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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Creativity and bureaucracy an oxymoron - read this month's newsletter to find out how to bust bureaucracy to bring creativity into your organization.

Creativity in a Bureaucracy

"Large organizations are like giant hairballs. Every decision adds another hair. There is existence but no life in a hairball. You have to expend creative energy to avoid getting all tangled up."

- Gordon Mackenzie, Hallmark Cards Creativity Consultant

Organizational red tape, cumbersome work rules, and tangled processes not only take up an extraordinary amount of time, it can drain creativity. Although creativity shows up in bureaucratic organizations in the form of brainstorming and "exciting days" in offices, the reality often is - a new idea flourishes, but then it enters a bureaucratic mess that substantially reduces the likelihood of its execution. For many, it is a daily challenge to subvert corporate stultification from the inside. Many working people are shut down, frustrated, and locked in a desperate situation they don't know how to get out of.

Contrary to popular belief, creativity can exist in bureaucratic environments. Many organizations foster creativity by organizing themselves in different ways. For example, 3M promotes 'skunkwork' - a project funded from other agreed projects, and being sustained through the belief of a champion, in the case of Post-It a researcher named Art Fry. Other organizations break down bureaucracy by setting up project based structures. Instead of having a traditional hierarchy and set of reporting relationships, where the tasks are performed by people who are functional specialists, projects are established across functional lines relative to the needs for that project. For example, a project to design a new product would have members from research, development, production, marketing, sales and finance working together from the outset. When the project is complete, the team dissolves and the people join other projects.

But what if you are in a bureaucratic organization that has no interest or inclination in being a creative organization, what can you do. Most organizations have bureaucracy - it is what it is and it is most likely not going to change. To make creativity happen, creative professionals must learn to work within the bureaucracy. It starts with you.

How to be Creative within a Bureaucratic Organization

- ✦ **Manage your inner story.** What is your 'inner story' about creativity within the organization in which you operate? Are you constantly focusing on how you can't be creative within this organization or are you feeding your mind with possibilities, e.g., how might I unleash creativity here? Where are the possibilities? What if?
- ✦ **Pay attention to your conversations.** What kind of conversations are you having? Are they full of judgment and negativity? A tremendous amount of creativity can be unleashed through artful conversation, one that is positive and nonjudgmental. For example, even if you hate an idea, respect it and the person who presented it. Find ways to present criticism or feedback in an inspiring way. For more ideas, read *Focus on Innovation, vol.3, no.3, March 2005 Building Innovative Capacity through Conversation*.
- ✦ **Expect to be creative.** Athletes who approach to the starting line imagining a win are more likely to succeed than those who doubt their capabilities. See yourself being creative within this organization. For each roadblock you experience, visualize yourself successfully navigating around it.
- ✦ **Constantly challenge assumptions and biases.** Challenge your assumptions and biases that you have about the organization and the people you are working with. This isn't always easy, particularly if you have long-held assumptions about the organization or person. Next time you catch yourself in this position, put on the 'pause button' – suspend judgment, focus on the present and on finding better ways to create value, of working together and of getting results.
- ✦ **Find your creative space.** Just as the artist has his or her studio, you need a place to stimulate your creativity, and it is most likely not your office cubicle. Einstein said that he got his best ideas while in the shower. Find your "shower" and leverage it as much as you can.
- ✦ **Shake up your routine.** Change your workspace, your work habits, your schedule, whom you talk to, whom you don't talk to – anything that causes you to jolt your mind from the status quo or your usual habits. Encourage your team mates to do the same.
- ✦ **Learn to let go.** Try not to take yourself and everything around you so seriously. Search for every way possible to let go, and find the courage to be yourself. Focus on what's in your control and let go of the rest. Play more (For more ideas, read *Focus on Innovation, vol.1, no.10, September 2004, Are We Getting Too Serious?*).
- ✦ **Start small.** There is no way you can change your bureaucratic organization into a creative one. However you can start with your own team, department or division. Not only brainstorm together the things you can do as a unit towards becoming a creative organization, execute on your plan.
- ✦ **Strive to have everyone at the table.** When holding brainstorm meetings include the required resources for execution of an idea from the get go. All in-house start ups are successful in developing new products or services because they take extra effort to engage the right resources from the beginning. When an idea is brewing, your first action should be to get everyone involved who will actually need to take action to make the idea happen.
- ✦ **Encourage ideas of every kind at every level.** Encourage a full and rigorous sharing of ideas of every kind, at every level, without constraint or limitation. This will result in maximizing commitment, collaboration, cooperation, and the creation of value as a team/department/unit. One of the reasons small organizations are successful is because they encourage employees to share their ideas, and then act on them quickly, leading employees to feel that their contributions do make a difference in how the organization performs.

What's the Bottom line

Being creative within a bureaucratic organization starts with you. It requires a shift in mindset coupled with commitment and persistence.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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