

## Can we become more creative and innovative?

*This article presents very simple and direct ideas for action that management can implement in order to foster creativity and innovation in any kind of organization.*

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**D**oing things right is increasingly the prerequisite for entering any field or business. Doing it better is just not enough. Improving all the time is certainly not easy and has in some cases natural limits. Information is definitely a commodity. Many more people share the basic levels of education and access to information. People like to think that they are unique. But then they apply for a job and find out that there are tens or hundreds of others with similar skills, competencies and valuable experiences.

There is a growing need in our society for individuals and organizations to be creative and innovative. In a world driven increasingly by ideas, not physical strength, the best rewards are reserved increasingly for those that dare to think, act and make things differently. We revere and pay tribute to artists, scientists and business entrepreneurs that create new possibilities and experiences. Some may even become global legends almost immediately after their creations bear fruit. Some singers can go from obscurity to glory and world tours in a couple of years; some scientists now make global headlines and even successful business entrepreneurs are now sometimes seen as major stars who are valued dearly by society.

Creative salespeople that come up with new negotiation strategies or arrangements that

make everyone win are incredibly valuable. Most negotiation courses, however, teach them very limited skills because the negotiation is honed by years of practice. Great marketers do not necessarily follow all the four, five or even seven Ps that are taught in business school. Highly ingenious engineers learn as much by tinkering as by attending courses and seminars. Creative salespeople, great marketers and ingenious engineers are highly admired everywhere. They achieve great things despite the odds. We know we like them and would love to have more of them in our lives and in our organizations. But, are most organizations really doing anything about it? I believe not.

Almost all organizations these days are talking about the need to be more innovative, beat the competition, surprise customers and get out of the commodity business. If however, you ask what they are doing about it, they will hardly list anything that boosts creativity and innovation in a major way. They will likely say that they are throwing some money into market research, providing a one-off creativity course for employees or putting more people in R&D.

Transforming an organization into one that is highly innovative begs, in our opinion, a completely different set of parameters and questioning fundamental concepts about how we learn, create

and generate value for our organizations. We will now discuss some of the things (see figure below) that we have learned over the last few years about creativity, learning and innovative organizations.

**Figure: Fostering Innovation**



#### **More risk**

No risk, no innovation. It is as simple as that. If you do not change your own risk profile or that of your organization, you will not make a dent in the innovation spiral. This is of course very hard for most people and organizations to do. For the most part, there are no rewards for breaking rules, failing or trying. There are many cases of people who tried, failed and got sacked. This is a tough world. But can you truly afford not to risk? Stories of major successes are often preceded by stories of people who put themselves on the line. We are

not advocating embracing risk carelessly. Smart organizations recognize the inherent aspect of risk in innovation and develop risk-sharing, hedging and other mechanisms for reducing the impact of failure.

#### **Work hard**

Innovation is hard work. It's not about sitting in a comfortable chair and waiting for "Eureka!" Innovation is different from creativity. Companies benefit from new products, processes and business models that actually are implemented. This is not

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to say that to innovate one needs to work like a machine. Great innovators do not wait for ideas to just appear, they search for them and they find each other. Yes, innovators look for ideas and ideas look for innovators. And when they find each other they make sure they are materialized and that there will be buyers for them. It is indeed hard work!

#### **More breaks**

Our minds work in mysterious ways. Nobody knows why exactly that happens, but the history of innovation is filled with “Eurekas!” that come when people are very relaxed. Work hard, find people who work hard, but give them a break or even better let them choose their breaks. That’s a sure way to get really new ideas.

#### **Less business plans**

Contrary to popular opinion, our strong belief is that business plans often hamper innovation. If every project in an organization pipeline has to be completely supported by strong business plans and detailed cash flow forecasts, the innovation stamina is not there and at some point the organization will start to lose its innovative edge. Analysis paralysis is a well-known phenomenon. Strong business innovation, however, does not need to be a crazy adventure. Innovators are usually able to tell convincing stories that bring them support from investors, colleagues and employees.

#### **More time alone**

Most organizations give no time for their employees to think. And they are often constantly bombarded by emails, phone calls, two-way pagers, useless meetings. Innovation is a funny phenomenon in that it is equally fueled by chaos and total peace. Different people will certainly be more or less innovative with different combinations of chaos and peace. Organizations seem, however, more adept to provide the former than the latter. Let your employees find their own balance and respect it!

#### **Many more ideas**

Prolific idea generators are the ones who once in a while produce ground-breaking ideas and innovations. It is like reading: the more you do it, the more you want to do it. They thrive in the act of creation. That’s fine, but organizations that live by quarterly results may dampen the energy of these individuals by giving clear signals that only very good ideas deserve any attention. But how the hell can you expect to build an idea creation environment and an innovative culture if new ideas are not respected? Those that have ventured to express or defend a new idea should be considered the new heroes of the knowledge-based organization. Good or bad, new ideas create new paradigms that when combined, transformed or reversed will result in value for the customers.

#### **More human senses**

Men have not evolved over millennia by looking at numbers and watching Power Point presentations. We learn and are impacted in multiple ways by all of our senses. A scent may awaken connections that go back to your childhood, for example, and this combined with whatever current challenge you’re facing might trigger a completely new idea. Far-fetched? Only if you think that mankind evolved looking at a computer screen. When thinking about innovation, it is important to leverage everything at one’s disposal and we can think of nothing more important than the (free) capability that is hidden in our own human senses.

#### **Diverse backgrounds**

Are you always hiring the same kind of people? Same social background, same schools, same ethnic roots and same locations? You may be doing ok, but you are probably missing out on a number of new perspectives. It is undoubtedly harder to hire people with diverse backgrounds and no doubt, you can recall a number of examples of how when you tried something different, it did not work out. Mix a number of people with very different approaches

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and you can create an explosive and destructive situation. Mixing different backgrounds requires a lot of maturity and a clear recognition that there will be many bumps. However, any expert on creativity will tell you that this is a risk and a task well worth taking.

### **More questioning**

What are the theories and paradigms of your business? Are there accepted truths about what works and does not work in your business and industry? Should salespeople be commissioned? Is it hard to sell directly to individuals? Is there no market for your product in developing countries? Costs can not be halved? People will not pay per song? Leasing will never work in this industry? Poor people will always put price first? The history of business is full of examples of organizations that broke all the rules and reinvented their industries (ex: Starbucks, Apple, Jetblue, etc.). So, isn't it worth it to have periodic meetings to question the existing very strong assumptions about one's own business. Some smart organizations do exactly that: they regularly get together their best minds to meet and attack the very foundations of their core beliefs. Ask your best minds to act like new players without all the resources that you currently have got used to. What would they do?

### **More traveling**

Get out. Go see the world. How often is this said to your employees? How much do you spend on encouraging them to spread their wings? How will they ever get very different ideas if everyday they drive the same streets, eat at the same places, talk to the same people and visit the same players in your industry? Interestingly enough, organizations that need ideas very badly are much more comfortable spending money on packaged courses where their employees will learn nothing really new than giving their employees some time and resources to go see how business is done elsewhere: in different markets, regions or

industries. Don't we feel reinvigorated when we go elsewhere on vacation? Why wait?

### **More (quality) time together**

Rush, rush and rush! How much time do your best people spend together? Do you give them or even force them to shoot the breeze sometimes? Believe it or not some top innovators do exactly that. They make their best people, sometimes even senior executives, free their schedules and "to do" lists to talk to one another. Not only is this good for marriages, but for business as well. Let key people connect at the deepest level possible and they might really build things together instead of competing for individual brilliance!

### **More creative routines**

Yes, innovation also needs routines. A number of distinguished authors and artists are well-known for following very specific and methodical routines for getting inspired and producing extensively. Organizations are full of routines. Most, however, have nothing to do with promoting innovation. On the contrary, they are there to show that people have learned to live by the norms, procedures and ceremonies of the bureaucracy.

### **More use of scenarios**

How far ahead and how differently do you view your future? Is your organization going to be selling the same products and value propositions to the same clients a few years from now? What about in ten years? Sure, nobody can predict the future, but the mere fact that you push people to imagine a different future, might help them to develop one or two insights that completely change your business. The other option is to develop a linear regression and see the future as the past has been. But how many industries have really evolved like that in the past three, five or ten years?

### **More meeting the clients**

Not many insights will come from spreadsheets,

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Power Points presentations and reports. The interesting aspect about business and hierarchies is that as the people who best serve the customers are promoted, they lose touch with clients. The same thing happens with good scientists who become managers that spend most of their time filling out reports, managing human resources or participating in corporate functions. This problem (losing a good scientist and gaining a bad manager) is well-known and widely discussed in the management literature. Innovation, however, is not the privilege or responsibility of scientists. However, one can easily argue that bureaucratic organizations have developed a well-oiled system to getting rid of innovators and isolating and suffocating them with reports and computer screens.

#### **Better work environments**

Why should creative-looking physical environments be reserved for advertising agencies and similar outfits? What are people afraid of? Are creative types less professional? Do they work less? Why do the ideas of order and perfect, straight lines dominate most office spaces? Does it have to be that way? Silicon valley companies have in general paid attention to creating work environments that foster innovation. In France, many knowledge-intensive companies have moved to splendid locations near the Alps. In Japan, leading companies in the auto, pharmaceutical and electronics industries are following Dr Nonaka's recipes and putting money into building creative Ba's, i.e., contexts for knowledge creation.

#### **More passionate people**

Oh my! How can one ever think about innovation without people who are passionate about what they do? The act of creation requires more than commitment, it requires total involvement. One can be committed to targets, bonuses and even to their peers. However, unfortunately, innovation is not the domain of good soldiers; it is the domain of people

with a burning desire to make their mark. Innovative stuff is never impersonal. Like artists, corporate innovators will naturally try to leave their personal imprints on their products wherever and whenever possible. What's wrong with this? Treat people like individuals, not generic "resources." At the end of the day, the act of creation depends on people; it can not be automated.

#### **More search of beauty**

The cultivation of aesthetics is not unrelated to innovation. Even a business plan can be beautiful. In fact, mankind is usually awed in the face of true innovations. Famous scientists, such as James Watson and Francis Crick, have revealed that they made their discoveries when they picked solutions that were beautiful. No very innovative company despises beauty. Beauty is in the care of the details, in the packaging as much as in the content. It gives us innate pleasure. People are inspired by beauty. If innovation is truly a part of your competitive strategy, start paying attention to beauty. Your employees, clients, suppliers and society will notice it as well.

#### **More attentive listening**

If many innovations come from the combination of old and new ideas or old and new knowledge, then it is evident that people with strong observation and listening skills have an advantage when it comes to developing new ideas. The same applies to companies. How does an organization observe if its environment is clearly related to its innovative capability? It asks itself: Do people from different departments actually pay attention to each other? Are there on-going routines that stimulate listening to others? Are people trained in attentive listening? Do more introverted people find venues to express their ideas? Attentive listening is not measured at a single point: it is a discipline that should be applied at many levels. If you listen, you may find innovation opportunities just around the corner in the office.

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### **More tinkering**

The innovator plays with the objects he/she fancies. Thus, companies should provide their people with the means to experiment and play with different concepts early on. Do not get a concept to the most detailed design stage before you invite colleagues, suppliers and clients to look at it. Innovators are usually collectors. Writers have many books; engineers have interesting garages; excellent marketers are avid media consumers and so on. Reality is never in the mind or in the object of creation; it is in the duality of the conscious and unconscious. No two people see exactly the same thing.

### **More pain**

True innovators talk about the amazing suffering they go through before finding a solution. Are organizations that different? Of course, only individuals feel pain, but one thought is that if all the decisions related to innovation projects and funding are easy, it is a good sign that the challenges are not up to the needs for fostering breakthroughs. Many innovative products are the result of painstaking years of hypothesizing, searching, testing and embarking on alternative and unexpected routes.

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Are there more things to be done to make us and our organizations more creative? Sure. Are the above points a complete guide or a roadmap? Certainly not, but they are a good start. If you say innovation is a core competency, ask yourself what are you doing for yourself and for your organization? Hopefully this article will set you in the right direction.

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