CREATIVITY IN THE WORKPLACE

BY TIM TOKARCZYK, JAKE APPELMAN, AND VANESSA WINZENBURG

Encouraging creativity in the workplace can do great things for productivity, not to mention morale.

CREATIVITY PLAYS A VITAL ROLE IN ALL ASPECTS OF AN ORGANIZATION, YET ITS IMPORTANCE IS OFTEN MISUNDERSTOOD OR BRUSHED ASIDE AS INSIGNIFICANT. Creativity involves the ability to transcend traditional ideas or processes and create meaningful, novel ideas and applications. By better understanding creative thought and by increasing the creative ability of your workers, the workplace can be transformed into an environment of increased productivity and superior performance.

Thinking: Productive or Reproductive?

True creative thought comes from a shift in your basic mental paradigm. As you grow up, you face problems and develop solutions to those problems. When you face similar problems, you refer to your past solutions to shape your response. Humans are uniquely suited to learning from experience and rapidly responding in a conventional manner.

This type of thought is *reproductive*, meaning you look back on similar problems and generate a response. Reproductive thought is vital, because it saves the time otherwise required to mentally process the answer. The speed and familiarity with which we solve common problems often limits our ability to generate novel, creative ideas. For example, let's say a worker is assigned a problem to solve that he has faced many times throughout his career. Most likely, the worker will use reproductive thought, recalling how he solved the problem in the past, and follow the same steps to reach the solution. However, this limits the worker in his problem solving, since by relying on previously used methods, he eliminates the possibility of finding new, better ways to reach a solution. While the worker may reach the conclusion desired using reproductive thought, he may overlook a much more effective and effi-

cient way to reach an even better solution. Furthermore, in a constantly changing business environment, the solutions used in the past will not necessarily work in the future.

One key to creative thought is shifting from reproductive thought to *productive* thought. Instead of referencing your mental library for examples of successful solutions, productive thought requires you to look at problems differently and develop an entirely new set of possibilities. When you convince yourself there is only one answer to a problem, you limit the potential of opening up new worlds. In many cases, creativity comes from exploring all the possibilities when a proven solution is already on the table.

In an increasingly competitive world, organizations need to consistently challenge themselves to reassess their current activities, looking for not only a solution to a problem, but the best solution. The best organizations—and the ones achieving the most success in the 21st century and beyond—will be the ones that are never satisfied with their current operations and are constantly pushing themselves to dig deeper, to think in new ways, and to relentlessly pursue improvement.

When we find an answer or solution, most of us stop searching. However, simply because we have one possible answer does not mean that we have found the only answer or solution, or even the best one. Being inquisitive after arriving at one possible solution will most likely lead to even better results. What would people in your organization do?

Reproductive thought is fine as long as your organization continues to face the same types of problems you have always faced. However, the modern challenge of a flattening world makes this more and more unlikely. The strategies and techniques you employed in the past will work less and less well. Countries and people from around the world share a connection in ways un-

like any before in human history. While this has created great opportunities for people all across the globe, it has also made the world a much more competitive place. The flattening of the world has created vast opportunities, yet it challenges companies to innovate persistently and constantly assess past actions in order to facilitate constant improvement. The answer to this challenge is the flexibility and adaptability that comes from creativity.

Creativity Myths

Multiple myths about creativity work to discourage leaders from creating a truly creative environment in their workplace. These myths range from the type of people who can be creative to the role creativity should play in the workplace. Only by examining these myths and pursuing the truth about creativity can we gather a real understanding of the value creativity brings to organizations.

Myth 1: Creativity is for dreamers. An often-cited fallacy about creativity is that it is only for the unrealistic dreamers and artists among us. However, creativity as a strategic advantage plays out at all levels and across all job functions. The most successful companies are the ones that utilize the creative potential of all their workers, not just "the creative ones." Anyone can learn to be creative and contribute that creativity towards enhancing the bottom line. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that following a two-year internal creativity course at General Electric, a 60% increase in patentable ideas occurred throughout the organization. At Sylvania, thousands of employees took a 40-hour course in using creativity to solve problems in the workplace. The return on investment for the creativity course was $20 for every $1 spent. Pittsburgh Plate Glass offered its employees a creativity training program, which resulted in a 300% increase in practical ideas among attendees compared with those who

declined to enroll in the program. Each of these examples shows an organization that committed itself to improving workplace creativity, and witnessed fast, measurable results as a result.

Myth 2: Creativity is for geniuses. You may also find it surprising to know that creativity is not linked to intelligence. The physicist Richard Feynman is widely regarded as the last great American mind, despite having a merely above-average IQ of 122. However, his ability to think differently led to paradigm-shifting work including expanding the theory of quantum electrodynamics, exploring the physics of the superfluidity of super-cooled liquid helium and developing particle theory. You can probably come up with examples from your own experiences of people who were brilliant but lacked a shred of creativity, and people with average intelligence who were bursting with creative ideas. Creativity is not tied to genius. Under the right circumstances, any employee is capable of generating true creative thought.

Myth 3: Creativity does NOT belong on the front lines. One of the most limiting approaches a leader can take is to assume that creativity belongs only in the executive suite or marketing department. Some of the most creative approaches come from front-line people who have the opportunity to problem-solve on a day-to-day basis. While they obviously have other tasks and need to complete their jobs on time, it is essential for field employees to play a role in developing creative solutions for the organization. These employees are the ones who put work in place for the organization.

Building a Creative Workforce to Enhance Productivity

One of the difficulties with enhancing creativity in organizations stems from involving field people as agents of creative change. To capitalize on this worker perspective, leaders must create an environment in which these workers are encouraged to develop creative ideas and solutions that will better the whole organization. Sadly, most American companies fail to capitalize on valuable innovations created by employees. In his book, *Corporate Creativity: How Innovation and Improvement Actually Happens*, author Alan Robinson reports, "American companies adopt about 38% of all creative ideas presented to them,

as compared to Japanese companies that adopt about 90%." By taking steps to ensure your workplace is conducive to creativity, your organization can benefit from the creative innovations your employees are capable of developing.

To improve creativity in the workplace, leaders need to focus on creating a more open and supportive environment. They can accomplish this by providing better support for their employees, recognizing them for good performance, and giving them positive feedback. Leaders also need to actively listen to their employees and act on their needs.

There are a number of structured systems and processes that managers can employ to ensure their organization is actively searching for and utilizing the creative ideas of the workforce. These include formal After Action Reviews (AARs), suggestion systems, individual meetings or lunches, and employee surveys. AARs are professional discussions that allow groups or teams to assess a project or major activity and determine specifically what outcome occurred and why. Through AARs, employees learn from both the successes and stumbling blocks encountered during a project or activity, and use that knowledge to broaden their perspectives. Instead of simply having a suggestion box, organizations should move toward suggestion systems, a formalized process for listening to employee thoughts and ideas and then aggressively acting on them.

When leaders react positively and openly toward new ideas, they help create an open and supportive environment in which employees not only feel free to express ideas, but also feel encouraged to do so. Employee surveys can be used to elicit suggestions and ideas from the workforce, while conveying the message that employee input is valued and expected. Similarly, all ideas should at least receive consideration, and those that potentially add the most value should be acted upon quickly.

Leaders can also take steps to encourage their employees to think differently. A popular tactic is to make one worker each month responsible for explaining an innovation in the industry, or a new business idea that they have read about and researched, to the team. By presenting an idea or innovation and then discussing how it could be integrated into their own organization, the employee will start thinking about their own work

in new ways. The employee will also begin focusing on creative solutions to improve the way they perform. Leaders can also focus more on asking the right questions, rather than always supplying an answer. This will work to stimulate employees' creativity and allow them to think through complex issues.

Major Barriers to Creativity

Leaders face several challenges in developing a creative environment for their workers. Understanding the major barriers to this process can help leaders avoid stalling in their attempts to increase creativity in the workforce. Many organizations do not focus energy on increasing creativity because of a lack of time; a lack of understanding of the role that creativity plays; biases as to the types of people capable of truly creative thought; and a lack of a sense of urgency for innovation. These challenges can be overcome by addressing each and developing solutions that fit your individual organization.

Research shows that the quickest way to suppress workplace creativity is through managers who too closely monitor their workers. Employees need to feel that they have some degree of independence in their work. The resulting increase in the employees' sense of personal responsibility will create an environment where they feel free to come up with new, useful ideas to improve multiple aspects of the workplace. To foster a creative culture, employees must be motivated primarily by the work itself, not the organization's system of rewards. Meaningful, challenging work coupled with an environment in which employees are free to express their opinions, share ideas, and stimulate thought will bring forth the most creative ideas from the workforce.

Benefits of Developing a Creative Workforce

Injecting creative thought into organizations results in multiple benefits. These include increases in quality, productivity, and efficiency. Dr. Ellen Domb, president of the PQR Group and editor of the *TRIZ Journal*, conducted research on the relationship between creativity and quality, and concluded: "Creativity improvement enhances quality improvement. Quality analysis tells us what our customers want, what our processes need, and what our employees need, but creativity is needed to find ways to make these new products, ser-

vices, systems, and processes happen." Creativity allows organizations to work more intelligently.

Finally, employees who are allowed to tap into their creative sides are generally more highly engaged in their positions and experience higher morale. This causes these employees to have a higher sense of commitment to their jobs and their companies, which results in higher productivity by minimizing the amount of turnover. In addition to a more productive workforce, increasing employee creativity may result in performance or process improvements that allow you to better serve your customers and gain competitive advantage.　**MSC**

Tim Tokarczyk, Jake Appelman, and Vanessa Winzenburg are all consultants with FMI Corporation. They can be reached at ttokarczyk@fminet.com, jappelman@fminet.com, and vwinzenburg@fminet.com, respectively.