

Beyond New Ideas: The challenges of enhancing workplace creativity

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Abstract:

Creativity drives the growth and innovation organizations need to sustain success. But creativity is a social process and therein lays the challenge: most of the issues and difficulties that arise on creative teams are interpersonal in nature, complex, and deeply rooted. In the past, consultants, training professionals and HR/OD practitioners have utilized methods that only begin to scratch the surface of effective development to enhance organizational creativity. To act with responsibility, professionals who work in the area of creativity and innovation must review their methods and deepen the focus of interventions in order to demonstrate and justify value. At the same time, internal HR/OD and Learning & Development staff must clarify the criteria they use to evaluate creativity consultants, coaches, and programs. This article explores the challenges associated with effective interventions to boost innovation capability, and makes key recommendations for evaluating the depth and breadth of proposals by external consultants.

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12 Common Issues That Block Creative Performance

Over the years, we have observed the issues and problems that arise when people work together on creative projects. *How many sound familiar to you?*

- ___ People are not sure how to proceed when they encounter unexpected obstacles – or when results don't meet expectations.
- ___ People spend a lot of time “preparing” for action – getting consensus, talking about ideas, thinking about options – and delay the learning the comes with taking small action steps in new directions.
- ___ Managers and leaders avoid making decisions when outcomes are uncertain – especially if they will be held accountable for results.
- ___ Criteria that people use to evaluate ideas and options is not well thought out or clearly described – and the team may end up pursuing unsound or untimely ideas.

- ___ Disagreements and conflict in team collaboration delay output and diminish quality.
- ___ People 'cook mostly on one burner' – they focus only on the task of solving the problem in front of them – and don't see connections and notice other benefits or applications of their work.
- ___ Managers and leaders have difficulty inspiring and motivating people to go beyond the usual answers.
- ___ Giving people more autonomy and freedom to experiment – or mixing people up to add diversity of perspectives (both actions that are supposed to improve creative results) – leads to indecisiveness rather than creative results.
- ___ People spend resources trying to put a square “benchmark” into a round problem: they try to apply a solution someone else developed to the problem they are facing – without adapting the solution sufficiently to fit their unique circumstances.
- ___ Political issues and “turf” battles undermine important projects that will yield innovative business value but would – most likely – bring uncertainty and change.
- ___ As creative ideas are implemented, the results that come back have veered off track, are missing key elements, or just don't hit the mark.
- ___ Good ideas fall flat when people lack the skills to 'market' their efforts to key stakeholders.

These scenarios begin to illuminate some of the deeply rooted issues that can get in the way of the best-planned and most sincere efforts to enhance team and organizational creativity. But despite its complexity, creativity remains one of the most powerful capabilities a business or organization has to grow, achieve desired results, thrive, and generate advantage. From the pages of Business Week's August issue describing *Why the World Needs New Thinking*, to the second-only special issue of the Harvard Business Review, devoted to the Innovative Enterprise, the word is out. To stay afloat organizations, companies and their people must innovate.

The fact is we are smack in the middle of an era of unprecedented change – in government, education, markets, corporate behavior, and the management of information to name a few. Gary Hamel, warns in his book, *Leading the Revolution* that in this “age of revolution it is not knowledge that produces new wealth, but insight” – insight into opportunities for innovation. Clearly creative thinking, new ideas, and the ability to turn ideas into profitable improvements have never been more important.

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The Challenge

Ask most any leader or manager what they believe is the biggest stumbling block to inspiring innovation. More often than not, the answer is *not* a lack of new ideas. As it turns out, says Theodore Levitt, a professor and former editor of the Harvard Business Review, “ideation is relatively abundant.” Usually, the most common blocks to creative performance are complex issues involving work habits, company culture, employee attitudes, poor implementation and follow-through, a lack of motivation, and gaps in skills for creative collaboration. Despite this common knowledge, many training professionals still focus efforts to enhance creativity primarily on ideation – the process of generating new ideas.

As more and more organizations are at risk of being caught flat-footed by the future, leaders are prepared to invest in the area of creativity enhancement. Surveys conducted by the Industrial Research Institute show that innovation was at the top of executives top five corporate priorities in the late 1990's. But in our current environment of accountability, these same leaders are increasingly intolerant of creativity enhancement sessions that consist of games, fun activities, brainstorming, and other techniques. It turns out that these techniques do not make a sustainable change in the key competencies required for a long-term improvement in work habits and the quality of output.

Consultants and training professionals are facing an unprecedented opportunity – and a difficult challenge: to meet the blossoming demand for innovation programs with an entirely new approach. What is required is a fundamental shift in the business of developing and enhancing creativity. Facilitators, trainers, and external consultants must rethink and refresh their methods for enhancing creativity, including the tools they use to assess, explain, and intervene in client systems and the ways they measure and communicate return on investment.

The first step is to acknowledge the failure of creativity games and motivational presentations as methods to enhance sustainable creativity in everyday work. The second step is to focus more attention on the social, collaborative aspects of creativity. Creativity is a social process – and most of the difficulties that arise as companies move ideas from vision to realization are interpersonal in nature.

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Saying No to Tips and Techniques

For anyone who is interested, there are a dizzying array of books, research articles, definitions, tips and recommendations for enhancing creativity. And you've probably heard them all, including:

- Don't fear failure
- Turn ideas into experiments
- Be passionate
- Look with fresh eyes
- Get diverse perspectives
- Deregulate thinking
- Have unrealistic expectations
- Question authority

These are great recommendations! But it's difficult to translate these general suggestions into actions that can ensure creative performance – without a context in which to practice new behaviors over time. Why is the link between recommendations and results so unreliable? Part of the answer lies in the number of interconnected factors that can make or break creative performance. The fact is for any number of reasons, a well-balanced team with a prior record of creative output, set in a culture that supports experimentation with supportive stakeholders could still fail to yield viable, creative results.

Another part of the answer lies in something called “fit to circumstances.” General recommendations can’t take a particular situation into account. They may or may not fit the needs and creative preferences of the people involved, the nature of the task, or the context in which creative activity is occurring. And sometimes, attempting to implement tips and recommendations without a deep understanding of the issues involved in creative performance can do more harm than good.

When it comes down to it, creativity enhancement is hard work that requires a robust understanding of the psychology of creativity, time and resources to coach and build skills with people *where they are doing the work*, and the credibility and clout necessary to effect change.

Exploring Social Factors

A great deal of time has been spent focusing our efforts on the individual and promoting the myth that creativity happens in the heads of star performers. Just look at the number of theories and books on creativity that take an attribute-based approach: describing the traits, attributes, and behaviors of “creative people” as a means to explain the mystery of creativity. Ultimately, this approach does little to help people untangle the web of factors – many of them social – that can inhibit creative performance.

The fact is information is everywhere these days. And so are ideas – and fragments of ideas waiting for the right moment and the right circumstances to be plucked up and turned into valuable, profitable innovations. To achieve creative results in our increasingly complex world, we need each other. John Wolpert, leader of IBM’s Extreme Blue incubator, writes that the biggest growth opportunities will come more often from collaboration than from “single visionaries, acting on their own.”

Enhancing collaboration is becoming more and more important to the work of developing creativity and innovation capability. People do not work in isolation. They collaborate, share ideas, and explore and shape those ideas together. And while there is no doubt that ideamakers will always be valued team members, so are idea explorers, idea shapers, and idea executors. Creative collaboration, not only in single teams but between departments, within business alliances and partnerships, and across industries is beginning to yield the greatest return on investment in innovation.

Think back on the 12 most common problems that arise on creative projects, described earlier in this article. These are not issues within lone individuals: they are primarily interpersonal issues centered in the way that people work together, motivate and inspire one another, resolve conflicts and share responsibility. These are the kinds of issues that anyone working to enhance the creative potential of a group and/or organization must be prepared to address.

At a minimum, we need to expand our repertoire of activities to include work that helps groups:

- Build a shared vision for success and a collective understanding of why creativity is required for that success – especially if the task is open-ended and the process of achieving goals is uncertain.
- Develop shared criteria for what “quality” and “good enough” mean.
- Establish clear team roles, where each member’s contribution is acknowledged and honored.
- Ensure that leadership has credibility and acts with integrity.
- Build effective conflict-management and decision-making processes.
- Manage the ebb and flow of autonomy during different phases of the creative process.
- Ensure consistent and reliable communication.

- Manage the balance between individual and collective needs.

This is not to say that work done to improve individual skills is unnecessary or unimportant. Helping people manage stress more effectively opens windows of perception and imagination. Working with people's self-concept – to help them recapture their connection with their own creative assets – will promote risk-taking and creative accountability. Exploring beliefs, values and rules can open peoples' range of perception. And working with people to manage resistance to ambiguity can help them look beyond the most common and instantaneous solutions.

But work in these areas is not easy. Neither is work to help leaders who manage others address issues involving creative collaboration. Both require skill on the part of professionals with expertise in the domain of creativity and human systems, and time to effect more change that is possible in a half-day module, or in one afternoon of a five-day workshop.

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New Quality Standards for the Profession

What would you say are the minimum qualifications necessary to deliver creativity-enhancing services to a corporate client? Do you need more than great facilitation skills and a book of creativity games for trainers? What about a degree in psychology? Is experience in the trenches enough? Do you need to be creative yourself? And what methods are sufficient to help people collaborate more effectively in creative activity? Is a daylong workshop enough? A five-day?

Setting quality standards for the practice of enhancing creativity within an enterprise is critical for helping "buyers" understand what will and will not generate a sustainable improvement to creative performance. According to John Wolpert, the business of providing corporate innovation programs should be subject to "careful, hard-nosed evaluation, and those that don't promise adequate returns should be curtailed or refocused."

At the risk of providing yet another list of recommendations, the following guidelines may help professionals and prospective buyers raise the bar in the quality of programs to enhance creativity and innovation.

1. **Embed work to enhance creativity in current, ongoing work and pressing issues.** Clients are becoming more and more reluctant to buy stand-alone workshops and consulting about creativity. And there's a good reason. Divorced from the real, day-to-day work, discussions about creativity become academic and abstract. Instead, we need to help our clients understand how to highlight opportunities for creativity and innovation in everyday tasks and interactions – and take creative action in response to peoples' most pressing issues and challenges.
2. **Avoid technology solutions that don't address people issues.** Idea management software that helps people suggest and progress new ideas can be a valuable investment for enhancing organizational creativity. But teaching people to use technology is not the same as teaching them how to reason differently and to apply creativity to everyday challenges. Balance technology with learning opportunities that help people explore the individual, social, and organizational factors that influence creative results.
3. **Reduce work with end users.** In Japan, representatives from companies who attend training events are expected to teach the course to colleagues the day they return to work.

While this is becoming more of a norm everywhere, we still deliver far too many services without a strategy for spreading the learning. Online resources, self-facilitated materials, ongoing coaching agreements, and train-the-trainer formats are good starting points.

4. **Beware of the tyranny of the “action step.”** There is no substitute for deep understanding. Yet we find that many clients want a list of action steps they can follow – rather than a new concept that helps them think differently. It is important to acknowledge up-front the dilemma in giving people pre-packaged action steps – it actually goes against the very essence of creativity: inventing new solutions. Deep work to enhance creativity should exercise peoples’ power of judgment, increase their capacity to act intelligently in new situations, and expand the possibility of richer experiences in the future.
5. **Access networks and communities of practice.** Social interaction is the primary vehicle for organizational creativity. And “belonging” is critical for learning, sharing knowledge, capturing innovation potential, and moving ideas from vision to venture. Bust myths that support the idea of “creative individuals” working in isolation and help people learn to tap into the power of networks and communities of practice to invent and execute new solutions.
6. **Help people become Creative Process Coaches.** Learning how the creative process works – and then how to work the process – is vital for long-term benefits. It’s not enough to help people have more ideas today. Our clients need to know how to manage individual and interpersonal issues that arise when the coach or consultant is not around. And as people learn to coach themselves they can develop their skill in coaching others for creative performance.
7. **Explore interpersonal dynamics.** It’s messy, and not as much fun as making a collage, but if we are going to effect lasting change, we must help our clients understand and unravel the web of social and cultural factors that influence creative performance.
8. **Troubleshoot in real time through coaching and observation.** Coaching should be a cornerstone of any serious effort to enhance organizational creativity. Whether on a plateau or upward learning curve, working with a coach can help bump individuals and teams up to new levels of mastery in accelerated time. That’s because coaching meets people where they are – and helps them heighten awareness and reduce interference in situations that are real, relevant, and timely.
9. **Widen your set of lenses to assess, explain, and intervene.** Addressing issues in creative performance requires a comprehensive set of lenses to unravel the web of influencing factors. We look at no fewer than 16 key areas to troubleshoot issues in the creative process.

In the current ethos of accountability, ethical concerns, and skin-tight budgets, we are all facing increasing pressure to deliver programs with measurable impact. For efforts aimed at improving organizational creativity, this poses a unique challenge – because the impact of interventions cannot be traced in a linear manner. To meet this challenge with responsibility, professionals who work in the area of creativity and innovation must review their approach and deepen the focus of interventions in order to demonstrate and justify value. At the same time, internal HR and Learning & Development staff must clarify the criteria they use to evaluate creativity consultants, coaches, and programs.

Together, we can ensure that work to enhance organizational creativity and innovation is deep enough to have a lasting effect, fits the unique circumstances of our clients, and helps to add tangible value to the success of our clients and client organizations.

