

# LEADERSHIP: ENABLING CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

BY MARGOT ZIELINSKA, KENEXA<sup>®</sup>  
ARTICLE ORIGINALLY FEATURED IN TRAININGZONE

**T**oday's leaders may be educated, knowledgeable and experienced, but many are still struggling to keep their companies competitive in the current economic climate. Their expertise and scientific methods will not help them predict the future in our modern, ambiguous, complex and ever-evolving environment. In these challenging times of economic crisis, leaders will often exert caution, make careful, low-risk decisions and focus on cutting costs to keep their company afloat. However, at a time when constant change has become a way of life, there is also a realization that these strategies will not be effective in the long-term.

Steve Jobs once famously said, "The cure for Apple is not cost-cutting. The cure for Apple is to innovate its way out of its current predicament." And that is what leaders have to do: innovate to find a way out of problems. Innovation has again become a buzz word in the business world. Historically, this is how proactive organizations have succeeded in a competitive environment. It is up to leaders to promote the conditions for creativity and instill a culture of innovation in their organizations. But how should they do that?

Psychological constructs of creativity and innovation have been widely researched in the organizational context. Creativity is associated with generating new ideas and concepts by individuals, whereas innovation refers to their successful implementation in practice, often by groups or organizations. Therefore, all innovation starts with creativity. However, as they are both separate constructs, creativity and innovation require different conditions in order to flourish.

## ENABLING CREATIVITY

For creativity to take place, an individual must feel appreciated, positive, safe, free from stress and threats to their identity, and know that their new ideas will be appreciated, not ridiculed. The job characteristics also influence levels of individual creativity and these are: skill variety and challenge, meaning and impact of the task, freedom, autonomy in how to perform the job and feedback. And of course we must not forget about motivation; individuals need to be motivated to think creatively. So this is the first tip for leaders wanting to promote the conditions for creativity—it all starts with creating a culture of respect with the right balance of support, variety and challenge, in which individuals can create safely and feel appreciated. How then do you get all those creative individuals to be innovative at the group and organizational level?

## ENABLING INNOVATION

To take advantage of the creative ideas of individuals, and to foster an organizational culture of innovation, there are four key areas on which leaders should concentrate.

### *Embrace Diversity*

Each of us has a natural tendency to prefer, hire, notice, reward, develop and trust people who are “like us.” This leads us to “think alike,” and not creatively. To truly foster innovation, a variety of differing perspectives is needed: people with different backgrounds, experiences, knowledge bases, skills, genders, ages, ethnicity, professional orientations and levels within the organization. Of course having a diverse workforce is not enough in itself, it requires appropriate managing and creating an inclusive climate in which everyone can perform to their potential.

### *Embrace the Challenge and Change*

Change is often seen as threatening. Many of us resist change and we seek to protect “tried and tested” ways of doing things or we defend our own points of view. Such attitudes lead to loss of motivation, reduced morale, unnecessary competitiveness and a decrease in performance. However, in today’s world, change is here to stay. Relying on “tried and tested” solutions is often impossible. Innovation is a challenge and constitutes a threat to the status quo because implementing new ideas requires change. Therefore to foster innovation, leaders must create a culture in which both challenge and change are accepted as norms and sought after.

### *Devote the Time*

Innovation will only happen when people are explicitly given the time and space to be innovative. We may want innovative solutions but paradoxically we are often too busy, hectic and pressurized to truly achieve them. Of course, some amount of pressure is necessary for innovation, however, in the long-term, reflexivity (having the time to reflect upon objectives, strategies and processes) is one of the key predictors of innovation and performance in groups and individually. The benefit of allowing teams or individuals to reflect on what they do is invaluable.

### *Communicate Openly*

Communication is vital at all levels and at all times, even when things are difficult. Innovation can only survive in the long-term in an environment where communication is open, challenge is welcome and processes are transparent.

This list is by no means exhaustive, as research in the area of creativity and innovation is rich and abundant. There is a wealth of information and advice out there for leaders to absorb.

### **WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?**

So, how come we know so much about creativity and innovation yet we have trouble finding a way forward?

It’s not easy to find an all-encompassing answer. However, what comes to mind is the gap between the theory and the practical application of these ideas. As I mentioned earlier, many leaders are well-educated, and may understand the issues and know what is best in the long-term, but in practice they often need to show stakeholders the difference they’re making to the bottom line and so they focus on productivity and efficiency in the short-term. That is why for innovation to truly become part of the organizational culture it must be entrenched in organizational values. To achieve this, leaders must not only create the culture but they must also live the values themselves, not only by providing appropriate direction and putting structures in place but also by making time to foster their own creativity. They must make efforts to notice and reward creativity and innovation, not just productivity. They must not be afraid of conflict and diversity but should encourage people to have different opinions, as these can lead to innovative solutions.

The same can also be said for us internal and external consultants in our capacity as advisers to businesses. We should educate our clients and encourage them to create climates and cultures of innovation. Sometimes that requires stepping back from the project or deadline and giving ourselves time for reflexivity. ■

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

#### **Margot Zielinska**

Margot Zielinska is a Consultant at Kenexa®. She is a Business Psychologist and an Executive Coach with experience in leadership and personal development, training delivery and design, coaching, assessment and selection. She has worked with clients in both public and private sectors, in Europe and the Middle East designing and delivering custom assessment and development programs as well as providing coaching for individuals. Ms. Zielinska holds a degree in Psychology, a Master of Science in Organizational Psychology, Diploma in Coaching and is currently completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Executive Coaching. She is BPS level A and B certified to administer and interpret psychometric instruments. She is a full member of the British Psychological Society and its Division of Occupational Psychology and Special Group in Coaching Psychology.

[www.kenexa.com](http://www.kenexa.com)  
[contactus@kenexa.com](mailto:contactus@kenexa.com)