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POCKET MENTOR

FOSTERING CREATIVITY

Identify Opportunities • Promote Diverse Ideas • Enrich Your Environment



Expert Solutions to Everyday Challenges

Fostering Creativity

Expert Solutions to
Everyday Challenges

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Mentor's Message: Why Fostering Creativity Is Important

Is your group having trouble generating new business ideas? Is the group thinking too much along traditional lines, or having difficulty thinking very far down the road? Is your group reluctant to take risks? If so, your organization may be missing out on the creativity it needs to solve key business problems and generate valuable innovations. And in today's hypercompetitive environment, an organization that cannot innovate cannot expect to survive for long.

Is there anything you can do as a manager to unleash your group's creativity? Yes. Essentially, all the situations described above stem from a problem in the creative functioning of the group. Contrary to what many people believe, group creativity doesn't just happen—it can be planned for, nurtured, and enhanced.

And you can help. The way you manage the various personalities in your team can help unleash your team's creative potential. But this is demanding work. You start by developing a deep appreciation for the different thinking styles in your team. Then you consciously try to have those differing approaches rub up against one another—making sure that the resulting “abrasion” improves rather than undermines the quality of the group's work.

There are other steps you can take as well. By paying close attention to group norms, you can foster a climate in which people feel good about their work and are motivated to seek out problems and solve them. You can alter the physical workspace in ways that make for more robust, stimulating communication. And you can lead your group through structured thinking exercises that will help them make connections they might not have made otherwise.

Using content derived from the book *When Sparks Fly* by Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap, this book explains how to make all these innovations happen—so that your organization can benefit from the fresh ideas flowing from your team.

Dorothy Leonard, Mentor

Dorothy Leonard is the William J. Abernathy Professor Emerita of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, where she has taught courses in corporate creativity, new product and process design, knowledge management, and innovation.

Professor Leonard is the author of two books on innovation, *Wellsprings of Knowledge: Building and Sustaining the Sources of Innovation* and *When Sparks Fly: Igniting Group Creativity*. Professor Leonard's major research interests, consulting expertise, and teaching efforts relate to creativity and managing the innovation process.

Contents

**Mentor's Message: Why Fostering Creativity
Is Important** xi

Fostering Creativity: The Basics

What Is Creativity? 3

A high-level view of this complex process.

A definition 4

How creativity relates to innovation 5

Five misconceptions about creativity 6

The creative process 8

Step 1: Assemble Your Team 11

Insights into how to build a creative group.

The value of creative teams 12

Characteristics of creative teams 14

Spotlight on intellectual diversity 15

Hiring for creativity 18

Integrating team members 19

Step 2: Identify Opportunities 21

Suggestions for finding opportunities to exploit.

Finding opportunities inside your organization 22

Finding opportunities outside your organization 23

Step 3: Generate Options 27

Powerful tactics for producing a rich array of options.

Managing creative abrasion 28

Encouraging divergent thinking 31

Using brainstorming techniques 31

Creating the right psychological environment 36

Creating the right physical environment 42

Step 4: Converge on the One Best Option 47

How to arrive at the one best choice.

Moving from divergence to convergence 48

Narrowing down the options 48

Planning for innovation: The end product of creativity 49

Tips and Tools

Tools for Fostering Creativity 55

Worksheets to help you assess how well your organization fosters creativity, set a target for creative change, assess the psychological environment in which you and your team are working, and document ideas for enhancing the physical environment to promote creativity.

Test Yourself 68

A helpful review of concepts presented in this guide. Take it before and after you've read the guide, to see how much you've learned.

Answers to test questions 71

To Learn More 73

Further titles of articles and books if you want to go more deeply into the topic.

Sources for Fostering Creativity 79

Notes 81

For you to use as ideas come to mind.

Fostering Creativity: The Basics

What Is Creativity?



The word *creativity* crops up in many workplace conversations. But what does it mean, exactly? Is it the same as innovation? Can anyone be creative? Is there a distinct process through which creativity unfolds? In the pages that follow, we explore these and other questions regarding the nature of creativity.

A definition

You know creativity when you see it, right? Not necessarily. But a deeper understanding of what creativity is—and what it is not—can help you enhance the creativity of any group you lead. Let's start with a definition. In its simplest terms, creativity is a process of developing and expressing novel ideas that are likely to be useful.

CREATIVITY: a process of developing and expressing novel ideas that are likely to be useful.

This definition raises two points that are important to understand regarding creativity:

Creativity is not so much a talent as it is a goal-oriented process. Making your group more creative is not a matter of importing a few people who have creative character traits and then relying on these folks to generate all your breakthrough ideas. Rather, it's a matter of designing a collaborative approach that

maximizes everyone's distinctive gifts, experience, and expertise. Moreover, the purpose or goal of the creative process is to solve a particular problem or satisfy a specific need.

Creativity involves convergent as well as divergent thinking.

The creative process begins with *divergent thinking*—a breaking away from familiar or established ways of seeing and doing that produces novel ideas. *Convergent thinking* occurs in the later stages of the process. As the original ideas generated by the divergent thinking are communicated to others, they are evaluated to determine which of them are genuinely novel and worth pursuing. The group then uses convergent thinking to choose an option with the potential to solve the problem that initiated the creative process. You'll learn more about divergent and convergent thinking later in this book.

How creativity relates to innovation

You've seen the definition for creativity. Now let's consider how creativity relates to innovation. Again, we need a definition. Simply put, innovation is the embodiment, combination, and/or synthesis of knowledge in original, relevant, valued new products, processes, or services.

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An innovation is *the end result of the creative process*. Again, creativity is a process you employ to improve your problem solving.

So you're not done until your creative efforts have produced a product, service, or process that answers the original need or solves the problem you identified at the outset.

Five misconceptions about creativity

Quite a bit of research on creativity has been done over the years. In the course of all this experimentation and exploration, it's become clear that creativity is a widely misunderstood subject. Misconceptions about this seemingly mysterious process abound. Below, we examine five of them. After reading them, ask yourself whether *you* hold any of these misconceptions about creativity. If so, doing away with them will help you extend your managerial arena—the range of possible actions you can take to maximize your group's creative potential.

Misconception #1: The smarter you are, the more creative you are. Intelligence correlates with creativity only up to a point. Once you have enough intelligence to do your job, the relationship no longer holds. That is, above a fairly modest threshold—an IQ of about 120—there is no correlation between intelligence and creativity.

Misconception #2: The young are more creative than the old. Age is not a clear predictor of creative potential. Research shows that it usually takes seven to ten years to build up deep expertise in a given field—the kind of expertise that enables a person to perceive patterns of order or meaning that are invisible to the novice. Thus, in the business world, the necessary creativity can be found

in an adult of any age. At the same time, however, expertise can *inhibit* creativity: experts sometimes find it difficult to see or think outside established patterns.

Misconception #3: Creativity is reserved for the few—the flamboyant high rollers. The willingness to take calculated risks and the ability to think in unconventional ways *do* play a role in creativity. But that doesn't mean that creativity is restricted to high-impact, high-risk endeavors. You don't have to be a bungee jumper in order to be creative. In fact, you don't have to be markedly different from everyone else. Moreover, managers can take specific steps to help themselves and anyone else be more creative. On rare occasions, the ideas that a creative person comes up with will be visionary leaps forward that revolutionize an industry. But more often, they will be small improvements that advance the organizational cause.

Misconception #4: The creative act is essentially solitary. In fact, a high percentage of the world's most important inventions resulted not from the work of one lone genius, but from the collaboration of a group of people with complementary skills. Individuals and groups that make important discoveries pass through a number of stages. The stage of illumination, when a flash of insight occurs, is the next-to-last stage. Although this stage tends to attract all the press, most innovations come about only after much toil, many dead ends, and more than a few apparent breakthroughs that ultimately don't pan out.

Misconception #5: You can't manage creativity. Granted, creativity is rather like a genie that can't be bottled: you can never know in

advance who will be involved in a creative act, what that act will be, or precisely when or how it will occur. Nevertheless, as a manager, you can create the conditions that make creativity much more likely to occur. That is, you can increase the probability of innovation.

So what's the lesson behind these five misconceptions? Your group has the potential to be creative—and thus to be innovative. But to unleash that potential, you need to set up the proper conditions. As we'll see in the next sections of the book, setting up those conditions calls for a specific series of actions. You'll need to:

- Carefully determine the composition of your group.
- Enrich the workplace environment—the psychological and the physical environment.
- Provide tools and techniques that enhance idea generation.
- Manage the creative process so that the best insights and ideas are translated into innovative products, services, and ways of doing business.

A good place to start is to become familiar with the sequence of the creative process.

The creative process

Think of the creative process as consisting of the following four steps:

1. **Assemble your team:** You select group members specifically to maximize creativity.

2. **Identify opportunities:** Group members identify a problem requiring creativity and (ultimately) innovation.
3. **Generate options:** Through divergent thinking, group members come up with an array of options for seizing the opportunity they've identified.
4. **Converge on the one best option:** Group members come to agreement on which of the options at hand will best solve the problem they've identified and create the most valuable new product, service, or way of doing business.

The creative process is not as linear as the above list of stages might suggest, but each phase is vital to group creativity. As a manager, you'll need to ensure that your group progresses through each stage.

In the sections that follow, we'll look at each of these steps in closer detail.