

Leading for Creativity

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When leading for creativity, there are often a number of hidden and known influences that affect the presence and type of creativity produced. The work environment contains a number of intentional and unintentional factors that foster or inhibit creativity. Leaders can greatly impact the creativity (or lack of it) in an organization.

Too often leaders walk away from managing creativity because they feel they don't have the ability or resources at hand. In reality, many basic people-management practices have been shown to be quite effective in encouraging creativity. Leaders can use these practices to create an intentional drive and culture for creativity.

At its core, leading for creativity is about motivating individuals. We motivate through goals, feedback, rewards, teaching, clearing obstacles and creating vision. Even though we are describing these actions as leading for creativity, these are sound practices of people management in general. In other words, they are indicative of what good leaders do every day.

Goal setting provides employees with a sense of meaning and purpose in what they do. Setting creativity goals, therefore, can help increase motivation to participate in (and sustain) creative tasks. Making clear dictums and expectations essentially gives employees permission to be creative. It also means that the leader has to be purposeful and directive in setting these expectations and parameters. By all means creativity may be inspired from within, but when a leader sets goals and expectations for creativity, it means creativity may be safely expressed and will be valued.

Creativity goals need boundaries to make the ultimate outcomes beneficial for the organization. Creativity isn't about a free-for-all. It needs scope. It needs limits. So when setting creativity goals, leaders also need to set an understanding of the acceptable levels of risk. From this come clear definitions of how one's work will be evaluated. This provides a framework for which employees can self-manage through the process. It keeps the work grounded in practicality, while encouraging growth and development.

Successful goal attainment requires good continued feedback throughout the process. Therefore, when establishing creativity goals, milestones and feedback need to be provided by the leader to ensure that things stay on track. Good feedback can also be highly motivating—especially in creative tasks. It builds confidence that one is on the right path.

Beyond goal setting, creativity can be fostered by leaders exhibiting creative behavior themselves. This is another way that leaders give employees "permission" to be creative. It also provides a way for employees to learn how to be creative. They can see what kind of behaviors are expected, accepted, recognized and rewarded.

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Given this, it should be no surprise that unconventional leader behavior has been shown to positively influence creativity. Keep in mind that what is conventional or unconventional is defined by one's work context. What is unconventional for IBM may be conventional for Apple. Regardless, the more employees can experience creativity, directly or indirectly, the better they can execute creative goals and tasks effectively and to the benefit of the organization. Seeing your leader doing something different and off the beaten path may open the door for employees to do the same when needed.

Once desired creative behaviors are learned and executed, you sustain creativity by rewarding it. Researchers have long perpetrated the myth that you can't manage creativity because you can't reward it, that extrinsic rewards inhibit creativity. In reality, it is the lack of reward and recognition of creative efforts that can inhibit further creativity. Recent research suggests that rewards can indeed positively influence organizational creativity. The hitch is that the rewards have to be meaningful to the individual. This element of employee motivation is often lacking.

Motivation is a personal thing. Leaders need to tailor rewards and recognition to those things that are most meaningful to the recipient. When the rewards are appropriate, and coupled with clarity, direction and feedback (i.e., good goal setting), then the right elements are in place for employees to be motivated to act creatively.

Another way in which leaders can provide support to creativity is by providing time. Being creative is an effortful process which takes energy and time. Organizations such as Bank of America regularly schedule time for their employees to generate new ideas.

Additionally, leaders can provide (or serve as) informational resources to their employees. They can make available the information employees need to be creative, insightful, and appropriately informed. Time and resources can also be obtained by leaders removing obstacles from employees' creative efforts. For example, reducing work loads on other projects, or providing additional funding, or bringing in additional team members. Removing obstacles is also a way by which leaders affirm support for their employees' efforts. Research shows that it is important for employees to feel supervisor support in order to sustain the creative effort.

Examples of leader support include removing obstacles, supporting and championing team members' ideas, inquiring regularly about work and progress, recognizing good work (both privately and publicly), helping when problems arise, and asking for ideas.

Leading also means creating a shared understanding, or a mental model, among team members—in other words, creating a shared vision among the team. This is the inspirational aspect of the creative endeavors. The vision, like the goals, should help set parameters, but also provide motivation, to be creative. This takes the leadership from what is established with individuals and makes it relevant for the whole team.

Another factor that leaders control that encourages creativity for the whole team is effective conflict management. Conflict is a great source for creative direction and innovation, but it has to be managed in a way that allows for effective resolution. Leaders need to help the teams face conflicts and see them as opportunities to forge new directions and processes.

Leaders can also foster creativity in teams by providing structure and guidance through developing team norms and culture, and encouraging participation. Leaders who encourage discussion and collaboration will subsequently influence knowledge and information sharing. These are building blocks for creative action.

The power of good leadership practices on creativity should not be underestimated. Too often these very effective people-management practices fall by the wayside in the hustle of daily work activities. However, those leaders who take the time to put these practices into purposeful action will be rewarded significantly.

Thus, the first step in leading for creativity is to realize that the toolbox is not too different from what you already know. The challenge is applying those tools in a consistent and sustained manner. Incorporating these practices into what you do every day will mean you will eventually, naturally, create an environment that fosters, supports, and models creativity, as well as good leadership. ■

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Anne E. Herman, Ph.D., serves as a research consultant for the Kenexa Research Institute. Dr. Herman worked previously for two years as a research consultant for Kenexa's survey team. She has extensive consulting experience in performance management, organizational assessment and change, creativity and innovation, employee selection and promotion, organizational strategy, program evaluation and statistical methodology. Her research interests include problem solving and decision making, creativity and innovation, leadership, organizational motivation, survey design and program effectiveness. Dr. Herman has spoken at many conferences and her research has appeared in several publications. She has taught graduate and undergraduate courses in leadership, business strategy, organizational behavior and behavioral statistics.

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