



BREAKTHROUGH CREATIVITY

*“Anyone who has
never made a mistake
has never tried
anything new.”*

– Albert Einstein

IS CREATIVITY THE NEW RELIGION OF COMMERCE?

Judging by the mantras chanted in the cathedrals of business, it appears that way. Lean production. TQM. Six Sigma. DMAIC. Constant innovation. Looking for a place to congregate with likeminded souls? Choose from incubators, technoparks and industry clusters.

Effectively managing the creative process is a hot topic. Building a team that consistently generates commercially viable ideas is essential for survival. Filter through management books, filled with prophets and personal coaches, and two truths become apparent: 1) inspired creativity does necessarily rely upon supernatural intervention, although it doesn't hurt. 2) building a creative environment begins with a few cardinal rules.

CREATIVE MYTHS

Research suggests the workplace emotional environment influences the flow of creative juices.¹ The same research also challenges three traditional myths about how to drive creativity.

1. Fear drives innovation. False.

Evidence suggests that an employee's happiness one day is the greatest predictor of creative breakthroughs during the next day at work.

2. Creativity only comes from really smart people. Wrong.

People who innovate and create inspired ideas are blessed with normal intelligence. They also tend to have a wide range of experiences, think differently, get excited about new ideas and love what they do. If you're not sure what ignites your team's passions, find out.

3. Time pressures energize creativity. Not true.

People are least creative when battling time. Research also suggests a time-pressure 'hangover'. Creativity declines for two days after a tight deadline.

FAIL OFTEN. SUCCEED SOONER.

The fear of suffering the consequences of failure is one of the strongest impediments to workplace creativity. Commercially viable innovation, by its very nature, implies a commitment to failure, learning from mistakes and progressing. Until employee concerns about sanctions typically associated with on-the-job gaffs – excluding negligence, of course - are removed, cultivating a creative workplace environment will be a challenge.

The ability to transform a work environment into a place of creativity is a critical leadership skill. Need proof?

Here are two examples of a commitment to learning from failure that resulted in company wins.²

- The CEO of a manufacturing plant found a piece of production scrap in the dumpster. The cost of the waste was \$450, though its value to the company was much greater when applied imaginatively in a learn-from-mistakes leadership context.

The scrap was mounted on a plaque and presented as a trophy to the most deserving employee at a ceremony, followed by a company picnic. The recipient of the trophy was initially embarrassed but later took pride in the fact that his error saved the company money because no one made that mistake again.

“Most managers underestimate the power of both technical and social barriers to organizational learning from failure.”

– Mark Cannon, Amy Edmondson

- Can mistakes lead to scientific breakthroughs? Peter Drucker recounts a story about a German researcher in a polymer lab who mistakenly left a Bunsen burner on overnight, which burned some material. Without regard for what had been created, the burnt material was thrown into the garbage.

Ten years later, a Du Pont chemist in a polymer lab made the same mistake. Instead of trashing the material, the chemist studied the results. It was an accidental discovery that led to DuPont's pioneering work in nylon.

FACTS OF INTEREST

39

Number of failed tests to develop a new lubricant. The 40th attempt was successful and led to the creation of WD-40.³

20

Percent of company time Google engineers can use on projects of their choice.⁴

50

Percent of new launches from Google originating from "20% time."⁵

1970s

Era when IBM rejected the relational database because it didn't fit the company's hardware focus. This oversight allowed Oracle to become the database leader in the 1980s.⁶

SUGGESTED READINGS

- *Applied Imagination* - Alex Osburn
- *Cracking Creativity: The Secrets of Creative Genius* - Michael Michalko
- *Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People* - Robert S. Root-Bernstein



*“To develop working
ideas efficiently,
I try to fail as fast
as I can.”*

“Sometimes the key to a creative breakthrough is a good old fashioned whack on the side of the head.”

– Richard Feynman, Nobel Laureate

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³ Tom Kelley, "The Ten Faces of Innovation." The Rotman. Spring-Summer, 2006, p.30. www.rotman.utoronto.ca/pdf/Rotman_spring06.pdf

⁴ Eric Schmidt and Hal Varian, "Google: Ten Golden Rules." http://1000advices.com/guru/organization_cs_google_10rules.html

⁵ US Patent Office. www.uspto.gov/go/taf/reports_pat_tr.htm

⁶ Business Week. http://images.businessweek.com/ss/06/06/marissa_mayer/index_01.htm

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