

Demonstrating Creativity And Innovation

by W. H. Weiss

You don't have to be intellectual or highly educated to come up with good ideas. Although creative people have certain traits which distinguish them from others, such characteristics can be developed with dedication and practice.

Your job becomes easier and you are more productive when you assure no good ideas ever escape you. Almost any process or procedure can be improved upon. If you decide something is perfect as is, you also eliminate considering areas for improvement. This provides a false sense of security at best.

Realize unusual procedures can often solve your most perplexing problems. Good ideas can come from areas where you least expect them. Some of the best ideas ever developed were sparked by investigating in an unfamiliar area of a business.

While there are many ways to be creative, here are some tips on getting started:

- **Be accessible.** Since ideas may come from anyone at anytime, you must be available and ready to receive them. If you get the reputation of being hard to reach or in

a hurry much of the time, it's probable others will not go out of their way to pass along their ideas.

- Promote creativity and innovation. You may receive a lot of impractical suggestions. But don't let that deter you from helping people come up with ideas. Even reticent and introverted co-workers may offer them. Learn to put aside the unworkable ones graciously and tactfully so you don't turn people off.

- Study each idea carefully, regardless where it originated, including yourself. Take your time and avoid snap judgments. Quick judgments are usually based on overall assumptions and intuition — seldom on detailed analysis. Too often excellent ideas are prematurely rejected simply because time wasn't taken to check them thoroughly.

- Keep an open mind. Since big ideas have a habit of growing out of little ones, avoid passing off something that appears to be minor. Be alert for ideas that are not usable immediately. With some slight modification, they may be usable somewhere else or in the near future.

- Check details. Maybe a small error was made in developing or presenting an idea. The idea may be usable when that is corrected. Also, close examination might reveal you can use a part of the idea for solving an entirely different problem.

- File ideas and suggestions. Today's unworkable procedure may be appropriate and applicable tomorrow. Recognize it is difficult to remember every idea you learn of. Months may pass before a situation arises where it may be put to use.

Benefitting From Your Creativity

How are some people able to come up with new and unusual approaches to problems when you seldom can do so? In the book *A Whack on the Side of the Head* (Warner Books), author Roger Von Oech offers these suggestions for getting your mind out of its mental rut:

- Don't always look for the one right answer. "We are taught to look for the one right answer. Actually, it's the second, third or tenth right answer that solves the problem in an innovative way," Von Oech says.

- Try to not always think logically. Logic is appropriate when you're evaluating ideas. But when you're searching for ideas, Von Oech observes, logic can short-circuit creativity.

- Avoid being too practical. When faced with a question or problem, ask yourself, "What if..." and explore the thought in ways that might not normally be followed.

- Stop thinking you're not creative. One of the big differences between creative people and noncreative people is the former pay attention to their small ideas, knowing they could lead to a substantial breakthrough. "Believe in the worth of your ideas and have the persistence to build on them," Von Oech advises.

Using Your Imagination To Advantage

Many successful people feel their imagination contributed greatly to their getting ahead. In business, imagination is an important skill to develop because it helps you see every side of a problem. It also enables you to find the most effective solutions.

How can you tell if your imagination makes you more innovative, and what steps can you take to further your progress? Here's how to handle it:

- Approach every project and task you undertake with a critical eye. If you think there's a better way to do a job, do it.
- Be generally receptive to new ideas. Check them thoroughly before rejecting them.
- Use your imagination to explore as many alternative solutions as possible when you have to solve a problem.
- Welcome the opportunity to tackle new jobs and different ways of doing things.
- Participate in your company's suggestion program.

Improving Procedures

While you may need innovative methods to solve difficult problems and make good decisions, you need them also to improve the procedures that achieve your organization's goals: Art Cornwell, author of *Freeing The Corporate Mind: How To Spur Innovation In Business* (Execu-Press) offers the following creativity-generating tips:

- Change your daily routine. "Each of us has a routine we follow in the morning," he says. "These are so well-established we really don't have to think at all before we get to work. Your mind is basically asleep. If you eat breakfast at home, periodically eat out. If you follow a particular route to work, find another one. Do something different to get your mind moving earlier."

- Use your ingenuity to think of unique ways to improve work procedures — even if they don't seem to be faulty. Look around your office or plant for an operation or job which could be done better. Think about it during the day, and try to reach a conclusion. Then take on another challenge the next day. This practice will not only boost your creativity, but can also give you a sense of accomplishment.

- Become an expert at something. "Innovative ideas aren't produced at random from some unknown stockpile of data. They're actually a merger of ideas from dissimilar fields of experience. A person with more interests tends to be more creative; he or she has a larger knowledge base from which to work. Select a field in which you're already interested and invest your time in learning more."

- Practice. "Thinking creatively," says Cornwell, "is much like learning long division. When your teacher first described the process, you wanted to avoid it entirely. But soon, you began following instructions. Through constant repetition, you learned how to do it." The same is true of being creative.

Managing Time

Finding enough time to do all your routine work in addition to putting out occasional "fires" can be difficult and stressful. Some managers feel they need to work overly fast just to keep up.

Using time wisely and learning to set priorities are necessary skills today. When you become proficient in allocating time, you'll find you have a greater sense of purpose. You'll also reduce the amount of pressure you feel on the job.

What can you do to take advantage of your creative talents to help you manage time? While creativity is elusive and can't be commanded, it can be cultivated. Instead of demanding creativity, try putting yourself in pleasant, conducive surroundings to promote it.

Concentration is an excellent way of encouraging creativity while also better managing time. Begin by concentrating on the interesting parts of a project or process. Once you become involved, the work will go more smoothly and quickly. If a project requires a large amount of uninterrupted time, close your office door and have someone take phone calls.

Managers who use time wisely focus on results and not on jobs or activities. They learn to structure their environment so it contributes to their productivity. They become skilled at distinguishing between the pressing demands on their time and those matters that actually require attention. Through better time management, they promote creativity and innovation.

Promoting Creativity

As a supervisor, one of your objectives should be to spur creativity and innovation from the people working for you. Due to the inherent nature of creativity, however, you must avoid any attempt to coax or pressure people for results. Creativity in others is best encouraged by being subtle and not obtrusive.

"For people to be creative," says Theresa Amabile, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Brandeis University, "they must possess several traits. You have to acquire mechanical skills as well as knowledge in a particular area before you're able to produce innovations. You also need creativity-relevant skills. These include the ability to apply new perspectives to problems, take risks in thinking and persevere in your line of thought."

"I think a primary way of boosting intrinsic task motivation is by giving your employees a degree of autonomy," says Dr. Amabile. "You need to let them feel ownership of the project." One way to do this is to give them assignments free of any constricting parameters. Through discussion with your employees, see if they can figure out the parameters on their own. They will probably feel they've got a personal stake in the project. More important, they likely will be more pleased with the restrictions they created than with the very same ones you might have imposed.

Another way creativity has been promoted was to introduce competition by asking two groups of employees to solve the same set of problems. While one group was told prizes and recognition would be awarded to those who did the best job, competition was not mentioned to the second group — they were only asked to have fun with the problems.

When both groups' solutions were studied, the second group's solutions were more creative than those of the group working under a competitive mind-set.

Although competition may give projects a boost and produce a flurry of results, quantity is not quality. You may have gotten people to work harder that way, but not have won their interest in the project. The difference is this: a competitive solution needs to be just a little better than the rest; an intrinsically motivated solution is often the very best a person can offer.

Surprisingly, rewards can be detrimental to creativity. "A reward can often eclipse personal interest in a project," says Dr. Amabile. "If you need to make a bribe to enlist interest, then the project is probably not interesting in itself, and the reward is the only thing worthwhile."

"This does not mean, however, that you should do away with rewards altogether," cautions Dr. Amabile. "But rather than formally stating at the beginning of a specific project that there will be a reward, try recognizing creative effort

on a regular basis. Also, you should reward creative effort even when a project fails."

"If you reward those efforts as well as the commercially successful ones," she says, "people are going to know they're working in an organization that recognizes and rewards superior creative effort. I think this feeling is a very powerful motivator for overall creativity."

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