The creative Melting pot: How organizations influence or hold back employee creativity

Productive creativity is a precious commodity. But how many organizations understand which factors contribute to (or prevent) good ideas? A new study shows that the way individuals, teams and employers think and act can seriously impact on the successful outcome of the creative process.
Creativity is not a linear process; it’s more often than not typified by alternate reflection and action.

It doesn’t follow that factors which drive creativity at one stage of an idea’s ‘journey’ will play a role at other stages. In fact, some might even inhibit individual or collective inventiveness, preventing otherwise worthy initiatives from seeing the light of day.

For organizations seeking to foster an environment of innovation, this means having to be far more strategic than simply letting creative types loose with an R&D budget. Careful consideration must also be given to how individual, team and organizational factors impact on each other at every stage, especially where the effect of those factors countervail.

That’s the finding of research by Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School. The research team brought together established process and variance models of creativity, and conducted in-depth, case study research of 22 carefully selected creative workers, as well as ‘key advocates’ of creativity (typically senior managers). The researchers consider this study as an important step towards developing an integrative framework of creativity.

**PRODUCTIVE CONTRADICTIONS:**

Six snapshots of creativity

Throughout the creative process – from idea generation, through idea promotion to idea realization, evidence of six countervailing forces emerged. Factors that might first appear to be contradictory can, with organizational awareness, be turned to creative advantage:

1. **People need people – sometimes…**
   At the idea generation stage, external pressure, however well-intentioned, is often counter-productive, inhibiting creativity in individuals. But at implementation stage, extrinsic motivators – such as how the organization facilitates delivery of ideas – are warmly welcomed by many of the same individuals. Organizations must be mindful of how, and at what point, senior management (or their policies) should be introduced into the creative process.

2. **Creators need doers**
   Both task-oriented and creative natures are indispensable to the creative process. Yet identifying people who possess both characteristics is a tall order in many organizations. Those who exhibit highly creative tendencies often have a hard time focusing on the nuts and bolts of implementation. This underlines the importance of selecting creative teams whose dispositions complement each other. It may be that the onus is on creative people to gather more task-oriented colleagues around them, for ideas to be fully realized.

3. **Knowing when to standing your ground**
   Can creative people adjust their behavior at each stage of the creative process? At idea generation, the typical creative individual eagerly seeks feedback; he’s open to suggestions, happily incorporating these into his ideas as part of ongoing improvements. However, at the promotion stage – when buy-in is sought from senior management – perseverance is needed to avoid making concessions that will devalue or derail the idea. Creative individuals who are naturally inclined to take comments on board must be alert to this danger, while organizations should take care over who is involved at this pivotal stage of the process.

4. **Virus-scanners and networkers: teams of all the talents**
   Team make-up can impact on each stage of the creative process. For instance, a good mix of knowledge is crucial for idea generation, allowing not just for cross-fertilization of know-how, but also for ‘virus-scanners’ to provide honest critiques (even if their opinions result in creatives being sent back to the drawing board). As a trustful team climate is essential for feedback, a good balance of personalities is also crucial.
   Yet at the idea promotion stage, knowledge mix is less of a concern; it’s those with extensive, influential internal networks who get results – while at realization, creative types themselves may need to take a step back, as task-oriented colleagues (who had less input, if any, earlier) step up to drive ideas across the finishing line.
   The different dynamics necessary to push each stage forward successfully has challenging implications for putting together creative teams.

5. **The best leaders wear many hats**
   Leaders need to understand when to hold back and when to call the shots. At the idea generation stage, the successful leader rarely throws his weight around, recognizing instead the value of allowing everyone a voice. However, he must remain vigilant to all discussion and activity, so that the team keeps sight of its vision and objective – and once resources are secured, the leader must assert himself, and be unafraid to take decisions. This requires an ability to change leadership style as the creative process evolves.
6. Disturb: do not disturb

An environment in which ideas can flourish and cross-fertilize is essential. That’s all very well when ideas are generated; input from all-comers is usually welcomed. But once the realization stage is reached, the creative team is likely to require isolation – both physically and psychologically – to avoid being distracted by outsiders who still insist on having their say. The organization must allow for leaders and creatives to shut the door until they’re ready to emerge, idea fully realized – or at least beyond the point where others can exert detrimental influence.

As well as these six countervailing aspects, researchers identified a number of antecedents for (and barriers to) creativity, mapping to the different stages of the creative process.

SPARK TO A FLAME: Idea generation

The individual: conscious and sub-conscious thinking

It was found that individual motivation is primarily impacted by the enthusiasm, eagerness, and pleasure that creative people derive from generating ideas: they regard problems as challenges to seize and relish. But while creative minds burst with ideas, their free-thinking disposition must be tempered with a sharp focus on organizational priorities. Details can present obstacles at later stages, while the creative individual must also be able to evaluate the uniqueness (and, where relevant, commerciality) of his idea.

Creative individuals, however, are often good networkers. They proactively widen their contact lists, and are open to the unexpected. They don’t confine idea-generation to brainstorm sessions, nor do they irrationally discriminate when bouncing ideas around.

The team: a meeting of minds

Team composition can significantly influence the generation of ideas. As we’ve seen, structure is important; a good mix of professional backgrounds is helpful. Personality plays a part too – creative individuals seek out people they know will challenge their ideas, recognizing that it’s better to identify issues – of clarity, accuracy, even commercial viability – at an early stage. Unrestrained, non-combative communication and feedback is vital, which is why a positive team climate is also a necessary precondition for creativity.

The organization: a trading floor for knowledge

Although individual motivation and team composition are important, wider organizational factors are important. Organizations that promote extensive, varied contact amongst colleagues, and define jobs broadly, allow for knowledge to be transferred easily, while people feel free to experiment with new ways of problem-solving. However, in today’s employment landscape, where person specifications and essential competencies are increasingly being tightened (often in response to workplace legislation), this can pose challenges. These can impact on the potential for creativity, even in organizations where innovation and idea generation is promoted as a strong element of the employer brand.

Case 1: Every day is ideas day

Our researchers carried out interviews at a global technology consultancy which wants its employees to live and breathe ideas. Not only does it have structures in place that encourage people to bounce ideas off each other, it makes sure not to restrict ideas to formal ‘ideas sessions’. Staff fully understand that they can operate – impulsively and proactively – beyond the confines of the routines of their ‘day jobs’, and in tandem with colleagues from different teams or departments. By removing hierarchical barriers to conversations around ideas, the company can harness its most valuable resources – its people – to best effect.

SHIFTING THROUGH THE GEARS: Promoting the big idea

The primary motivator for people promoting their own ideas – the persistent belief in the definite worth of their ideas’ potential – calls for unadulterated enthusiasm on the part of creative individuals throughout the entire promotion process. This mindset should help to overcome any relapse into ‘feedback mode’ that could jeopardize convincing the powers-that-be.

Those who are talented in communication are more likely to succeed in pushing forward their ideas, while knowledge of the structure and/or politics of the organization, or the markets in which it operates, is of primary importance for the idea’s promotion internally as a valuable commodity. If the organization’s strategy is clearly communicated, and entrepreneurialism championed (see Case 2), then all the better.

Case 2: Where creativity is routine

Researchers looked at a leading biotechnology company, and found that innovation is very much the focus of organizational strategy. Employees are left in no doubt that the initiative to ‘trying something new’ is a foundation of the company’s success, and that entrepreneurship and drive sit equally alongside values such as collaboration and integrity. This environment encourages staff to be unafraid of promoting their ideas, secure in the knowledge that displaying their creativity aligns visibly with corporate objectives.

Meanwhile, ‘who you know’ can be as crucial to selling the idea as the brilliance of the idea itself. While individual strengths remain important, the diversity of each team member’s networks can make a difference.

In particular, the leader’s reputation and contacts with those in decision-making or budget-holding roles within the organization are likely to be critical.
DREAMS INTO ACTION: Realizing ideas

The motivated creative may at last be able to start visualizing his idea in a material way – his product on the shelf, his sales proposition being marketed, his technology solution saving money – but his work is far from over.

At this stage, well-organized, systematic, even perfectionist qualities are called for, along with the agility to make last-minute practical or attitudinal changes in response to unforeseen problems. Creative individuals may need to work in tandem with (or delegate to) those who are better ‘completer-finishers’ (see Case 3). In fact, it’s often at the realization stage that effective teamwork – crucial from the outset, of course – comes most visibly into its own. Many creative types are mindful of their own shortcomings in this respect, and grateful for more able colleagues’ assistance.

Case 3: Creativity in harmony

One of the choral world’s most acclaimed classical/rock vocal ensembles owes its success to the unique collaboration between its two driving forces. One man takes responsibility for most of the music side – singing, writing and arranging. Just as crucially, his partner, who conducts the choir, also organizes the tours and oversees stage management. The mix of creative and task-oriented personality perfectly exemplifies the importance of having a diverse team in place at the delivery stage – when great ideas are often at their most vulnerable to destruction.

> At the idea generation stage, individuals are driven by the pleasure derived simply from creating ideas
> When promoting an idea, they’re driven by the persistent belief that the idea is worth pursuing
> As realization approaches, it’s the prospect of seeing their idea put in practice that drives individuals

Organizations seeking to put in place incentive schemes that encourage and reward creativity might well find it profitable to tap into this ‘process view’.

Review, refine, review, refine: a never-ending loop?

Creativity is not a linear process; it’s more often than not typified by alternate reflection and action. At the idea generation stage, inspired suggestions thrown into the mix invite critical feedback, generating everything from minor tweaks to wholesale changes. When selling in a fleshed-out proposal, the team considers how best to promote its merits to the organization (or its customers) while acting to exploit networks and other available resources. And the flexibility that’s a crucial characteristic of the results-focused, task-oriented individuals responsible for realization demonstrates how, even as the end goal is in sight, reflection is absolutely necessary.

Where do we go from here?

This study, while not exhaustive in volume, nevertheless delves deep into the creative process. It may be that some employers need make no adjustments to the way in which they encourage innovation. But certainly these insights should stimulate debate, particularly around the ‘mix’ of factors in play as ideas are generated, promoted and realized.

Are winning ideas being cultivated – or overlooked? Why?
Are the right people involved at each stage, or are less blatantly creative individuals being excluded? Who?
Is the path to implementation of the best ideas barrier-free, or are unnecessary obstacles getting in the way? How?

By considering this study’s findings in an organizational context, the answers to these questions may be closer to hand – and more startling than expected.

EMPLOYEE CREATIVITY: final words

Intrinsic motivation: worth a closer look?

It’s widely accepted that intrinsic motivation in individuals is likely to be important throughout the creative process. But this study’s research team discovered that intrinsic motivation manifests itself quite differently at each stage:

Reference:

From Creativity to Success: Barriers and Critical Success Factors in the Successful Implementation of Creative Ideas; Susan Ashford, Kateleen De Stobbeleir and Inge De Clippeleer; Flanders DC Knowledge Centre at Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School.