Ideas

Just the Tip of the Iceberg of
Positive Effects from a Creative Working Culture

by Maren Baermann

The Iceberg

In today's business world the cycles of products become shorter and shorter. To keep up with this, organizations have to be quick and alert, have to be innovative and adapt constantly to new market situations. Much has been said about the necessity to develop a creative culture to enable high idea output, which enables high innovation – that is implementation of these ideas. I claim that establishing a creative culture will in turn trigger a strengthening of several of the initial factors contributing to the creative culture, and that these will benefit the organization in many more ways than just by helping to generate new ideas. So in fact the directly visible outcome might be an abundance of ideas (the tip of the iceberg), but the body of value for an organization lies invisible beneath the surface; it supports the visible tip and makes it rise above the waterline, but also is a solid asset in itself that should not be neglected. The three interlinked areas benefiting from the reciprocal nurturing are motivation, integration and embracing change.

Creative Culture

Ford (1999) states 'corporate culture (…) can be defined as a pattern of shared meanings (concepts, beliefs, expectations, values, etc.) that evoke normative thought and behavior from organizational actors" (p.385). Thus, even though culture can not be 'installed', as people have to form these shared meanings themselves, it can be formed and influenced by supporting certain patterns more than others, and by providing a setting, which facilitates certain behaviors more than others.

According to Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi (2003) there are six conditions in a workplace that produce flow and creativity.

1. The organization has to value excellence – that is place priority on doing an excellent job in the long run, even if this involves taking a loss in short term results. To me this means it has to be authentic, and it has to provide a safe environment, where mistakes are tolerated or even encouraged to promote learning and risk taking for the sake of the long term goal.

2. Clear goals have to be communicated to all members of the organization. This means there has to be a vision where the organization is going, and the mission, i.e. how the organization intends to get there. Where the long term goals should be clearly defined, the individual members of the organization need to have a certain amount of freedom on how to translate them into their specific work area on a day to day basis.

3. Individuals depend on feedback to know where they stand and to be able to push at the boundaries of their performance. For this the feedback needs to be timely and consistent, which ideally results in the ability of employees to evaluate their performance themselves.

4. The challenges posed through work should match the skills of people – if not individuals either get bored when overqualified or stressed when the task is too demanding. The management should seek to provide opportunities to employees that match their skills.

5. The work environment should enable to focus on the tasks at hand. This calls for a reduction of physical and psychological distractions.

6. Organizations should provide their members with freedom and a sense of control. Not only is this motivating, it also gives individuals the chance to thrive and perform at their best. This can be achieved by getting employees to buy in to the company goals.

7. Ford (1999) summarizes the factors that are essential for creative output from the perspective of collective creativity. He sees the strategic vision as a shared understanding that provides an orientation frame. This as a basis facilitates the adoption of new ideas. To me this means that a common goal will serve as a shared drive to excel, incorporating the value of excellence. It enables constructive discussion and exchange on the fundament of a basic agreement. Ford's second point focuses on the empowerment of employees. He describes this as leading to self confidence and intrinsic motivation. He thereby combines the aforementioned points 3. and 4. introducing a further important point: that organizations should seek to train and educate their members to enhance their skills. His third point 'competitive paranoia' concerns the creation of group feel, defining the in-group by the common goal of surviving against the competition. This feeling of being in the same boat enhances the safe environment on one side, by uniting everyone towards the long term goal of survival, thus supporting exploration and generating new ideas, on the other hand it strengthens the commitment of people by unifying them against a perceived threat. Ford's last point focuses on proactive change, stating that empowered employees embrace creativity and proactive change. To me this refers back to providing a safe environment, as a solid ground to start from, and a constructive attitude towards employees, stressing the importance to learn and enhance skills, which enables them to cope with change.

Reinforcement

Any behavior that is reinforced will be strengthened and displayed more often. Some of the above mentioned factors rely on this reinforcement. Some produce it. Flow is generally described as a very enjoyable state that evokes happiness and fulfillment. Activities producing flow are often not reinforced by tangible rewards. So they have to be intrinsically motivated, or in other words: be reinforced by flow. This would explain why creativity is often associated with intrinsic motivation, as it is reinforced by producing happiness and fulfillment.

Intrinsically motivated activities can be reinforced by extrinsic rewards, as long as these extrinsic rewards do not superimpose the intrinsic ones. Usually intangible rewards such as praise, affection or respect harmonize well with intrinsic rewards.

Under the assumption that everybody enjoys having produced a wholesome product (even if the activity was not sought and maybe not enjoyed during the act), productivity is reinforced by the positive feeling evoked by its result. This holds true for physical and mental products, thus explaining why creative activity is firstly enjoyable and secondly engaged in so persistently by individuals.

The abovementioned factors interact as reinforcements as well: the shared vision will not only be a framework for communicating ideas, the competitive paranoia not only help to focus on the long term goal of survival. Both will contribute to a 'we feeling' that serves as a social reinforcement. Empowerment will foster a sense of achievement, growth and maturity contribute to the self-actualization of individuals, which is rewarding in the process (which in this case constitutes the goal). Being able to deal with change and master the changing environment provides a sense of control, which is rewarding experience in itself.

So as soon as the conditions for flow are provided, teams can start to work more creatively, especially as 'although flow is a subjective phenomenon, it is often triggered and sustained by interpersonal interaction' (Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 221). Thus the self fueling loop in the team is initiated.

Creative People

But who are the team members? Will this only work in a certain constellation? Henry (2001) lists four qualities of creative people:

- positivity, defined by tolerance and a quest for opportunities
- playfulness, meaning mental flexibility and enjoying to take risks
- passion, which incorporates motivation and commitment
- persistence, to acquire experience in a field, which is necessary to be problem sensitive

In my opinion both the positivity and persistence are strongly bolstered by an optimistic attribution style. According to Seligman (1991) optimistic people explain positive events as being caused by themselves, see success as constant over time and consistent over different fields. Negative events are interpreted as bad luck, one time happenings that occurred in this specific field. This attribution of events will reinforce seeking opportunities, and it will foster persistence, even if a bad event comes along, as the next event will naturally be anticipated to be positive again. I would like to generalize the aspect of experience in the quality of persistence: I believe it does not have to be experience specific to a field. Maybe it only has to be experience that reinforces persistence, as often ideas are inspired by crossing boarders between domains, and by neglecting the expertise that confined the solution space.

I believe these characteristics can be found in all of us, albeit to a different extent. And I believe they can be enhanced in the right surroundings with the right reinforcement. Furthermore I believe a group gains creativity potential with the interdisciplinarity and diversity inherent to it. So the mix of people will include individuals that will vary in their degrees of having the aforementioned qualities.

Motivation

Intrinsic motivation fosters creativity. According to Hooker & Csikszentmihalyi (2003) Teresa Amabile found that extrinsic motivators can trigger creativity, but the intrinsic motivation produces more creativity. She discovered two reasons for this: firstly extrinsic factors can distract from the actual goal by letting the creator focus on the expected rewards. Secondly they can reduce the individual's willingness to take risks, as these might endanger the extrinsic goal.

It is exactly this willingness to take risks, one part of the playfulness quality, which corresponds highly with the desire to explore. The adventurer, who playfully explores an idea, quenching her thirst to discover new territory, enjoys this without needing any external rewards. The journey itself is enough reinforcement. An open climate that allows this, giving people freedom and allowing them to control their direct surroundings, might be laying the foundation for one of the most important factors in fostering creativity: fun. People who have fun at work, have a safe environment to joke around in, where ambiguity is not a threat but an opportunity to explore new perspectives will experience flow in doing so – thus reinforcing their creative activities. As Henry (2001) phrases it 'the love people feel for their work may be just as good a measure of their level of creativity' (p.14). There must be room for people to live out their passion for what they are doing.

All these settings enable people to grow, to mature and to move towards self-actualization. For this, being autonomous to a certain extent plays an important part. People who suffer lack of control over their lives will not be able to self actualize. Myers (1999) explains that learned helplessness is 'the hopelessness and resignation learned when a human (…) perceives no control over repeated bad events' (p.52). Based on Martin Seligman's research, he further states that the feeling to be in control has positive effects on health and helps to reduce stress.

I believe that when people have the freedom and the control to joyfully explore, to promote their self actualization and experience flow, they will develop a higher commitment to the job. They will make their tasks 'their baby', taking responsibility for it and investing a lot more energy in it, simply generate a higher (intrinsic) motivation. Employees will also set priorities in a much more goal-oriented way, focusing on the long term goal, even accepting and overcoming short term disadvantages to attain it. This means less energy is wasted on side tracks, such as struggling for an external reward or pursuing politics. On the management level much less effort is necessary for monitoring employees: once the goal is clarified, the high motivation and ability to perceive reality more objectively (as Maslow accredits people who are self actualized, in Davis, 2004) will enable the employee to monitor himself very accurately.

In sum this means that a creative work culture is stimulating and motivating for employees, which results in higher performance. This alone should be a convincing argument for organizations to promote a creative work culture.

Integration

In the age of globalization people from all over the world have to work together, sometimes without being in the same location. Companies merge, markets grow and technology seems to make the planet smaller. In many fields it has become popular and necessary to work in interdisciplinary teams. This has positive effects on the creativity and innovation performance, as the number of bisociations rise with people from differing backgrounds (Abra & Abra, 1999) – if the potential of the people in the group is applied effectively. Unfortunately communication and interaction can become very difficult among people from different backgrounds, with different experiences, mind sets, miscellaneous knowledge and varying cultures.

Here creativity can serve as a bridge, as a common denominator that helps overcome differences to collaborate on a common goal. The tolerance for ambiguity and the mental flexibility open the door for different approaches. As Simonton (1999) states in his article 'Creativity and Genius', creative people are extremely open to new experiences, usually interested in a multiple of domains and they actively seek complexity. I see several advantages these characteristics pose for the interdisciplinary team. Withholding judgment helps to follow another person along a different path. The positivity and its opportunity seeking character enable people to see new things as an inspiration rather than a threat. Driven by a true passion for a subject they will eagerly incorporate new aspects, and therefore be highly interested in acquiring new insights and perspectives. As the highly creative person is usually characterized as introverted, some attention has to be paid to overcoming social skill hurdles. But the way I see it, this is taken care of by the strong commitment of the individual towards the task.

In his book 'The seven habits of highly effective people' Stephen R. Covey describes several habits or guidelines to become a more effective person. One of them is to 'think win-win'. To do this, a person has to be able to take the other's perspective. The overall outcome will always be better than when seeking to exploit someone, as in a win-lose outcome. More often will the individual outcome for both sides actually be better in win-win, especially when taking into account that it is a much more rewarding basis for a longer term relationship. Abra & Abra (1999) phrase it a bit differently, saying that cooperation is a form of interdependence, where the advancement of one member of the group towards a common goal raises the chances for the others to reach it. This of course depends strongly on the setting provided by the organization. If competitive behavior is favored it is hard to develop an integrating attitude.

So being able to change point of view and actively try acquiring new perspectives will boost negotiation skills. With a little training and empowerment, employees in creative settings will boost their ability to work in interdisciplinary teams. The more a learning culture is promoted, that emphasizes mistake tolerance and is authentic in working towards a long term goal, the easier it will be to effectively use the potential of diverse teams.

Embracing Change

Moss Kanter (1992) describes 'kaleidoscope thinking' as the essential skill to master change. To her, kaleidoscope thinking means being able to see patterns and to look at them from different perspectives. It also means being able to take data, assumptions or concepts and actively shaking them and rearranging them into new pattern. This flexibility is one of the qualities that I have found to be cited very often concerning creative people. It includes an ability to be flexible and a willingness to be so. Many of the methods to generate ideas found on this principle, stimulating the expansion of boarders, changing certain aspects and turning the angle applied to the problem or object of ideation. De Bono (1996) coined the term lateral thinking to describe a shift in thinking that takes place on the same level. Vertical thinking, in contrast, would mean maintaining the position but changing the level of detail or abstractness. In order to pursue lateral thinking, one has to challenge the paradigm one is moving in. This means questioning the framework one is applying to a specific situation. In other words: the parameters by which one is usually judging approaches or solutions have to be suspended. Two of the four ground rules for diverging (e.g. Miller, Verhar, Firestien, 2001) heed this: deferring judgment and seeking wild and unusual ideas both aim at enabling lateral movement in thought.

Sometimes it is not so easy to take on a different viewpoint. Group situations may easily pressure us into conformity with the opinions of others. Myers (1999) differentiates between normative influence, which 'is conformity based on a person's desire to fulfill others' expectations, often to gain acceptance' and informational influence, 'conformity that results from accepting evidence about reality provided by other people' (both p.237). The former should be tackled by deferring judgment and having an open, constructive culture. The latter might pose problems, not because people will consciously conform, but because conforming due to informational influence is a learned pattern applied in situation where one does not have sufficient information at hand. Creative situations often are marked by lack of knowledge, being open ended and by ambiguity, so this might trigger informational conformity in a group setting.

As Henry (2001) states 'chance favours the prepared mind', so enhancing skills that help to question paradigms and supplying an environment that is open for anything new, will enable people to cope with change that is imposed on them. Brabandere (2005) describes change as taking place in two steps. The first is the continuous implementation of change, making it become reality. It can be learned and requires project management skills. The second is the sudden switch in perception, which is facilitated by being prepared for it. The latter is the one that makes change sustainable, as change that only takes place in step one can relapse to the old situation. The former is irreversible: once one has changed perception of something, one cannot undo this view. So while change step 1 takes place on the material side of things (implementing change) the other takes place in the head of people. Facing new insights is an aspect where humor plays an important role again: when we are presented with something unanticipated, something new or a shift in perspective, we tend to laugh (Segal, 2001). So fun at the workplace is a very positive signal that the environment fosters dealing with the unexpected.

Again the qualities of positivity, thereby opportunity seeking and tolerance for ambiguity, as well as playfulness, consisting of mental flexibility and a portion of risk taking are huge assets when dealing with change. But reacting to change in the environment is not enough. In his book about change "Who moved my cheese?" Johnson (1998) phrased it this way: 'Anticipate the change: get ready for the cheese to move' (taken from wikipedia, 2005). Providing an environment that fosters creativity and thereby empowering people to become self actualized is the best basis to entice them to embrace change, enjoying the challenge of the novel, seeking to explore and integrate the unknown. Being able to deal with change is a huge asset in today's speed oriented world.

Conclusion

I claim that organizations benefit enormously from providing a creative working environment. Once the shakedown of the conditions for flow and creativity has taken place, energy originally bound to implementing these structures is set free to pour into the reciprocal nurturing of motivation, integration and embracing change. These areas are strongly intertwined and support the 'idea tip of the iceberg', but they also constitute very valuable assets for organizations in themselves. Thus organizations will not only achieve the ability to be creative and innovative when promoting a creative culture, but also become more attractive places to work. Performance is boosted through motivation and effective use of potential, and the company has the best preconditions to stay well ahead of competition.

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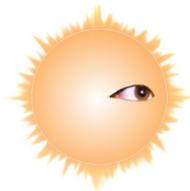
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