

# Recognizing the Value of Creativity and Innovation in Organizations: Recognition is Not Enough

By Anne E. Herman, Ph.D., Kenexa Research Institute and Jeffrey M. Saltzman, M.A., Kenexa

Organizations have increasingly become interested in creativity and innovation, in part as a response to the pressures associated with globalization, competition, economic factors and technology changes. Many organizational leaders see creativity as an opportunity for gaining a sustainable competitive advantage.

An outcome or result is interpreted as creative if it is both novel and appropriate (Amabile, 1996). Though much of the early research on creativity focused on major breakthroughs or radical ideas in science and art (referred to as “Big C”), these kinds of creative activities would not be functional in organizations. In the context of an organization, we need creative output (e.g., solution, product) to have a suitable fit within the organizational vision and goals. Thus, the opportunity for most of us to be creative will be different. We are more likely to be presented with the opportunities to be creative in less extreme ways, such as the adaptation of a process or solving a problem (known as “little c”).

Is your organization helping to set the stage for “little c”? Most of us might not really be able to answer this question. What should an organization do to promote and sustain creativity? Are there current processes in place that can influence employee creativity? Is anything being done that is actually inhibiting creativity?

Organizations often unintentionally influence creativity positively or negatively through various actions that are standard practice. Though not an exhaustive list, here is a set of factors that might prove useful to consider when assessing your organization’s current creativity climate:

## Job Characteristics

The characteristics of employees’ jobs can influence organizational creativity. To the extent that it is possible, allowing employees to have a choice in the types of activities in which they participate enables them to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. Employees who perceive that they have freedom or flexibility in how they perform their jobs are also likely to feel free to be creative. Employees who enjoy positive and complex challenges are more likely to be creative, unless the challenges become overwhelming.

## Encouragement of Creativity

Organizational leaders can play a critical role in encouraging creativity through goal setting. Goal setting provides employees a purpose for 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.

Creativity goals cannot be given without boundaries to make the ultimate outcomes meaningful for the organization. Expectations are needed regarding acceptable levels of risk, as well as 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. In addition to explicitly encouraging creativity, organizational leaders can help to create a culture that allows for risk taking.

## Organizational/Work Group/Supervisory Support

Are your employees encouraged to work together, or do they work separately? Is it normal for employees to consult with one another

to obtain diverse perspectives? Employees who feel support from their co-workers and organizations are more likely to be creative. Similarly, do your employees manage conflict among themselves, or with the help of their supervisor? Organizations that encourage and provide employee support for managing conflict may be unintentionally encouraging employee creativity efforts. Controlled conflict has been shown to facilitate creativity.

In addition to providing encouragement through the setting of creative goals, supervisors can provide supportive supervision. Supervisors can meet with employees to provide a sounding board. Additionally, supervisors can be role models by being creative themselves. This demonstration of creativity provides employees the license to, in turn, be creative.

### Resources

One of the most critical resources that will influence your employees' creativity is time. Being creative is an effortful process that 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 by helping them get the information they need to be creative, insightful and appropriately informed.

### Obstacles/Impediments

Removing obstacles is a way in which leaders affirm support for their employees' efforts. One of the potential obstacles to creativity that may be present in an organization is negative workload pressures. Employees who are held to stringent time pressures, or who have sizable workloads, are less likely to be creative.

Leaders removing obstacles from employees' creative efforts will also help generate time and resources that encourage creativity. Research shows that it is important for employees to feel supervisor support in order to sustain the creative effort—for example, reducing workloads on other projects, or providing extra funding, or bringing in additional team members.

We know that people, especially as children, are often naturally creative. Individuals come into organizations hoping to perform at high levels, to try new things, to excel and use their creative talent. However, rigid work policies and practices often drive creativity out of the organizational environment. In some organizations, it does not take long for employees to learn that the nail that sticks up gets hammered down. That is why organizations that desire to maintain and develop the creativity that people bring to the job should be closely monitoring their organizational culture. The best method that organizational psychologists currently have for doing that is the employee survey. It is important in these surveys to directly ask about creativity and innovation (Is it encouraged? Do you have what you need to be creative or innovative?). It is equally important to ask about other aspects of culture that nurture creativity,

such as having an environment where people with diverse backgrounds can succeed. Creativity comes about almost naturally in organizations; it is up to organizations to adopt policies and practices that nurture, rather than stamp out, creative instincts. ■

### About the Authors

#### Anne E. Herman, Ph.D.

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.

Dr. Herman is a member of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Academy of Management, American Psychological Association and the Organization Development Network. She holds a Master of Arts degree in psychology and a Doctorate in industrial and organizational psychology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

#### Jeffrey M. Saltzman, M.A.

Jeffrey M. Saltzman, M.A., is the east coast practice leader at Kenexa. With more than 25 years of field experience, he has extensive consulting experience in diverse settings including heavy industry and high technology manufacturing, service organizations and federal government agencies. Mr. Saltzman has conducted employee research in organization effectiveness, recruitment and retention, merger-related issues, diversity, downsizing, communication methods, employee morale and engagement and cultural differences. He has also extensively studied customer satisfaction, repurchase and recommendation intentions, the linkages between employee and customer attitudes and bottom-line business performance.

Mr. Saltzman is a regular university lecturer and is a noted conference speaker. He holds a Master of Arts degree in industrial and organizational psychology from the University of Akron and a Bachelor of Arts degree from the State University of New York at Binghamton.

[www.kenexa.com](http://www.kenexa.com)  
866.391.9557