Creating a Climate of Creativity

by Mike Hawkins
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Imitation products, boring value propositions, and dull themes seem to be in vogue these days. There are exceptions of course, but the lack of innovation truly manifests itself by the number of people and companies who so quickly turn to reducing their prices instead of improving their value add. I also find it interesting that so many jump on other's fresh ideas instead of formulating their own. I can't help but think that in our increasingly busy lives, personally and professionally, we're losing our creativity. Why else would people be so quick to settle for other's ideas and the status-quo when there are so many opportunities for improvement?

In people's defense, it takes more time to conceive something new than it does to follow something existing. It is also risky business trying something new. After all, you might fail. You might look foolish. Or you might work for a creativity stifling manager who punishes risk takers and particularly those who fail.

There is also the excuse "I'm just not a very creative person". Well, neither am I, but that doesn't stop me from putting myself at reasonable risk on a regular basis by trying new ideas. I follow the advice of Edward De Bono, a leading authority in the field of creative thinking who said, *"It is better to have enough ideas for some of them to be wrong, than to be always right by having no ideas at all."*

The reality is that anyone can be creative. Creativity is more of a cultivated ability than a natural one. In fact, any manager can stimulate a climate of creativity. Here are eight principles to follow to bring out the creative ability in yourself and in your teams:

1. Adopt the mindset. Before cultivating the creative ability, cultivate the creative mindset. Ensure the question "Why do we need to be creative?" is answered. Build up the awareness of the need to be creative. Give examples of innovation and its benefits to your organization, or the lack of it and its harmful effects. Ensure the motivators to pursue creativity are firmly in place. Create enthusiasm for asking questions and challenging the status quo.

2. Free up time. When you have a two page to-do list and are in back-to-back phone calls and meetings all day, you don't have time to be creative. You can only hope to get to your next meeting on time. The first step in releasing creativity is creating time to be creative. You need white space on your calendar. The cliché that the best ideas come while you are in the shower has more truth than you might realize. When in a relaxing setting where you are free from distractions, your mind is free to wander. Create time and opportunities for ideas to percolate.

3. Change your routine. When you drive the same way to work every day, order the same cup of latte, sit at the same desk, meet in the same conference room, talk to the same people, and do the same thing day after day, you build engrained habits of thought and action. These habits create resistance to new ways of thinking and behaving. Change your surroundings. Seek out more diverse venues for meetings. Meet new people, visit different customers, go to new places, experience new activities, and pursue different types of knowledge.

4. Leverage diversity. People attract and generally spend time with people like themselves. Overtime people surround themselves with like minded people with similar personality traits and thought patterns. It makes for enjoyable company, but is terrible when trying to see the world in new ways and cultivate new ideas. Build teams of diverse people with different perspectives, abilities, backgrounds, interests, personalities, and knowledge.

5. Foster communications and openness to new ideas. Break down barriers to communications or any elements of your organizational ecosystem that present obstacles to sharing and being open. Cultivate trust between business units and people so that people are collaborating instead of competing. Create common goals, interlinked processes, and cross-functional measurements to enhance idea sharing.

6. Be willing to take reasonable risks. A sterile culture where people fear stepping out and taking risks that might make them look foolish isn't conducive to innovation. Nor is a climate of mindless tactical execution. Reward stepping out of routines and comfort zones. Create learning environments where it is safe to fail.

7. Challenge the status quo. Most new ideas are extensions of existing ones. Creativity isn't usually a big-bang of something totally new, but an incremental extension of something existing. Challenge existing assumptions. Challenge the status quo. Assume existing norms are transient and there is a better way. Brainstorm new ideas with "what if" questions like "what if we didn't have these constraints?" or "what if we did the exact opposite?"

8. Be an expert. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his book *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, suggests that you should be a master before a creator. Pursue expertise and become fluent in your domain before trying to extend your domain. To come up with new ideas and approaches, you need to know the old ideas and ways first.

Follow these eight principles and watch your and your team's creativity soar.

Mike Hawkins is author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.activatingyourambition.com), and president of Alpine Link Corporation (www.alpinelink.com), a consulting firm specializing in helping individuals and organizations reach their peak potential.

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