

MIND THE CREATIVITY

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Creativity is a buzz. It generates idea, insights, new product concepts, magical marketing messages, and along the way energises staff. There are creativity training programs and tools, creativity hubs, hot spots, creativity conferences and creativity consultants. With so many options what should a leading company do?

Some firms buy idea management software. It works wonderfully well as long as they have people to drive the software, funds to resource work on the best ideas, and a culture where ideas are valued. But just as entrepreneurs build from their own natural talents, the first step in fostering creative thought is to build on the natural creativity of people - ask them for their creative thoughts!

Whilst managers can lurch on creativity techniques, ranging from the disarmingly simple to the bewilderingly complex, leading companies are those where creativity is an ingredient in creating their own future. Leander Kahney in his insightful book "Inside Steve's Brain" distilled the principles that guided Steve Jobs as he set about rebuilding the world's most innovative company. He captured the dramatic moment when Jobs returned to Apple as CEO:

"Before anyone could react, Steve Jobs entered the room, looking like a bum. He was wearing shorts and sneakers and several days' worth of stubble. He plonked himself into a chair and slowly started to spin. "Tell me what's wrong with this place," he said. Before anyone could reply, he burst out: "It's the products. The products SUCK. There's no sex in them." (P16, Inside Steve's Brain)

We should make a habit of encouraging our people to remember that they are creative, demonstrate creativity and, following Steve, demand creativity. Reminding people that they are naturally creative involves two streams. For some - simply remind them of their jokes, wisecracks, lines and talent. For others - create the possibility: "you may be surprised at what you come up with when you give it a bit of time". (These specific words "you may be surprised..." often shift a person's thoughts from doubt to positive expectation.) And to get them started we can share our own stories of about silly and successful creative endeavours and offer everyone the challenge of change.

Now I am a mostly serious type but I enjoy a joke and see the funny side of things. Technology entrepreneurs who have mastered the subtle complexities in their field also tend to the serious side.

Fortunately my good friend Megan helped me out. She reminded me (straight out told me actually) that while I practiced loosening up I could simply delegate the demonstrations and storytelling to the entirely, highly visible fun leader in our team. Our Marketing Manager, Potter, happens to be a person not averse to dressing up, dancing and harmonica playing. From time to time he used all of these abilities, in addition to stories, and his domineering charm. (Example: overheard in conversation with our new programmer: *"I haven't had a creative idea from you for a while. You will have one for me tomorrow when I buy you lunch, won't you?"*) Within a few weeks many more ideas were floating around, including one or two that had the smell of opportunities.

I came to see that this was not a matter of luck. Rather it was a talent of leaders who know you can't be all things to all people and look to the best talent among their team for particular jobs. Asking people to be creative works better regularly woven into manager's narrative as they talk with staff. It works best when we show the way and give people some time and space to play with ideas (also called ideation). At a basic level, a hot spot around the coffee machine with permission to throw around ideas.

There were some bumps along the path to our blooming opportunity factory. As staff responded to Potter's charm, more ideas flowed, more ideas were rejected and more and more, louder and louder rumblings were heard. The problem in companies that fail the innovation test is that people become tired of offering ideas, responding to our "ask"; only to see them thrown in the abyss. Even worse, supervisors who are too busy to even acknowledge the effort that goes into ideas that may need just a bit more reshaping and some calculated risk are like Apple CEO Scully who fired Jobs because he couldn't see a path to the future.

Megan helped me see the point here. It takes time for people to learn to come up with good ideas, and the only way they learn is by getting good helpful feedback on why their idea didn't make it and encouragement to keep their imagination firing. There are no bad ideas; only learning opportunities.

This is one of the reasons why Toyota is (even after recent factory recalls and tsunami shocks) the most profitable car manufacturer in the world and its Prius is one of the company's leading hybrid products around the globe, Toyota had the courage and the commitment to put together a new young team to cut emissions and cut costs.

Each worker on the Toyota production line puts forward over 20 ideas a year and after some team discussion 95% of the ideas are implemented. But they have been doing it for over twenty years.

Fortunately the world has loosened up a great deal since the time since Toyota started its globally leading culture changes. So it's easier for all of us to tap the creative gems in our minds.