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Inspiring Creativity & Innovation

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Are you an artist? Do you design furniture or jewellery? Are you in the music business? These are all questions you might be asked, if you say you are in a creative business. Often, we think that only those who produce work such as art or music are creative, but all of us can be creative in our roles. This month, we explore what it means to be creative and how you can increase innovative thinking in your organization.

Defining Creativity & Innovation

Before we can cultivate greater creativity and innovation in our organizations, we need to be able to define it within a business context.

A useful definition of creativity is: The production of novel and useful ideas or solutions.

Innovation is often used to indicate change, and includes developing new creative processes, establishing strategies and using different business models.

Given these definitions, it's easier to imagine how we can be creative and innovative in various types of roles. Finding a cost cutting measure is a creative solution. Applying a proven business model in one line of business to solve challenges in another part of the business is innovative. Looking at challenges differently and re-framing obstacles by seeking input and points of view from a wide range of perspectives inspires creative problem solving. Before we can cultivate greater creativity and innovation in our organizations, we need to be able to define it within a business context.

Barriers to Being Creative

There are often individual and systemic barriers to creativity within an organization. At an individual level, you might not believe you are creative and therefore don't give yourself permission to think outside-the-box or challenge your own assumptions. Sometimes when we are too focused on logical thinking, we don't allow ourselves to freely imagine how a situation could be different. In addition, if we possess a fear of making a mistake or being wrong, then we are much less likely to be open to creative thinking techniques or novel ideas.

At an organizational level, barriers exist when there are strong silos across the organization and cross-functional collaboration doesn't occur. In addition, strictly enforcing rules can inhibit creativity by sending the message to employees that new ideas aren't welcome.

The Role Leaders Play

Workplace research has found that the main drivers to creativity are the behaviours and attitudes of leaders. Leaders who have an informal management style tend to put employees at ease and, thus, encourage the sharing of new ideas. In order to create a culture of innovation, leaders should do everything possible to clear hurdles for employees and provide a vision for how new, creative ideas can be used to increase organizational performance.

Positive leadership behaviours that show support for creativity include:

- Clearing obstacles or situations
- Socializing informally
- Updating employees on pertinent information
- Sharing information on a personal level
- Setting vision without interfering
- Offering helpful and positive feedback
- Recognizing good work in front of other employees
- Soliciting ideas from employees

Negative leadership behaviours that do not show support for creativity include:

- Pressuring employees with looming deadlines
- Assigning tasks that do not fit the talents of the individuals
- Not setting the appropriate vision or goals
- Setting conflicting goals
- Monitoring work too closely
- Offering unhelpful and negative feedback
- Not paying attention to employees' ideas

According to a recent study on creativity, it was found that setting expectations can be a way to motivate employees to think and behave in a particular way. The study suggests that leaders' expectations for creative work contributed to the likelihood of employees engaging in creative activities. Additionally, the data revealed that employees with a higher belief in their own abilities for creativity had a higher expectancy to participate in creative work behaviours. To encourage creative actions, leaders should be trained on how to effectively communicate their expectations for creativity to employees. Furthermore, leaders should also develop employees' beliefs in their creative abilities by encouraging them to use creative thinking techniques when solving organizational challenges.

Generational Considerations

Our Generational Advisory Council provided us insights into their experiences as it relates to creativity and innovation. 50% of Gen Xers and Gen Ys described themselves as creative, with 42% of Baby Boomers strongly agreeing they are creative.

At an organizational level, Baby Boomers were significantly more likely (57%) to rate their employer as creative and innovative, compared to Gen Xers or Gen Ys . Interestingly, Boomers also felt their colleagues were quick to adapt to changes (29%), while the majority %? of Gen Xers and Gen Ys felt their team members were only somewhat adaptable. This may be due to the fact that when Gen Xers and Ys work in multigenerational teams, they may perceive their more experienced colleagues, who focus on rules and processes, as less likely to adopt new changes.

More than half of all respondents indicated that their senior leaders are open and encouraging towards employees who express new ideas, which is likely to encourage employees to voice their opinions and thoughts. A whopping 83% of Gen Ys said they take initiative to share their creative ideas with their manager, which isn't surprising to anyone who has worked with a group of Gen Ys. This cohort is well known for their desire and willingness to voice their opinions and thoughts.

Leaders that create a collaborative team environment and support creative thinking practices are more likely to encourage employees of all generations to challenge the status quo and offer up new ideas. An area for development, however, is in supporting the creative process. This includes time to brainstorm new thoughts, training on how to apply creative thinking techniques, and collaborative activities with varied employee groups. Our GAC results show that most organizations don't provide enough creative support, with no Baby Boomers or Gen Ys strongly agreeing and only moderate agreement from 33% of Gen Xers. In addition, few respondents felt their organizations were highly effective at recognizing and rewarding creative and innovative thinkers.

The Connection Between HR Management & Innovation

Human resource management connects with innovation on two levels: the organization in general (e.g., building an innovative organization with a creative climate) and specific innovation activities, projects and/or stages (e.g., staffing, teamwork, leadership, employee creativity, career development).

A recent HR survey revealed four key factors of corporate culture that support building a culture of innovation:

1) leaders visibly promote new ideas from all areas of the organization;

2) entrepreneurial and risk-taking behaviors are encouraged;

3) growth as a result of innovation is considered as important a goal as cost reduction;

4) learning from mistakes is important, with toleration for failure.

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Yet according to HR executives, innovation is not typically considered a high priority in their organizations. From an HR point of view, certain factors could better support innovative initiatives to address workforce planning, such as improved systems for knowledge capture and dissemination, identification of skills needed for innovation, and integration of this information into recruiting criteria.

Other HR practices that create an innovative and creative environment include:

- Hiring employees who embrace uncertainty and ambiguity
- Hiring employees from a different backgrounds (academic, experience, geography, etc) to improve diversity of thought
- Providing learning and development on creative thinking techniques
- Rewarding and recognizing employees who demonstrate creativity and innovation

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