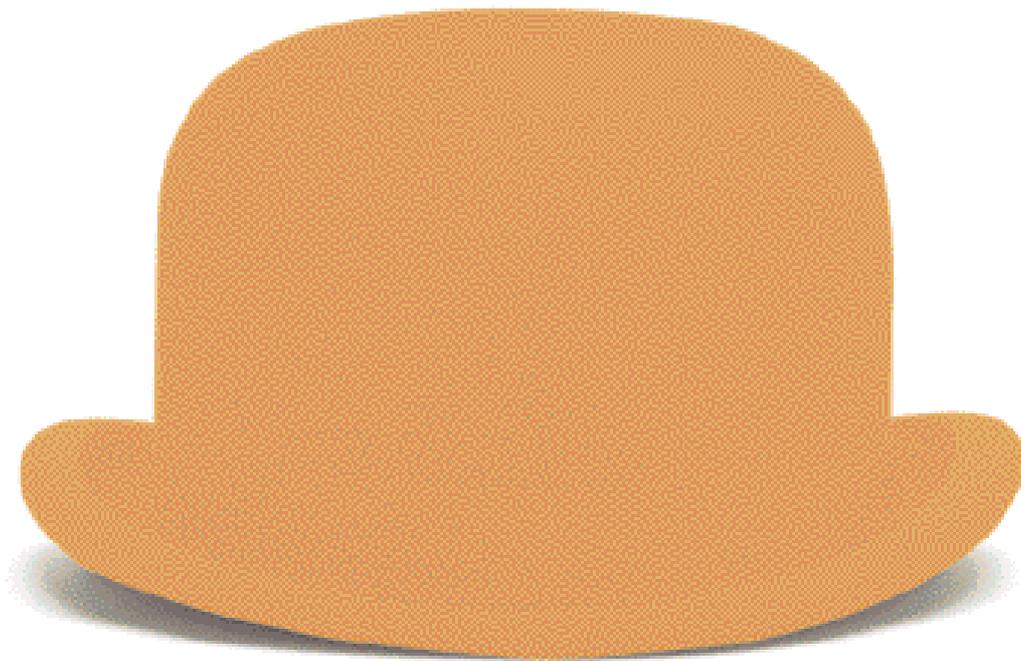


challenging convention creativity in organisations

by Mathilda Joubert



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To obtain copies of the report

Copies of the report can be downloaded, at no charge, from the Challenging Convention pages on the RSA web site. This may be found at www.thersa.org.uk

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Executive summary

Most managers believe their organisations need creative thinking. As one executive explained, organisations survive in the short term by repeating proven practices; they prosper in the long term by innovating. However, despite this widespread belief that organisational creativity is important, few organisations have solid systems in place for developing and managing new ideas. We set this as the challenge for undertaking this research: how can managers effectively implement creativity throughout their organisation?

To answer this and related questions, we sought the opinions of a wide cross-section of experts and individuals within organisations across the UK. Based upon their comments, five factors emerged as essential to promoting and developing organisational creativity. These are:

1 Management conviction

Creativity begins with an organisation's leaders. They must draw upon a deep-seated conviction that innovation is necessary for the future of their organisation and they must express a personal commitment to this belief. Most employees will only take the risk of contributing new ideas if they are convinced senior management will support and reward them. And only senior management can provide them with the necessary guidelines for generating and developing ideas that will

support the organisation's long-term goals and strategy.

2 Organisation-wide understanding

To promote creativity effectively, organisations also need a common understanding throughout the organisation of what creativity is and what is expected of staff members. In many organisations, stereotypes and myths about creativity abound. Organisations must eliminate these misunderstandings and develop a shared language and a shared mandate or policy for creativity. Ideally, staff at every level should be involved in the creation of an organisation-wide creativity and innovation policy that reflects a multitude of perspectives and is understood by all.

3 Commitment to employee learning

Organisations can develop staff capacity for innovation through a commitment to providing learning activities. Many new ideas occur at the intersection between disciplines or departments; exposure to different areas broadens perspectives and triggers new ideas. We found that organisations can promote creativity by focusing on three learning tasks – helping staff to change belief systems; providing a range of creativity learning experiences; and creating low-risk opportunities

for staff to practice or rehearse this new creative behaviour. An ongoing commitment to creative activities leads to continuous renewal for the organisation

4 An effective implementation plan

To develop innovative products and practices, organisations need a system to evaluate, develop and test new ideas. We found evidence of a knowledge-experience mismatch in many organisations where people know, in theory, which steps could be taken to establish a process or system whereby creative ideas can progress through the organisation, but do not implement them in practice. Effective implementation systems include the following components: a forum for submitting ideas; a creativity evaluation and feedback system; an idea development system; and a reward system.

5 Failure tolerance

In order to promote innovative thinking, organisations must allow staff to take calculated risks. Any new idea brings with it

the possibility of failure; good ideas often come from bad ones; and, of course, staff learn more from mistakes than successes. Despite this, there is pressure in many organisations not to fail. Organisation leaders must make it clear that they support reasonable risk and will not penalise failure when appropriate effort has been made. One organisation leader takes responsibility for all his employees' failures; they may take whatever risk they determine appropriate, with one proviso. If they fail, they must share what they have learned with all staff so that the same mistake never occurs anywhere within the organisation again.

These five factors can provide the basis for a system to manage organisational creativity. Such a system requires high-level commitment and sustained effort. Most participants in our research believe the effort is worth it. At the very least, an organisation that promotes and develops creativity provides a satisfying work environment and develops the flexibility to change when necessary. For many organisations, much more is at stake. Such a system is necessary to survive and grow.

Foreword

Current wisdom, particularly in Anglo-American cultures, identifies people as the principal source of long-term competitive advantage for companies and suggests that as a nation we need an economy based on innovation, creativity and added-value industries.

Continuous innovation must be 'standard operating procedure' and that requires continuous creativity. Today companies have to get everything right, and continue to do so as the targets move, in all aspects of their operation. What was 'right' yesterday is not quite right today and will probably be wrong tomorrow. And what is true of the private sector is equally so for public sector organisations as they seek ways to respond to the continuing pressure to improve both service levels and productivity.

Two parameters within which we should consider these recommendations are context and culture. Leaders of successful organisations today must execute well a tremendous juggling act, balancing strategy, operations, people issues, external reputation, social responsibility and results. This report reminds us firmly that ensuring effective creativity is a vital element in achieving an organisation's success. However, organisations will need to adapt skilfully the principles outlined here to the cultural stamp of their enterprise and its various constituents if the principles are to work successfully in practice.

So, for leaders, mastering the five principles will be a necessary, but not sufficient, first step on the road to ensuring that creativity contributes effectively to the survival and flourishing of their organisation.

However important, many managers still struggle to free and direct the latent creativity in

their organisations – perhaps because only now is the realisation dawning that the task cannot be done just by the senior management team. There is a need to engage managers and staff at all levels in the organisation. Furthermore, as this work signals, it may well be that we need to envisage the activities of managing the creative, innovative, organisation in a different way from that in which they have been depicted in much of the management research and in prescriptions for practice. In the meantime this report identifies five areas where those leading organisations can act to improve the flow and management of new ideas and its emphasis on the importance of excellent execution is crucial.

Finally although the report emphasises the initial steps that organisations can take this must not be interpreted as saying that more could not be done in the education of young people to inspire them and to instil in them the behaviours and confidence vital to creativity. Creative organisations require creative people. There is no point in organisations struggling to produce environments that encourage and free creativity if the earliest, and often the most significant, experiences of people have neither encouraged nor implanted it. Confident young people, equipped with the knowledge, skills and behaviours to deliver on a day to day basis and to contribute and respond to a continuous flow of new ideas must continue to be seen as a vital priority for the nation.

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Section one

Introduction

Organisations prosper and succeed in the short run by repeating known and successful practices. They only succeed in the long term by innovating.

Vincent Nolan, former chairman of Synectics Europe

Most managers think their organisations need creativity. Whenever consultant John Kao asks his professional audiences how many believe innovation to be fundamentally important to their organisations, the vast majority raise their hands. The same professionals give a different response, however, when Kao asks them about their organisations' methods for developing new ideas. In response to his second question – how many have a system for managing that innovation, one that is known to all employees, generally viewed as working well, and has generated some results, however irregular – only a few hands go up. 'I think we get why innovation is important,' says Kao, founder of the Idea Factory and former Harvard University Business School professor. 'The trick is getting it done.'

The issue is one of implementation. Any system for managing organisational creativity must balance established practices with new ways of doing things. It must also develop some types of new ideas and not others. As consultant and writer Charlie Leadbeater said during a debate at the RSA at the beginning of this project, creativity is a good thing that is not equally desirable in every situation. Few would welcome a 'creative' wages department or a 'creative' postal worker who decides to deliver letters in a new way. Left unharnessed to clear

organisational objectives, innovative thinking could generate a 'loose cannon effect' that may cause more harm than good.

So how can organisations foster what nearly everyone agrees is necessary – the ability to be creative enough to survive and succeed? How can they combat the 'loose cannon effect' and maintain smooth operations while promoting new ideas and asking their employees to be more flexible and original? What exactly does creativity mean in an organisational context? How can a system monitor and control something as difficult to measure as ideas? With questions such as these in mind, we set out to ask the opinions of a wide cross-section of experts and individuals within organisations across the UK.

This report reflects the contributions of a total of 208 people involved in 25 group discussions and semi-structured interviews conducted during 2001. These individuals represented organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors, from more than 20 different disciplines and up to four levels within organisations, ranging from senior management to maintenance staff. This research also reflects the contributions of speakers in a public debate that occurred in June of 2001 at the RSA.¹

With this report we provide their answers. In doing so, we hope to challenge convention and provide organisations some ideas of how to foster creativity/innovation – terms we use synonymously.² By including people across the boundaries of disciplines, sectors and hierarchical levels, we designed our research in such a way as to model some of the key

aspects of creativity. First, that creativity occurs whenever a person undertakes original and valuable activities to improvise responses in the absence of a known script for the given situation. Second, that it flourishes at the intersections between areas of responsibility and expertise. And third, that original thinking may occur everywhere within any organisation regardless of discipline, level of seniority or job

description. We thus agree with the journalist Melanie Phillips: 'I think that creativity is not confined to artistic individuals. I think it's an essential part of being human. It's a force for good in all of us; it's what makes us human. It amounts to the release of individual potential. It accounts for progress. It produces spontaneity and diversity and all manner of good things.'

- 1 Speakers included Dr Marilyn Fryer, Founder of the Creativity Centre and Creativity Centre Educational Trust; Charles Leadbeater, author, writer and former editor at the *Financial Times*; Baroness Genista McIntosh, Executive Director of the Royal National Theatre and board member of other arts organisations; Melanie Phillips, author and columnist for *The Sunday Times*; and Claire Hewitt, partner at Synectics Europe Ltd who has been involved in strategic planning and marketing activities in a broad range of industries
- 2 Of the more than 400 definitions of the word 'creativity,' our conception matches the one developed by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education: 'imaginative activity fashioned so as to produce outcomes that are both original and of value'

Section two

Results: five key factors

In the course of our research, five key factors emerged to distinguish organisations that are successful in harnessing the creativity of their employees. These factors were either described in depth in our interviews with individuals and groups involved in these organisations – or they were described as being missing from organisations less successful in encouraging creativity. They include:

- management commitment to creativity
- a shared understanding throughout the organisation
- a commitment to employee learning
- an effective implementation system
- failure tolerance

1 Management conviction

Creativity begins with an organisation's leaders. They must draw upon a deep-seated conviction that innovation is necessary for the future of their organisation and they must express a personal commitment to this belief. Most employees will only take the risk of contributing new ideas if they are convinced senior management will support and reward them. And only senior management can provide them with the necessary guidelines for generating and developing ideas that will support the organisation's long-term goals and strategy. In order to provide value for the organisation, creativity 'absolutely must be focused on the organisation's vision and strategy ... specific business areas, specific

market opportunities, specific categories,' says Claire Hewitt, partner at Synectics Europe

Leaders need to go out of their way to actively encourage and support appropriate ideas from employees at all levels of their organisation. This commitment should be articulated in a policy or mandate understood by every member of the organisation. Above all, both encouragement and mandate must be completely sincere, as individuals are quick to detect false notes. If they feel deceived, they may become confused, demotivated or frustrated. They may even use their creativity to subvert the organisation.

Encouragement

Our research found a range of levels of encouragement for original thinking within organisations. One way of categorising these different levels of conviction is:

- active discouragement;
- passive discouragement;
- passive encouragement;
- active encouragement; and
- active encouragement with appropriate support.

At one end of the spectrum were organisations that discouraged creativity. A few even completely forbade it out of a belief that it would cause disruption or be unduly 'artistic'. Other organisations were less vigorous in their discouragement, but their managers exhibited an ambivalence about creativity. Little innovation can occur in organisations like this. When senior managers cannot or will not openly express a commitment to creativity, few people at lower levels will risk it.

Consultant and writer Leadbeater suggests that organisations that discourage creativity often do so not because they do not believe in it, but because its end result is usually change. 'The presence of creative people who can see things differently is not threatening because it promises some new future that might be exciting but challenging,' Leadbeater says. 'It's because it threatens the past which is difficult to unlearn and get rid of. Large organisations ... are very bad at selecting for the future; they're tremendously good at selecting to reinforce past success.'

Most of the organisations we encountered in our research encouraged creativity in some way, perhaps because our case study organisations were self-selected. According to employees, however, this encouragement was sometimes passive or piecemeal, unsupported by strong conviction by the organisation's leadership. While managers in these organisations encouraged their staff to be creative, they seldom had the resources or mandate to support innovative activity. 'I'm desperately interested in creativity and my company is doing nothing to discourage it,' said one middle manager in a manufacturing business, 'but my company is doing nothing to support it either.'

Even in companies where managers spoke of a firm commitment to creativity at the top, employees sometimes saw the situation differently. 'You often find an 'intention gap' where what the CEO intends is not experienced throughout the company,' said a human resources consultant. Many interviewees spoke of creativity being encouraged in some departments and levels, but not others. 'We know that something is happening, but it's unclear what,' complained an employee of one arts organisation about her company's creativity program. 'Management doesn't allow for creativity in my type of job,' said another interviewee, a receptionist.

The ideal is for organisations is not only to

encourage creativity actively throughout their entire organisation, but also to provide appropriate support for it with learning and practice opportunities and rewards. In organisations that reach this highest level, all managers openly solicit creativity through a co-ordinated strategy; they also help staff to develop and practice the skills and tools they have determined most beneficial. Such managers support staff in taking creative risks and are prepared to demonstrate their own creative processes with all the risks and false starts that may involve.

2 Shared understanding

Commitment to creativity cannot stop at the senior management level. It must cascade through the organisation to involve individuals of all job descriptions. Everyone should share the same understanding of what creativity is and what they are being asked to aspire to. A common language for discussing creativity must be developed as well as a positive attitude undeterred by stereotypes and myths. Ideally, staff at every level should be involved in the creation of an organisation-wide policy that reflects a multitude of perspectives and is understood by all.

Meaningful terms

First, a shared language related to creativity must be defined. Even the word 'creativity' can create misunderstandings. For example, some interviewees reported managers stating that they supported innovation, but not creativity – terms many would consider synonymous. To check interpretations of related words, we asked interviewees across different sectors to compare the following terms – creativity, innovation, invention, discovery, entrepreneurship, problem-solving, risk-taking.

Most agreed that all the words have the same core idea of new and original ways of thinking, though some terms are traditionally associated with different contexts. Managers and technologists may prefer 'innovation'; scientists, 'discovery' or 'invention'; artists, 'creativity'. Organisations should select terms that motivate staff and clearly define what they mean in the appropriate context.

Stereotypes and myths

Organisations also need to address unfounded stereotypes about creativity when beginning to promote it. Misperceptions and negative feelings need to be identified and countered with facts. During this project, we explored views people often hold about creativity and the 'creatives'. We found evidence of the following myths.

Myth 'Only some people are creative.' Under this view, creativity is limited to certain people, departments or job levels. Interviewees spoke of creativity being the province of 'creative geniuses, the great and the good'; 'people with artistic skills'; 'the creativity or innovation teams at work; for example, the design teams'; 'certain job types'; and 'management or white collar workers only'.

Fact Everybody is capable of being creative. As Dr Marilyn Fryer of the Creativity Centre in Dean Clough explains, 'Although people will exhibit different degrees of creative expertise, everyone can make some contribution to the overall creative output of the organisation.'

Some interviewees stated at first that they were not creative. Prompted by people they worked with, however, they would suddenly see that they had improvised novel solutions without giving themselves credit. For example, a maintenance worker initially expressed during a group discussion that he was uncreative and that his job did not allow for any creativity. One of his colleagues then reminded him of the day

he had found a way to open a locked door in a crisis situation without breaking it down and without the key. The maintenance worker was able to see himself in a new light. Often just the realisation that they can and do apply original thinking in some way provides people with more positive feelings about themselves and their jobs.

Myth 'Only certain industries are creative.'

Interviewees often mentioned that advertising, music, art and design were 'creative' industries; whereas law, civil service and accountancy were 'uncreative.' We interviewed people from a wide range of professions – tax lawyers, accountants, librarians, civil servants, business leaders, artists, waiters, teachers, scientists, and engineers. Once probed beyond initial stereotypical views, all saw potential in their own and other industries for creativity.

Fact All industries can be creative and apply creativity. The so-called 'creative industries' often acquire this reputation because of their products rather than their processes. Under this view, a watercolourist reproducing the same painting without variation 100 times would be considered creative, while a pharmaceutical company developing a new medication would be uncreative, since paintings are creative and pills are not. The real creative organisations are, however, those that display creative processes. 'Many companies very successfully produce goods and services which could rightly be called creative, but the conditions under which they are produced leaves much to be desired,' Fryer says. 'A company which really addresses creativity is creative not only about what it produces, but how it does that.'

Furthermore, we found that staff found it encouraging to work in an industry deemed 'creative' and de-motivating to work in one considered 'uncreative.' In order to promote innovative thinking, the challenge is thus for managers and staff to emphasise the originality

of their processes irrespective of whether their products are 'creative' or 'uncreative.' And those organisations with creative products should fight complacency and ensure that opportunities for creativity extend to their processes as well as their products.

Myth 'Creative people are weird and difficult to work with.' In the course of our interviews we found that even some managers who thought creative abilities were an asset to their organisations could also believe creative individuals to be disruptive and requiring restraint to prevent them from causing major damage. They were described as 'troublemakers', 'always against the flow', 'difficult to communicate with' and 'eccentric'.

Fact The wrong characteristics are often associated with highly creative people. 'Most evidence indicates that the stereotypical view doesn't hold water,' Fryer explains. 'Instead their behaviour is characterised by high levels of motivation, drive, determination, self-discipline, high levels of curiosity and a willingness to work hard.' Research on the characteristics of creative people was summarised by Catarina Brolin as follows:

- strong motivation
- endurance
- intellectual curiosity
- deep commitment
- independence in thought and action
- strong desire for self-realisation
- strong sense of self
- strong self-confidence
- openness to impressions from within and without
- attracted to complexity and obscurity
- high sensitivity
- high capacity for emotional involvement

Unless these characteristics are recognised, organisations may identify the wrong people as highly creative. True creativity may go unnoticed because it comes from a highly-motivated hard-

working person without eccentric habits.

Myth 'Creativity is always/never applicable.' Some people interviewed felt creativity never applied to certain professions or jobs. Many more interviewees shared the belief that creativity should always be used in every situation.

Fact Neither of these views is true or helpful. Almost every organisation or job should contain a balance between routine operational activity and creative activity. These cycles should be managed well and the individuals involved should understand which activities are appropriate for particular tasks. For example, it would be foolish and dangerous for an airline pilot to risk changing operational procedures during a routine landing. The same pilot encountering a mechanical problem, on the other hand, would need to apply all available creativity to troubleshoot the problem and solve it. The balance of routine tasks and creativity may change at different times and with different jobs, but both elements should be present and well developed.

If a job consists solely of repetitive operational tasks, outlets for creativity should be provided elsewhere within the organisation to maintain self-esteem and a positive attitude. Some manufacturing operations provide workers with access to a workshop and tools, so that they may vary their routine tasks at breaks and lunchtime by working on their own projects. The brass bands established by the miners in the North of England provide another such example. Playing in these bands, which were supported by the mining management and scheduled around their work activities, gave the miners the opportunity to stimulate, express and develop creativity despite routine jobs. The result was heightened morale.

Another interesting finding in this project involved the physical environment. Workers

who regularly apply high levels of creativity in their job felt that the physical environment did not play an important role in encouraging or inhibiting their creativity. On the other hand, workers with very formalised, structured jobs with less freedom for creativity deemed the physical environment to be very important to either stimulate creativity or to compensate for the lack of creativity allowed in their jobs.

Organisational policy

Often developing a shared language and overcoming destructive stereotypes about creativity can be accomplished while an organisation develops the third requirement for a shared understanding about creativity – a formal policy or mandate. Such a mandate cannot be merely imposed on staff from the top; where it works well it is truly a shared representation of what the organisation wants to achieve through creativity. All stakeholders were given the opportunity to contribute to the mandate.

By involving individuals at all levels in the development of this policy, organisations may avoid issues we heard mentioned in our research. In some cases, managers felt their organisation encouraged creativity, while staff at the same companies disagreed. 'It's like two companies in the same building,' said a junior staff member in one of these organisations, which did not have a formal policy on encouraging creativity. Managers did not have a good sense of what staff positions involved. 'They need to get their hands dirty and listen to us.'

One clerical worker in a company with a creativity policy said that creativity 'may be a vision at the top, but there are differing interpretations of it down the structure.' Workers did not know what was expected and were left frustrated and resentful. In one case, staff from different levels were invited to provide ideas, but then these ideas were not

acknowledged or used. 'If you raise expectations like that, where do you go with it?' the worker said. 'They would have been better off if they had never asked.' This resulted in a severely negative effect on staff morale.

Organisations that took the time to involve staff in the development of a shared organisational mandate for creativity found that it added value in several ways. In addition to building increased support from those involved, the process resulted in an organisational language with shared concepts and ultimately a shared understanding relating to the promotion of creativity.

3 Commitment to learning

Once a policy is in place, an organisation can reinforce its encouragement of creativity through a commitment to providing appropriate learning opportunities. Learning occurs through communication between departments and levels as well as formal training and experiential activities. This is an ongoing and sometimes slow process that needs to be given adequate space and time within an organisation; it is also an evolutionary process.

We found that organisations can promote creativity by focusing on three learning tasks – helping staff to change belief systems; providing a range of creativity learning experiences; and creating low-risk opportunities for staff to practice or rehearse this new creative behaviour.

Changing belief systems

People join organisations with their own ideas about their creative potential and the levels of their creative abilities. These ideas may have formed through schooling or previous work experiences and may have evolved over years. This is powerful reinforcement for people who

learned young that they are creative – and a powerful deterrent for those who believe the opposite of themselves. People thinking themselves uncreative must ‘unlearn’ a belief they may have carried with them since childhood. They may need encouragement to be creative as well as positive reinforcement of their capacity for original activity.

We found that helping people believe in their own creative potential can be more important than developing their creative abilities. Individuals believing themselves creative will be prepared to try new activities, learn through experience and, in the process, expand their capabilities. Non-believers will be more reluctant to take what they may see as risks.

During the interviews, we were surprised at how quickly individuals who initially saw themselves as uncreative could ‘discover’ their creative potential during group discussions. When one person provided an example of their ability to be innovative, it would trigger other people in the group who initially came up blank to find their own examples. Individuals sometimes report that an inspirational teacher or mentor at work made them realise they are creative. For others it was a school or work environment; still others refer to a particular challenge that allowed them to prove their creativity to themselves. For those who have not encountered inspiration in this way, organisations may ‘flick the switch’ by helping them understand what creativity is and how they have already exhibited it.

A range of creative learning opportunities

Next, organisations should provide a range of opportunities for learning related to creativity. These opportunities may include:

- **Learning about creativity** – what it involves, how to develop it, how to contribute to a corporate culture conducive to creativity, and

the appropriateness or applicability of creativity to various scenarios.

- **Techniques for generating creativity** – ways to develop individual, team and organisational creativity; e.g., idea generation, selection and development strategies.
- **Learning creatively** – all learning opportunities should be managed and conducted in original, creative ways to ensure maximum benefit to participants as well as a sense of enjoyment stemming from the creative experiences.

Since different people learn in different ways and some aspects of creativity are better learnt through specific types of experience, organisations should provide a range of both formal and informal or experiential learning activities. These may include training sessions, a mentoring system, working with an experienced manager, and learning from peers within teams, across teams, across disciplines or even across organisations.

Creativity often depends upon cross-disciplinary curiosity and stimulation, yet conventional learning opportunities promote the insularity of disciplinary streams. When individuals exchange ideas with peers in other departments, sectors or disciplines, they often return to their own area with new and innovative approaches. For example, a local education authority set up a network where best practice was shared across the authority in a range of relevant fields through self-volunteering and identification by roaming advisors. Once a beneficial practice is identified, small groups of teachers visit the school to observe and learn. The government official managing the scheme said, ‘They learn more in a few minutes in someone else’s school than we could teach them in a whole day’s conference.’

Informal cross-disciplinary learning opportunities can be just as beneficial. One organisation that we interviewed has a policy

always to assign cross-disciplinary teams to projects, another encourages staff to spend time working with other teams on a regular basis, and yet another organisation has a policy where new staff members spend time in each department before settling down in their own jobs. Staff from these organisations saw the benefits these practices offer as:

- 'encouraging an understanding and appreciation for different jobs across the organisation';
- 'improving cross-divisional communication';
- 'providing a newly found perspective on the total activity of the organisation'; and ultimately
- 'promoting organisational creativity'.

Opportunities for practice

There is often a desperate need for individuals to explore their creativity in the workplace, but this desire is easily crushed by the risks involved in trying something new, especially where stakes are high. Creativity consultants Ceserani and Greatwood point out that creativity is a bit like sex. You can talk about it, you can read a book about it, you can attend a lecture about it; but you won't really know what it is really about until you have experienced it.

In order to get better at creativity, you must actually do it, practice it and repeat it.

Organisations should provide opportunities for their members to rehearse their creative skills in supportive environments where collaborative teamwork is encouraged. One PR director, for example, gave each member of his team a different chapter of *The Fifth Discipline*, the book by Peter Senge on the concept of the learning organisation, to read before a group discussion. This exercise was unrelated to any specific project. After team members contributed ideas from their chapters, a stimulating brainstorming session resulted in which ideas could be introduced and developed in an environment free of worry

about deadlines, clients or other pressures.

Staff reported that they felt freer to contribute ideas in this environment than under normal circumstances, which are often driven by fear of failure. Junior staff in particular felt more encouraged to contribute than in other situations where their relative lack of experience kept them from speaking up. 'This simple exercise ended up being a tremendous learning experience for all staff involved,' the PR director said. 'They learnt about the content of the book, they discovered things about their own personal creative abilities and they got the chance to rehearse their creativity in a safe environment.'

4 An effective implementation system

A policy is not enough to effectively promote creativity throughout an organisation. As Claire Hewitt explains,

The paradox about innovation is that in order to be really creative and turn your creativity into innovative new products, services and offers, you need a system to be able to manage that creativity. Without structure you simply have the kind of sporadic bright ideas which, at best may yield fruit, but at worst may actually rock your organisation because you have no means of dealing with the internal changes that those new creative ideas demand.

Thus organisations committing to creativity must also develop an implementation system for it. Such a system, one respondent pointed out, is like a conveyor belt for a product. The organisation has to enable creative ideas to pass through different stages. First there should be a forum where individuals can place ideas on the conveyor belt; then there is an evaluation system for the idea. For those ideas meeting the criteria, there is a development

cycle and also a reward procedure – both for ideas and creative effort. Once such an implementation system has been put in place, it needs to be continuously monitored and improved as well as supported by an effective internal communication system. Despite the fact that many managers could list the necessary stages of a creativity implementation system, hardly any had such a system in place within their organisations.

Forum for ideas

The first stage of a creativity implementation system, a forum for ideas, can take many forms. Some organisations use suggestion boxes; others hold regular ideas meetings; still others allow open spaces in regular team meetings for contributing and discussing new ideas. One engineer described an annual process whereby all the ideas contributed over the course of the year were considered. When each idea came up, it would be put in a drawer if it was not immediately applicable, as the company worked only according to predetermined project plans. Although the originator of the idea was not always happy with the delay, at the end of the year all ideas that were contributed are pulled out of the drawer, evaluated and reconsidered, with staff informed of this process. This gave the staff a feeling of empowerment, not so much because a particular idea would be implemented, but because they know their ideas were investigated and taken seriously.

Whatever form is chosen for soliciting ideas, the forum should be well-publicised throughout the organisation and open to all. Organisation members must not only know how to contribute ideas; they must also know what will happen to the ideas they contribute and feel confident they will receive feedback about their contribution.

We found an interesting disparity in some organisations between what management and

subordinates thought was encouraged within an organisation. In some instances managers believed they had a system in place through which employees could offer creative ideas, but the employees either reported that they did not know this or felt that the system was blocked in some way. In one case, workers in a sewing factory would occasionally come up with ideas of how to save time, increase productivity or improve the sense of staff well-being at their level. These ideas were passed on to team supervisors according to the organisational hierarchy – but nothing happened after that. Workers speculated that there was either no forum to which the supervisors could take these ideas or that the supervisors did not want to rock the boat. In any case, they were left feeling undervalued and resentful. Not only was the company denied the benefit of the suggestions, but the frustrated workers may have lost the incentive to try so hard.

Interviewees further commented that the culture of an organisation can make a huge difference to the likelihood that staff will contribute their ideas. In a supportive, creative environment, staff will feel much freer to contribute ideas. Open University researcher and lecturer Anna Craft recently summarised research findings about creative organisational cultures, suggesting that the members in such organisations:

- feel challenged by their goals, operations and tasks;
- feel able to take initiative and to find relevant information;
- feel able to interact with others;
- feel that new ideas are met with support and encouragement;
- feel able to put forward new ideas and views;
- experience much debate within a prestige-free and open environment;
- feel uncertainty is tolerated and thus risk taking is encouraged.

Creativity evaluation and feedback system

In organisations where the forum is working effectively, all ideas are given due attention either by an open-minded management team or a cross-level ideas team. All ideas do not need to be implemented, but they should be considered seriously using criteria the contributors understand. This system should not rely solely upon hierarchy or the 'yes' or 'no' of a single gatekeeper. Many truly valuable ideas are never implemented because a single individual did not have the expertise to recognise the value of an idea or felt it either threatening or too much trouble to pass on.

The results of this can be deadening. For example, a junior manager in a manufacturing business explained that all employees knew they were encouraged to bring suggestions to the management; a junior staff member duly submitted an idea for improving a routine procedure. But the management had no experience of the specific task and thus no way of evaluating the idea or its likelihood of success. As a result, nothing happened. The employee who had suggested it felt humiliated and vowed never to submit another idea. The message then spread rapidly throughout the organisation and many now say they are highly unlikely to offer their own suggestions.

A formal evaluation system with a feedback mechanism reduces the chances of such discouragement. Interestingly, our research found that organisational criteria for evaluating creativity were highly under-developed. When we asked individuals at all levels of organisations whether they were ever in a position to judge other people's creativity, everyone responded that they judged some others' creativity, including junior staff, peers, superiors and competitors. They also said they judged their own creativity. However, when we asked a second related question – what criteria they used for judging it – not a single person

could articulate these criteria. Instead, they provided answers such as 'a lot depends on gut instinct' or 'judging creativity is a very personal thing.' One administrator even suggested that 'the closer you come to trying to identify what it is that makes people creative, the further away from it you get.'

Without an effective evaluation system, however, many ideas have no chance of ever being developed. The organisation should determine precisely what criteria will be used to deem an idea sufficiently interesting to examine further, perhaps within the context of the department where it will be applied. The system should also specify how this examination will take place. Those who do contribute ideas should be appropriately notified when their ideas are or are not taken further in the process, complete with tactful and honest reasons. The effort can still be rewarded, even if the idea is not progressed. At the same time, success stories from the evaluation system should be widely circulated throughout the organisation to encourage more individuals at all levels to contribute ideas.

Idea development system

Once suggestions have been determined to be beneficial, they often must be further developed or tested before implementation. Few ideas are ready to use exactly as proposed and some, while good, may be ahead of their time. To become truly innovative, organisations must commit to developing the appropriate tools and methodologies for bringing good ideas to fruition. They also must allow time and space for staff to develop these ideas. 'If you have a way of developing some key routes through to action, through to implementation, that takes away the confusion for people. It manages the risk and the emotional sense of distress and dramatically increases your chances of success,' says Hewitt. 'It's good to have a lot of small experiments going on

concurrently rather than having to risk your neck on one make-or-break project.'

Specific idea development techniques that can be employed include creative problem solving techniques, metaphorical thinking strategies or arts-based techniques to stimulate creativity; e.g., visualisation, storytelling, musical improvisation, role-play, etc. Creativity consultant Kao describes these techniques as 'an enhanced palette of expressive tools'. Working in cross-disciplinary teams for specific tasks can also be an effective way of encouraging new thinking in order to develop creative ideas further.

Reward system

The implementation system should also include a reward mechanism. Adequate rewards for creativity can help organisations retain their valuable human resources. This is true both literally – members may stay with the organisation longer if their creative efforts are rewarded – and figuratively – members will continue to contribute ideas to the organisation rather than keep quiet or apply their creativity elsewhere. In addition, rewards for creative ideas or behaviour provide visible signs of the organisation's commitment to creativity, thereby motivating others to contribute ideas.

Rewards can take many different forms. 'For many people who are highly creative, the most rewarding thing you can do is to give them another challenge to tackle,' says Fryer of the Creativity Centre. 'It's the task itself which is rewarding to them and they're not that interested in what other people think or other people say.' Other rewards include financial incentives, promotion, recognition, and a sincere 'thank you for a job well done' communicated throughout the organisation.

One employment company offers an incentive scheme of serious proportions. This prompted one employee to suggest an idea some of his colleagues thought foolish: that

they should provide free advertising space on their recruitment website to competitors. The management tried it out and the gamble paid off. Their website became the largest independent employment website in the UK. At the time of our research 8,691 recruitment agencies were registered on the site. The company name is now much more widely known and many more users visit the site. The company also earned the respect and praise of their industry. The employee's reward for this breakthrough idea? £100,000.

Different people are motivated by different forms of reward. Organisations should therefore develop flexible reward systems that will address such individual differences whilst being appropriate to the situation and the organisational culture. Not only results, but creative processes, approaches and attempts should also be rewarded to show that they are valued by the organisation.

5 Failure tolerance

The last key factor for promoting organisational creativity is failure tolerance. This is the least complex factor discussed in this report, but probably the most difficult for some organisations. Yet it is crucial. As one interviewee from a PR company put it, 'You can't fear failure, or you will never do anything.' If organisations insist on perfect results every time, employees will respond by avoiding risks and new ideas. Our research found that many organisations fear failure, deal harshly with it when it does occur and thereby create an organisational culture that is risk-averse. A senior director in one organisation described his role in managing staff as follows: 'Don't set them up to fail, but don't make them look foolish when they do. If you are seen to punish

people for getting things slightly wrong it will kill creativity.'

Organisations wishing to promote creativity should help their employees to succeed and assume they will; but when they fail as the result of carefully considered risk, they should not be punished. 'If you're going to manage creatively, you have to be able to live with a great deal of ambiguity, a great deal of risk, a great deal of complexity, and develop a tolerance for those characteristics in the workplace,' says Baroness Genista McIntosh, Executive Director of the National Theatre and board member for many arts organisations.

Employees should also be encouraged to see failure in a positive light. People learn much more from their failures than their successes. Knowing this, the managing director of one large national organisation has developed a

policy of taking responsibility himself for any mistakes his employees make. The people involved suffer no consequences, with one proviso. The individual or team must share what was learnt from the experience with the whole organisation so that no one ever makes the same mistake again.

The nature of creativity is one of false starts, restarts and progress through trial and error. The eventual successful product often overshadows the slow and often problematic process of getting there. 'Management have a role in reframing the problem to provoke iterations since creativity is an iterative process,' said one theatre director interviewee. 'We need to reframe suggestions for improvement as a challenge. It's all about motivation.' The director then quoted Samuel Beckett, 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.'

Section three

Conclusion

To summarise, organisational creativity depends upon a series of necessary paradoxes. The first of these is that creativity itself can and must be managed within organisational objectives. 'Constraints can be enabling,' says Dr. Fryer of the Creativity Centre. 'They give form to creativity.' To build a system for cultivating innovation, organisations must enlist the sincere and forceful commitment of top management. Employees at all levels should participate in creating a formal policy and system for encouraging and developing creative ideas. Once the system is in place, complete with mechanisms for idea selection, development, testing and employee rewards, all members of the organisation should understand how it works. They should have the confidence that any idea they generate, however strange it appears, will be considered in a systematic way.

Another paradox is that creativity in an organisational setting requires learning. The ideas that power organisations are usually

grounded in a solid knowledge base, often of more than one discipline; innovation commonly occurs at the intersections between fields of expertise. In addition, creativity itself requires a series of specific skills and beliefs that are learned. The final paradox: to succeed with a new idea, employees must be free to fail. Organisations that punish calculated risk-taking impede innovation.

While organisations must work hard to navigate these paradoxes, most of the people we spoke with believe the results – the heightened creativity and flexibility necessary for long-term success – are worth the effort. Creativity expert Kao believes these results are so important that one day companies will be measured on ROI – Return on Innovation. 'There will be chief innovation officers, who will be responsible for innovation processes,' Kao says. 'People will look at the management of ideas then as routinely as they look at the management of money now.'

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- 3 This list draw heavily from that compiled by Bettina von Stamm for the Arts & Business funded research entitled *Transfer of learning into the workplace: feedback report with past senior executive programme participants*

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