



How to foster a culture of creativity in your workplace.

CREATIVE THINKING IS KEY TO SUCCESS. HERE'S HOW TO ENCOURAGE — NOT SQUASH — ITS POWER.



1 Define the creative process.

Yes, creativity is about breaking rules. But first you need to establish a process that allows creative thinking and ideas to emerge, says David Owens, Ph.D., author of “Creative People Must Be Stopped: 6 Ways We Kill Innovation (Without Even Trying).”

That could mean scheduling a regular meeting for exploring new ideas, followed by an evaluation meeting to talk about what works and what doesn’t. Make sure everyone knows the guidelines: no criticizing any ideas in the exploration meeting, for example.

Whatever process you choose, the more the group practices it, the more intuitive it will become.

2 Rely on leadership to model creative values.

“One of the first ways to create a creative culture is to model it from the leadership,” Owens says, “to show that this process is real, that leaders make mistakes and that leaders don’t have all the ideas.”

This requires leaders to fully embrace the creative process and abide by all the agreed-upon rules. If they don’t, the effect is chilling; when a CEO says that everyone’s ideas are valid but then ignores input from junior staffers, the message comes through loud and clear. When he or she models openness to creativity, it can energize the entire workplace.





3 **Communicate the goal.**

Organizations tend to be good at defining deliverables when it comes to concrete tasks but less so in regard to creative thinking, Owens says. But creative goals can be defined, too, and doing so will help the team come up with better ideas.

Creative ideation should be labeled either “adaptive” or “radical,” he says. Adaptive is about finding a better way to do something you’re already doing, or that a competitor is already doing. It’s innovation on a more modest scale. Radical creative thinking is about throwing out everything you know and coming up with something new and disruptive.

Employees need to know what kind of thinking to pursue, Owens says. “Then they know what’s in bounds or out of bounds.”

4 Embrace the (often messy) steps beyond “brainstorm.”

Too often, good ideas are left to die in brainstorm sessions that go nowhere. As part of establishing a creative process, determine what's next for ideas with real potential. This should include a mechanism for prototyping ideas and testing their success, Owens says. It's important to acknowledge that this step requires employee time away from regular work and often costs money.

This testing will include false starts, wasted efforts and dead ends, and that needs to be OK, says Owens.





5 Don't fall victim to creativity for its own sake.

Owens has seen organizations fall so in love with creative thinking that they miss simpler solutions for business problems. It's important not to lose sight of your actual goals, he says.

"We put a lot of social baggage on being creative," but it's important to stay focused on execution, too.

6 Encourage playfulness.

Creative thinking requires freedom and playfulness in the workplace. But that doesn't have to mean improv exercises or icebreakers.

“It can be a serious, intellectual playfulness; it doesn't have to be throwing Nerf balls at each other,” Owens says. “It's about taking liberties with the rules, with the current status quo understanding.”

That could mean pulling in a different team to think about a problem: Maybe marketing will see something that accounting didn't. Or a recurring Friday meeting could welcome a different department to present its favorite half-baked idea, Owens says. The idea is to inject flexibility and energy into the culture.





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