to attain their visions and serve their stakeholders.

Organizations with creative cultures benefit from increased follower cohesiveness and a closer alignment of followers' values with those of the organization. Collaboration and cooperation are also improved, as followers become increasingly accustomed to discussing their ideas and knowing that they will be taken seriously, even if their ideas never leave the discussion phase. Followers are also more likely to take risks in creative organizations because they are given the latitude to experiment and try new things. Their ways of thinking are constantly being expanded, making them more receptive to others' ideas and able to easily transition into a creative mode when the company needs to change.

### **Revival through Creativity**

Leaders heavily influence the level of creativity of organizations; the more creative leaders are, the more likely they are to encourage others to create, learn, and evolve. Creative leaders value the time that is required to think about organizational challenges and generate ideas to address those issues, and they effectively communicate this value, as they allow followers to do the same. Providing employees the time to think creatively is an important factor in reviving failing organizations and on the continuous growth of successful ones. Leaders who agree are able to tap into the imaginations of their followers, allowing them to truly think outside-the-box.

In his book, *Bigger, Faster Leadership*, Dr. Samuel Chand notes that leaders must make deliberate changes in organizational structures, cultures, and processes of failing organizations to transform them into creative and productive ones. These changes make creativity and innovation possible by allowing followers to perceive the freedom to experiment and learn as they pursue solutions to organizational challenges and conceptualize new products and services. There are specific steps that leaders can take to facilitate such creativity in organizations: ensure that the organization's structures and systems are conducive to creative processes, model creative behavior, and encourage ongoing creative activity.

**Structure and Systems Must Facilitate Creativity**

Sustained organizational creativity does not happen accidentally. It is the result of leaders' deliberate efforts aimed at allowing the various viewpoints, disciplines, and functions within the organization to flow freely, resulting in inter-organizational inspiration and collaboration. It also stems from their ability to harness and steer organizational thinking in ways that keep followers' creativity aligned with the organization's strategic goals. By providing structure and context to organizational creativity, leaders ensure that followers are helping the organization move forward along its strategic path over the long term. Additionally, Chand notes, organizations with systems and structures that foster creativity permit followers to combine skills, resources, and experiences to produce impactful ideas, while encouraging discourse within and between groups in the organization.

Systems and structures turn creativity into innovation when organizational creativity is aligned with strategy and the industrial landscape. To accomplish this, leaders must provide the direction and support necessary to set the pace for and encourage creativity and innovation. Effective, creative leaders determine the amount of focus that is placed on creativity in organizations, and they are able to help followers attain a balance between creativity and productivity. This keeps organizations from becoming creatively chaotic, resulting from too many ideas and not enough implementation. With systems and structures in place to promote creativity, organizations can take advantage of countless opportunities to make incremental innovations that will keep them progressing and at the forefront of their industries.

To determine whether an organization's structure and systems allow for creativity, leaders should assess their organization's level of flexibility. Since rigid, hierarchical structures can often be prohibitive of creativity, leaders should review whether followers perceive that they can work with others in the organization to generate new ideas and that those ideas will receive some level of serious attention. They should also determine whether followers feel that they have the leeway to experiment and learn from failure. A keen understanding of senior leaders' reactions when a follower takes a risk and tries something new will provide helpful insight regarding the extent to which creativity is tolerated and able to flow freely in the organization. By assessing the organization's current propensity for creativity, leaders are able to identify ways to help the organization to become more creative, and they are able to make the necessary structural and systematic changes that will be impactful for the organization.

**Model Creativity for Followers**

Systems and strategy are not enough to foster creative organizations alone. Leaders must also demonstrate to followers that they value creativity through their actions. They must personally challenge complacency and admonish followers to excel in their performance. Creative leaders understand that creative processes are social. This means that a creative spirit, fostered by the leader, has the ability to permeate the entire organization.

Creative leaders value differing viewpoints, and they see new ideas as opportunities for organizational success, rather than as threats to their personal position. Through their willingness to interact with and listen to others, they demonstrate the importance of inclusion and the placement of high value on others' contributions to the organization. By showing appreciation for others' viewpoints and differences, leaders create environments in which followers feel psychologically safe enough to share their thoughts and ideas.

Leaders also model creative behaviors by contributing their own ideas and allowing followers to provide honest feedback. Not only does this serve to steer creative conversations in specific ways, it also furthers the notion that the organization is a safe space to engage in meaningful dialogues, including criticism. Honest leader-follower conversations convey the norms that the leader finds acceptable in a creative environment, and they result in followers making their own contributions.

Creative leaders model creative behaviors by paying attention to others, demonstrating their value of others' personal experiences, and by telling their own stories. In paying attention to others, leaders learn to hear what others are saying, as well as what is not being verbalized. They are also able to discern when followers are uneasy about sharing their own thoughts, and they are able to decrease followers' apprehensions and encourage sharing. When leaders value the personal experiences of others, they demonstrate their appreciation for varying perspectives, and they reinforce the idea that great insights can be gained when individuals contribute their ideas from their own personal vantage point. Once shared, these experiences can make significant contributions to the organization's creative dynamic, and offer fresh perspectives when it comes to managing challenges and solving problems. By telling their own stories, leaders offer followers transparency – that is, they allow followers to understand how they think, and they give followers insight into the leaders' experiences with creativity, both good and bad. Leaders should not be afraid to share with followers in this way since it is another means by which followers are able to determine the value that leaders place on creativity, trial, and error. Knowing that the leader has tried, failed, and tried again goes a long way to help followers perceive that they are free to do the same.

### **Encourage Creative Processes**

The climate of creative organizations encourages everyone to think differently and work in new ways. Leaders must help followers see the importance of using their imaginations and picturing desirable future states. Leaders do this by consistently communicating the vision of the organization and by articulating the importance of creativity throughout the organization. They set the pace for creativity by providing the direction, support, and encouragement sufficient to convey to followers that creativity is valued in the organization. Leaders must discard the notion that periodic brainstorming sessions are adequate opportunities for real organizational creativity. To be truly creative, leaders must make an ongoing effort to give individuals the proper tools and environments, rather than always expecting followers to be creative on the spot.

Organizations which value creativity actively support it through the allocation of funds, materials, facilities, knowledge, and money which can motivate followers and give them increased confidence. When followers feel that they are supported in risk-taking and when they feel comfortable openly discussing ideas, organizations experience an increase in creative behaviors. The encouragement of cross-functional work teams, as well as rewards and recognition for creative activities, further facilitates the flow of new ideas throughout the organization.

Leaders also encourage creative processes by giving individuals and groups time and physical space to think. By allowing time to be set aside for creative thinking and discussion, leaders give followers the freedom to explore alternatives and ponder new ways to bring value to the organization. This creative practice allows followers to birth ideas, refine them with colleagues, and present them to senior leaders as possible innovations for the organization. Being so empowered, followers take ownership of their collective creative ideas, and they are more likely to be supportive and cooperative of each other and the organization when it is time to transition ideas from concept to reality.

## **Conclusion**

Creativity is essential if an organization intends to keep up with changing times, stakeholder proclivities, and new technologies. In its absence, organizations become stuck in old ways and fall victim to the status quo. As their industrial landscapes continue to progress and evolve, uncreative organizations are left behind, and they eventually die. Leaders who fail to recognize the importance of creativity breed organizational attitudes that fear new ideas and reject change. With creativity, however, leaders are able to initiate or promote the forward motion of organizations, and they help organizations welcome the many possibilities that can result from new ideas and change.

Organizations that have become stagnant can be revived through creativity. Leaders simply need to take intentional steps to spark and maintain creative organizational cultures. They can accomplish this by ensuring that the organization's structure and systems are conducive to creative thinking and organizational flexibility, by modeling behaviors and attitudes that demonstrate leaders' high value of creativity, and by supporting and encouraging creative processes throughout the organization.

Creativity produces innovation, which benefits organizations and individuals. Leaders who are able to inspire and harness followers' creativity ensure that the organization has a continuous stream of ideas flowing into the organization, they improve followers' commitment to the organization and its goals, and they witness increased levels of satisfaction, ownership, and loyalty among the organization's followers. Applied effectively, organizational creativity gives followers opportunities to operate at their best and allows organizations to progress and prosper.

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