# Organisational creativity – the top ten enablers

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As part of a masters degree research project Wayne Morris surveyed a range of New Zealand organisations with the intention of identifying the factors that enable organisational creativity. These are his top ten.

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More than just a buzzword, creativity is becoming acknowledged as a critical factor in organisational success. Creativity in organisations might be defined as the process by which new ideas that make innovation possible, are developed. Talk to any organisational leader and sooner or later the words 'creativity' and 'innovation' will come up. But for many, these terms are simply buzz words. Few truly know how to foster creativity and innovation in their workplace. And even fewer actually do it. My research identified the following as the top ten critical organisational creativity success factors. They are in ascending priority order as identified by the survey respondents. The quotes are taken directly from the survey responses.

## 10.   Appropriate reward.

"It's money that brings me to work but it's not money that gets the best work out of me." Rewards do matter but they must be appropriate and that requires an understanding of what pushses each individuals buttons.

## 9.   Clear organisational goals.

Agreed by the majority but with some interesting exceptions as expressed by this response. ""My department has done all the visioning stuff – and we have goals for everything – but the reality is that if I get excited about something I will do the work I have to do as quick as I can so I can get onto the exciting stuff. I still try to meet my goals but if I wasn't able to do some of this other stuff it would probably drive me nuts. Isn't most work boring?" There is a growing message that being able to act rapidly, to seize new opportunities as they emerge and to create new knowledge from previously unanticipated needs are becoming more important than staying focussed and marching in the same direction.

## 8.   Positive staff motivation

Motivated staff are essential to having a creative organsaition. Most took this as a given – no motivation – no creativity. Some described it as a cycle as expressed in the following: "If I am motivated I will be more creative but the reverse is also true. I have seen people get into upward and downward spirals and it can be catching." Positive staff motivation enhances organisational creativity.

## 7.    Committed leadership

"While the truly inspired and creative may break through the barriers to success, an environment that enhances organisational creativity may reap benefits from many surprising sources – the quiet, the reluctant, the plodders – not just the Einsteins. The leaders role is to remove the barriers."
Leadership that removes barriers enhances organisational creativity.

## 6    Personal authority to initiate change / individual empowerment

Respondents talked about how much freedom and authority they had to initiate change – some gave it to themselves, others waited for it to be given. Many spoke of the anxiety that at times accompanies empowerment. Ideally empowerment of people results in increased initiative, involvement, enthusiasm, innovation and speed but also has a cost in terms of increased anxiety and stress levels.

## 5    Supportive organisational structure

Described by one respondent as "an environment where problems are addressed without blaming or scapegoating" supportive organisational structure was described by others as having decentralised authority, flexibility and adapatability. The terms 'organic versus mechanistic' were used by some respondents with an organic structure being the preferred to enhance organisational creativity.

## 4.    Open communication and information sharing

"For me one of the barriers is an environment where people undermine each other, information is not shared and there is no credit given for creativity." And from another respondent; "It's esential to have access to information – creativity is often spurred on by hitchiking on new ideas that flow past the alert mind – often converting them to a new situation or application."
Open communication of organisational changes, decisions and policies; opportunities to voice concerns, understandings and ideas; and the feeling of 'being heard' all enhance organisational creativity.

## 3.    Space / resources to pursue ideas

This priority was closely linked to time but also included the physical space required to 'trial' new ideas and the finance to fund such a pursuit.
"I am at my creative best when I can balance the need for access to people and resources with time for me. I do my best thinking when I am jogging in the morning but then I need people to test my ideas against – and sometimes that is hard."

An environment that was conducive to creativity was also mentioned by some with one commenting that "having appropriate music, art work and 'creative

stuff' around gets my creative juices going but I don't think my tastes would appeal to all. I'm not sure how you get agreement on that sort of thing." Appropriate space and resources enhances organisational creativity.

## 2.    Staff competence

Competence of staff was highlighted as the second most important factor in enhancing organisational creativity. When questioned further about this respondents talked about a range of issues perhaps best summarised by this comment: "If I know I can rely on my staff, that they are technically competent, then I am able to push the boundaries of their technical competence into areas of the unknown of the new – to come up with creative and innovative ideas." A contrary view was offered by some. "Just because someone is technically competent doesn't mean that they are capable of producing new and creative ideas. Some people are simply not competent or confident to do so".

From the survey responses there appears to be agreement that competent staff are important to organisational creativity but disagreement over the types of competencies required.

. . . a drum roll please . . . ! The single biggest enabler to enhancing organisational creativity is . . . .

## 1.    Time

More respondents raised the issue of time as the most important factor in enhancing organsiational creativity than any other with comments such as, "Just having uninterrupted time would do it for me. It's so rare that I make space and time in my day to just think. I know that when I do, it works really well for me and I get a lot more stausfaction from my work. It remains a real challenge for me."

This is supported by a study conducted by Teresa Amabile [in Fast Company Bill Breen Issue 89 Dec 2004] the results of which indicated that contrary to the belief that people often thought they were more creative under deadline pressure the opposite was, in fact, the case – people were the least creative when they were fighting the clock. It seems that time pressure stifles creativity because people are unable to  deeply engage with a problem. Creativity requires an incubation period; people need time to soak in a problem and let the ideas bubble up.
Organisational creativity requires time!!

## The scary bit!

The people surveyed had little difficulty in identifying the factors they regarded as necessary to enhance organisational creativity but very few said that they worked in an organisation that actually implemented them.

"I personally feel 'congested' to the point where dreaming up something new and innovative is totally unappealing, because it will just add to an already overloaded schedule. I do recall feeling differently and have demonstrated an ability to make a silk purse out of a sows ear in the past. But I do seem to have passed over the creative climax and am trying not to slip down the other side. I suspect this sentiment is not uncommon."

Sadly, I suspect the comment above is right.

Let me finish this article with some quotes from my research – they are offered as thought starters.

"Uncreative people in the organisation need to genntly placed out of the way of the creatives – at all levels!"

"The environment has to be safe enough to make mistakes in – not repeatedly – but it is difficult to learn without making some mistakes."

"Dead and boring leaders create dead and boring organisations."

So, if creativity is important to you and your organisation's future you need to make time for it before you begin to wonder how you got this far behind.

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