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Creativity: are you building it or crushing it?

When it comes to creativity, fear of criticism, judgment, of taking risks and putting your reputation on the line is a huge obstacle

By Mike Desjardins

We're born creative and continually experience the excitement of that creativity as we grow. Over time, our environment and experiences can cause us to fall into thinking patterns that get in the way of our creativity.

Your job as a leader is to help shift thinking and remove these obstacles:

Play is frivolous. We're told that children play and adults are meant to be serious. This creates the self-limiting belief that if something starts to feel too much like fun then it can't possibly be productive work. Start by changing your thought patterns around creativity. The more you let go of the existing beliefs and thoughts that limit you in thinking of new possibilities, the more you can explore creativity. Find small ways to be creative everyday while encouraging the same in others. If you're interesting in watching a truly outstanding creative process in action, search "IDEO Shopping Cart" on youtube.com and watch their process. (Thanks to Cactus Club CEO Richard Jaffray for recommending this video.)

Creativity comes from creative people. When people think that creativity is the job of marketing or PR, they disable their own creativity. Once they understand that creativity is a choice for all of us, not part of a select few people's job descriptions, the realms of possibility open up substantially. As a leader, consider where you might be categorizing others as "creative" or "not creative." Work on altering that thought pattern to embrace the idea that we all have that capacity by asking people for ideas on projects when you normally wouldn't seek their input.

Deciding before you start. If you think you know the answer before you start the creative process, then you may be limiting yourself to a smaller set of possibilities. Instead, view your idea as only one possible solution and look at it from new perspectives. Curiosity creates leverage in brainstorming so ask a lot of questions, considering as many different view points as you can.

Believing there is a "right" answer. When we focus our problem solving on trying to find the "right" answer, there's a tendency to have a narrow focus. This prevents us from exploring the problem or opportunity in favour of trying to "fix it" as soon as possible. Try "reverse brainstorming," where you reverse the problem or challenge by brainstorming answers to the question "How could we possibly cause this problem." Once you have a number of ideas to solve the reverse problem, reverse them into solutions for the original problem or challenge.

Stinking thinking. The easiest way to kill a brainstorming session is with killer statements: “We’ve tried that before,” “That won’t work in this market,” “We don’t have the resources/budget” (this one’s my personal favourite). Next time you’re in a brainstorming session with your team, take a positive approach by first getting all the ideas out on the table before debating or discussing any of them.

Fear of failure. When it comes to creativity, fear of criticism, judgment, of taking risks and putting your reputation on the line is a huge obstacle. After all, your ideas may be a complete flop, so it just feels safer to stick to the status quo. As a leader, it’s your job to create the space for people to take the risk. Consider failure as feedback; focus on and celebrate learning, how to move forward, and what to do differently next time.

No time or space. As companies grow and times get busier, your focus may be on solely on day-to-day operations. Setting aside some unscheduled time in your week is a great way to provide you the space to be creative. If you ask most leaders when they’re most creative they respond with, “on my commute, in the shower, while exercising, after a good night’s sleep, on planes, and while staring out the window.” I’ve never heard a leader respond with, “while on a conference call, in between a day stacked with meetings, or when my schedule is overwhelming.” Schedule “white space” in your calendar to just sit back and let your thoughts wander, ideally outside of the office. •

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