Enhancing Creativity

Overview

> ### Purpose
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> The purpose of this module is to enable participants to enhance a team's ability to be creative.
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> ### Objectives
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> At the end of this module participants will be able to:
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> - Explore attitudes that help or hinder the expression of creative ideas.
> - Identify how to improve the climate for creativity in team meetings.
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> ### Content
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> - Understanding Creativity
> - Blocks to Creativity
> - The Creative Team

Understanding Creativity

Creativity is *thinking* up new things. It is said that Albert Einstein developed the concept of the curvature of space while daydreaming about riding on a sunbeam. During World War II, a British scientist invented a bomb that would skip like a stone along the surface of the water before exploding against the restraining walls of German dams. Such concepts and inventions are the work of brilliant, creative people. However, progress could not be made if only those few people were asked to do the work.

Clearly, not all breakthroughs are the products of single minds. Teams can be extremely creative, particularly when they function so that "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" (i.e., together, the members can be more creative than if each member worked alone).

Whereas creativity is defined as *thinking* up new ideas, innovation is *doing* new things. A powerful new idea can be discussed for years, yet never used because no one assumed the responsibility for converting it from words into action. People often believe that creativity automatically leads to innovation.[1] Innovation takes place as a result of effective change management, which is discussed in Module 11.

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[1] Gretz, K.F. and Drozdeck, S.R. *Empowering Innovative People*, Chicago, Illinois: Probus Publishing, 1992.

How Does Creativity Work?

The process of creation is hard to describe in rational and objective terms. People often are unable to explain how ideas came to them. One is likely to hear that "It came to me in a dream" or that "Everything suddenly clicked." Edward Matchett, a British researcher who has studied the creative process, reports that people can learn to develop their creative potential by "tuning in" to latent aspects of themselves.[2] His research indicates that creativity is aided when people are emotionally, physically, and intellectually open to new ideas and experiences.

Despite the "it just happened" phenomenon, creativity does not have to be unplanned or haphazard. Teams can enhance their creativity with the use of relatively straightforward techniques. The creative process begins with the identification of a need and then of the "missing links" between the status quo and the realization of the need. Next, a new idea must emerge. The new idea can be anything from a logical extension of an existing process to a radical departure. Seldom is a new idea clear or fully developed at its inception; it has to be fleshed out, enlarged, extended, and simplified.

Blocks to Creativity

In exploring the process of developing creativity, it is useful to begin with the ways in which people are prevented from being more creative. Common blocks to creativity can be summarized under the following five headings[3]:

Block 1: Rigid Mind Set

Most people interpret their experiences according to their personal views of the world. People "filter" their interpretations of experiences so that the experiences justify their attitudes and beliefs. Of course, it is easier to see this rigidity in others than in oneself.

Block 2: Poor Communication Skills

People who are trying to express new ideas often are unclear, repetitious, or inconsistent. The excitement and anxiety about the new idea can interfere with their ability to communicate. The person trying to communicate a new idea must be attuned to the needs of the listener. The listener's level of understanding, beliefs, and relationship with the speaker all affect how he or she receives the new idea.

Several mistakes are common when presenting new ideas; all are likely to frustrate and "turn off" listeners. They are:

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[2] Matchett, E., and Trevelyan, G. *Twelve Seats at the Round Table,* , Jersey, U.K.: Neville Speerman, 1976.

[3] Adapted from Francis, Dave and Young, Don. *Improving Work Groups: A Practical Manual for Team Building*, San Diego, California: Pfeiffer & Company, 1992

- Inappropriate timing.
- Lack of specification.
- Repetitious and wordy speech.
- Failure to check with the listeners for understanding.
- Lack of focus and a rambling style of presentation.
- Critical and argumentative attitude.

Block 3: Lack of Open Expression

Much creativity stems from the discontent of people who perceive that present systems, methods, or products are inadequate. Their complaints and criticisms may be viewed as fuel that will spark new ideas. However this will only take place in an environment that values open expression of discontent. Although some kinds of open expression, such as giving praise, are easy to do, it is much more difficult to bring up matters that appear to be unresolvable, improper to discuss, or closed.

Many people find it difficult to be open about negative things, especially to the people who are responsible for them. If they choose to say anything at all, their criticisms probably will be muted and generalized and thereby have less impact.

Someone who is attempting to be more open about problems often will say, "I don't know where to begin." This person needs to begin anywhere. Out of his or her expressions of difficulty and emotion can come new energy to solve problems and manage progress.

Block 4: Lack of Knowledge or Acceptance of Techniques for Generating Creativity

Generating creative ideas may be enhanced through the use of specific techniques. Some techniques for generating creativity may be scorned if they appear to be too simplistic or "touchy-feely". However, a common creative technique, brainstorming is effective and accepted.

Brainstorming is a well-known tactic for generating ideas in a group. In brainstorming, the process of generating ideas is separated from the process of evaluating them. Instead of evaluating (or criticizing) ideas as they are suggested, the group suggests as many ideas as it can during a specified period of time, and one member records them for a later evaluation session. Criticism is not allowed during the idea-generation phase. Using this technique, a group can generate a large quantity of ideas rapidly.

There are many techniques and exercises that can open a team's thinking and foster more creative approaches. Some exercises which challenge a team to think differently about routine things may be found in the books cited in the References and Recommended Readings section of this module.

Block 5: Lack of Organizational Support

A team cannot be creative and innovative without the support and encouragement of management. Some organizations are exciting and stimulating places to work; others stifle the creative impulses of their employees. Examples of organizational practices that stifle creativity are:

- The repetition of meaningless tasks.
- Overly critical bosses.
- Restrictions on the scope of work.
- Authoritative decision making.
- Overly directive instructions and tight supervision - "micro-managing".
- Perception or reality of scarce resources.

The Creative Team

How Creative is Your Team?

Do the following statements apply to your team?

- Assumptions, values, and habits are never challenged.
- Change is not encouraged or welcomed.
- Adaptation to new challenges or circumstances is slow.
- Enthusiasm is shunned; creative members are demotivated.
- Team members' energy is low.
- The team is perceived as "behind" by other teams.

If the above items are true for your team, it is likely to be **low in creativity**.

What Does a Creative Team Look Like?

For a team to be creative, its members must question their habits and assumptions. Creative thinking should be encouraged, and all ideas should be explored and evaluated. Risk taking (with no recriminations) must be encouraged. Methods of researching new ideas need to be established.

Risk cannot be eliminated from creativity, and the most highly trained and experienced people will make errors. Accordingly, a climate that encourages creativity must include the norm that occasional failures are normal and acceptable.

A team climate that encourages creativity and risk taking also improves the work environment. The team will be less likely to become rigid and fearful of change. An effective, innovative team attracts creative people who will contribute new ideas. This keeps the team members challenged and confidant.

Creative teams in supportive organizations share the following qualities:

- Members can put aside conventional wisdom to challenge orthodox ways of thinking and acting.
- Creative people are encouraged to contribute to the team.
- The team experiments and learns from its experiences.
- "The way we do things around here" is to question the status quo and to seek ways to make improvements.
- Tolerance and openness to others' ideas are encouraged.
- The organization's reward system supports creativity.
- The team's ways of working increase its creative potential.

When an organization supports creativity, the creative urge spreads rapidly. Even though not all jobs contain equal opportunities for creativity, all can benefit from creative approaches and innovative thinking.

References and Recommended Readings

Francis, Dave and Young, Don. *Improving Work Groups: A Practical Manual for Team Building*, San Diego, California: Pfeiffer & Company, 1992.

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