

Hurdling Creativity Barriers:

A top-down approach for encouraging innovation in the workplace

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by David L. Gibson

There is a point in the life of every organization when change becomes imperative. Not change for the sake of change, but for the very survival of the organization. A changing political environment, mission requirements, technological advances, personnel considerations and a host of other factors can necessitate or exact change. The organization that does not view change as being inevitable, embracing and leading it, is destined for demise, marginalization, failure and eventually extinction (Kotter, 1996; Bennis, 2000).

Barriers to creativity and innovation must be identified and removed to eliminate blockages to potential inventiveness, thus enabling “group genius” (Roberts, 1997) and “awakening the collaborative spirit” of the organization (Michalko, 2001). Breaking the barriers to creativity and innovation is essentially changing “what one believes and how one behaves” (Sridhar, 2004).

Recognize the Barriers

Case in point, the organization in which I work, has evidenced the following barriers to creativity:

- Fear
- Poor leadership and commitment to innovation
- Bureaucratic policies and red tape
- Silos and turfs
- Pressure to produce immediate results
- Personal biases: beliefs, attitudes and values

Fear.

Fear is the number one barrier to creativity and innovation identified by most of my colleagues within the organization. Fear of failure. Fear of ridicule. Fear of decision-making. Fear of making mistakes. Fear of taking risks. Fear of not being promoted. Fear of change. Fear of senior leadership. Fear of the unknown.

Fear keeps a person from exploring new ways and enjoying an investigative mindset where failure can be expected and is welcomed as a source of new information and learning. Creativity and innovation are positively associated with joy and love, while negatively associated with fear, anger and anxiety (Breen, 2004). Young employees learn very quickly that in some organizations, you don't have to raise your head very high above the ridgeline before it will get it shot off by senior leadership.

Poor leadership and commitment to innovation.

If an employee is not given time or encouragement to be creative and innovative, it can almost certainly be guaranteed that new projects and new mechanisms for their delivery will not be born. Nothing new will happen. Much depends and hinges on how senior leadership demonstrates their commitment to creativity and innovation (Sridhar, 2004). Too often, the atmosphere becomes poisoned by criticism that fosters insecurity,

anger and personal agendas with very little consensus building, collaboration or fun. Senior leadership sometimes fails to realize that what they say and do in this context is more powerful than any speech or policy they may make.

As a leader, how do you respond to new ideas? What is your reaction to ideas that may not have occurred to you? Are you willing to let other people get the recognition and reward for creativity and innovation? Do you really have a passion for doing the job in new and imaginative ways? Are you willing to change personally to make this happen? Are you willing to put your neck on the line to protect an employee who shows inventiveness and initiative? Are you willing to obligate funding to support creativity and innovation? Do you prefer to judge ideas rather than encourage them or generate them yourself?

Bureaucracy, policies and red tape.

Bureaucracy, age-old policies and needless red tape can stifle new thinking and fresh approaches. They promote the status quo as the safest response to change, and therefore affect the ability to respond to new information and challenges by devising new responses and procedures (Gryskiewicz, 1999). An organization's mind-set, culture and procedures can smother inventiveness to the point that fewer and fewer ideas come forward as the creative mind gives up on navigating bureaucratic obstacles and numerous standard operating procedures (Kelly, 2001).

Silos and Turfs.

Individual fiefdoms and acquisition of power can prevent collaboration and experimentation, especially if it involves new ways of working. There is unwillingness on the part of some leaders to share power, responsibility and reward. Empowerment of others becomes more lip service and there is "no intellectual acceptance of the benefits of creativity" and innovation. Intrinsically, those at the top do not believe creativity and innovation will help the organization or they doubt if it is really needed (Sridhar, 2004).

In theory, the organization for which I work encourages middle-management to delegate authority and empower subordinates to think out of the box. But in reality, they reject that practice and foster a system that rewards a senior leader's micromanagement at the cost of disempowering and stifling the creativity, innovation and individual initiative of their followers (Abrashoff, 2002).

Pressure to produce immediate results.

The unrelenting pressure to produce results immediately, as if there is no tomorrow, often leads to the tyranny of the "either or." Either be creative and innovative or be productive, producing results. Creativity and innovation are not seen as being relevant unless they can be "summoned on demand and produce short-term results" (Sridhar, 2004). People are most creative when they are motivated primarily by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction and challenge of the work itself (intrinsic motivators) (Amabile, 2001). Creativity and innovation cannot be ordered. It must be inspired and groomed. It takes time and it must flow from a relaxed atmosphere accentuated with fun.

Personal biases: Beliefs, attitudes and values

Each employee brings a mix of biases from their own belief system or background. This often times leads to a lack of collaboration, disproportionate personal ambition and, in a worse case scenario, sabotage of coworkers' efforts and the slandering of their reputations. These biases are subversive and dangerous in that personal motivation and ambition is colored and warped, hindering one's ability to see things differently. Issues tend to be viewed myopically, creating tunnel vision that fails to see a bigger picture outside of one's biases (Bennis, 1989).

Unleash the creative and innovative capital within your employees.

"Imagination is a priceless asset that enables an organization to envision better, new and different outcomes." It's this latent potential that an organization must stimulate and foster if it is going to "develop and grow, rather than stagnate and disappear" (Lincoln, 2004). In short, the right climate is needed for creativity and innovation to flourish within an organizational culture and system whose relevance – and future – is clearly in question.

How can an organization create a climate for creativity and innovation? How can the organization, as a whole, be creative? The key is the human mind. It must be stimulated, excited and nurtured to produce creative

thinking. Equally, the mind must be free of creativity and innovation barriers that encumber and impede its ability to fully capitalize on the enormous potential within its grasp that now lies dormant. Unleash your organization's creativity by incorporating the following guidelines:

Establish a working definition for creativity and innovation.

There are many definitions of creativity, but for the purposes of consistency and continuity, creativity would be defined as “seeing what everyone else has seen, but thinking what no one else has thought.” Creativity is about the generation of ideas. The quality and/or quantity of the idea(s) is not the issue (Lincoln, 2004). The essence of creativity is to get people to develop ideas, for out of this flow of new ideas comes great innovations for change.

Innovation would be defined as the process of designing and implementing new ideas. It's possible to have hundreds of creative ideas, but they can only be termed “an innovation” once they've been successfully implemented (Lincoln, 2004). Given the opportunity to freely express them, leaders, followers and stakeholders generate ideas that can lead to innovations that will benefit the organization.

Passionately promote an atmosphere within the organization where ideas are valued, considered and, whenever possible, implemented.

Over time, this would infuse the organization with a trust, passion and vision for creativity and innovation. Senior leadership must empower all leaders, followers and stakeholders to be creative, setting them free to create while also establishing new structures that reward and encourage new ways of thinking and doing. Time for thinking and being creative must be built into the work schedule. It's not enough to promote an atmosphere of creativity and innovation and then expect employees to do nothing but work. Creativity and innovation must be seen and prized as a part of an employee's responsibilities.

Establish innovative metrics that measure the creative and innovative capacity of the organization.

What gets measured in the organization gets done! If it is also rewarded, then it is even more likely to get done!

Change your attitude toward creativity and innovation.

You must provide leadership and set a positive tone at the top. In most settings, ideas are born drowning, already at risk of dying, and leadership can either stretch out a helping hand to innovative ideas or look the other way. Don't allow ideas to be “still born” for lack of metrics (Abrashoff, 2002). When senior leadership becomes creativity and innovation's biggest cheerleader, the fear expressed by so many employees will begin to dissipate as they begin to see that new ideas and insight will not be criticized or ignored, but will genuinely be considered and implemented when possible. See yourself as a leader who clears the way for creativity and innovation rather than one who simply maintains the status quo. Infuse within your organization an attitude that it's ok to have fun!

Make creativity and innovation an integral part of all strategies and policies.

Ongoing creative thinking and innovation should be strategically programmed into every meeting in which your staff participates. Ask “How many different ways can we look at this issue or problem,” instead of the proverbial “What have we been taught by someone else regarding how to solve this” (Michalko, 2001). Define broad parameters in which your team is allowed to operate, and then get out of the way. This, in itself allows for true creativity and innovation rather than a regurgitation of what the team thinks the leader wants.

Give your employees the tools and the training needed for unlocking creativity and innovation.

People and learning are fundamental. Courses that provide a few creative tools to a few employees will not ensure that creativity will magically flourish within the entire organization. These opportunities must be available to all employees. In addition to the training, provide a supportive climate that encourages creativity and innovation.

No additional financial resources available for professional development? Consider redirecting existing training funds or develop a “how to” training and development workshop. Use current in-house training departments or programs to solicit creative and innovative ideas concerning pending or breaking issues within the organization. This can be done through brainstorming sessions or any other procedure for

encouraging creativity, such as mind mapping, theme mapping, making combinations, connecting the unconnected, etc.

Establish a mechanism for the flow of creative ideas up and down the chain of command; a pipeline for the free flow of ideas between leaders and followers.

This mechanism allows for a systematic process that incorporates lateral thinking, which in turn speeds up or expands potential ideas that flow from creativity to innovation, providing the organization with an effective means of keeping one eye on the present and the other eye on the future. It tracks promising ideas, while simultaneously spotting emerging trends throughout the organization as it continues to operate in an ever expanding and changing global setting. This will help to turn the most innovative and provocative ideas into reality, while keeping the organization on the cutting edge of innovative business practices and delivery well into the future.

Promote and expect an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation.

Organizations are comprised of diverse beliefs, backgrounds, attitudes and values, which drive behavior. These range from individuals who believe "old dogs can't learn new tricks" to those who are closed to opposing viewpoints, to those who are willing to cooperate without compromising their beliefs or values. Therefore, promote and expect an atmosphere where collaboration and cooperation is central to the life of your organization. While there will be some who will refuse to be a part of any creativity and innovation processes, the will of the few should not drive the creativity mechanisms within the organization.

Avoid the "quick fix" trap.

Most organizations will acknowledge their need to be more creative, and many will be tempted to pursue the "quick fix" option. Some will, no doubt, claim that they're satisfied with the degree of success found in the status quo, while failing to realize the long-term benefits of developing a strategy that will ensure an ongoing focus on creativity and innovation to sustain their competitive edge and their very existence. Will your organization fall into such a trap?

If your organization is to leverage its creative might to help meet the challenges of remaining a viable and vibrant force within this changing structure, it must first remove the barriers to creativity and innovation that encumber and hinder ideas for new and cutting edge organizational practices. By removing these barriers, your organization will be free to search for opportunities through innovative methods for change, growth and improvement. In this day and time where change is the only constant, *what* we do is important, but *how* we do it is even more important!

If you truly want your organization to make a difference in this world and in the marketplace, then be vigilant in scanning the horizon for new and creative models for doing business. Invite your employees to create new initiatives that provide positive turning points in the lives of consumers and the organization. When more attention is given to the untested and untried and less attention is spent on the routine and status quo, this climate can happen (Kouzes & Posner, 2004). When such creativity is embraced, the key questions become "What's new? What's next? What's better?"

About the Author



CDR Dave Gibson is a U.S. Navy Chaplain presently serving in Pensacola, FL. He has had assignments with the U.S. Marine Corps and the U.S. Coast Guard. Dave completed a B.S. from Lee University, and an M.Div. from the Church of God Theological Seminary, both in Cleveland, TN. He is currently completing the third year of a doctor in strategic leadership degree at Regent University's School of Leadership Studies. He may be contacted through e-mail at dtgibson@juno.com

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