

Management for Creativity: Environmental Factors Determining Successful Creative Thinking

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Creativity is both an individual and, ever increasingly, an organizational concept. Experts in a variety of fields agree that for an organization to be successful in the long term it must foster an environment where creativity is valued. Without creative ideas and solutions at all levels, organizations become mired down in outdated procedures and policies and forward momentum is impossible. Amabile (1988) and Shalley (1991) point out, however, that the ability of organizations to be innovative is dependant on the climate they create for employees. Furthermore, Shalley and Perry-Smith (2001) define creativity “as the production of novel and appropriate ideas, solutions, and work processes,” (2) which means that ideas must be unique, and yet applicable to the particular organization or problem. In relation to library settings, Tennant (2005) and Dolan and Kennedy (2009) have suggested that a high rate of technological change means that libraries need to become more adaptable to user needs, authoring unique and collaborative solutions to information systems and sharing. Driving this need for creativity is, in part, the acknowledgement of the authors that significant information competitors now exist in the commercial sector. According to Dolan and Kennedy, “it is essential to innovate to continue to be meaningful” (349). Given this current climate, it is important for library leaders to understand creativity from a managerial standpoint. This paper will address considerations leading to increased organizational creativity, including climate, group interactions, leadership, and individual performance, which have been identified by Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, and Strange (2002) as significant areas of creativity research.

Organizational Climate

Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron (1996) and Madjar, Oldham, and Pratt (2002) have suggested that employees’ perceptions of the work environment have a strong influence on their creativity level, and that these perceptions can change based on organization,

department, and team structures. Isaksen, Lauer, Ekvall, and Britz (2001) further expand this concept of structure by pointing out that, “it deals with levels of responsibility, decision making authority, and formal reporting relations with others in the organization.” (173) This definition of structure can exist at all levels, and has a strong influence over employee interactions. For instance, the Situational Outlook Questionnaire (SOQ) used by Isaksen, et al. (2001), identifies several dimensions of climate related to supervisor and subordinate interactions. Challenge and involvement, freedom, and idea support are some of the concepts most directly related to organizational structure; these all influence creativity levels to a high degree. In a study using the SOQ to determine employee-perceived levels of each climate dimension, the researchers found that creative organizations scored high on topics related to employee autonomy and open communications, while less creative organizations scored much lower.

The KEYS: Assessing the Climate for Creativity (KEYS) measuring instrument provides the basis for another study on institutional influences on creativity in employees. Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron (1996) found that environmental factors could either encourage or halt creativity, depending on the situation. Considerations such as whether a supervisor trusted employees to make decisions about their work, the level of challenge the work provided, and the amount of resources provided were significant factors in determining creativity. In fact, the attitude of the organization as a whole was a strong influence on creativity. The willingness of the organization to implement creative ideas, for instance, was perceived by employees to be indicative of a culture of innovation. This proved to motivate employees to produce creative solutions on a frequent basis (1996).

Reward systems also proved effective in the Amabile, et. al (1996) study. However, the rewards that were appropriate were recognition of employees by managers and institutional

leaders; bonuses proved to decrease creativity levels. This point was also made by von Dran in the 1993 article *Empowerment*. In fact, both authors found that too much extrinsic motivation actually interfered with the intrinsic motivation required for creativity. Therefore organizations that empower employees to make key decisions and take risks in their idea generation create a better atmosphere than organizations that try to generate creativity through systems of reward and punishment. Such hierarchical structures enforce traditional authority in a way that diminishes innovation impulses in employees. Managers that see empowerment of employees as a threat to their own authority risk squelching the creative impulses of those workers (Von Dran, 1993). Organizational culture has a lasting impact on whether naturally creative people will thrive or conform. Next the traits that suggest individual creativity and how this potential can be encouraged and utilized in the context of a group setting will be examined.

Individual and Group Creativity

Certain traits tend to define people that are considered creative. Cummings and Oldham (1997) identified self-confidence, a desire for challenging work and the opportunity to learn, and patience in dealing with conflicting views as a few of those traits. Additionally, extremely creative employees are likely to create innovative solutions that completely depart from organizational norms, as opposed to reconfiguring existing structures to solve problems. Employees that engage in the latter process are contributing creatively as well, but in a more adaptive manner. Innovators, on the other hand, are more likely to take risks and respond to an environment that allows them to do so without the fear of repercussions for failure (1997).

In an organizational setting creativity is important at all levels and in relation to all situations. Everyday problems offer as many opportunities for innovation as special projects, as long as an atmosphere conducive to sharing is maintained. Madjar, Oldham, and Pratt (2002)

and Ashkanasy and Daus (2002) point out that the mood of an organization impacts its individual employees in significant ways. For instance, a threatening atmosphere causes employees to react negatively, which in turn diminishes creative drive. The authors explain this relationship between mood and creative performance by suggesting that negative events inform an employee's perception of the organization and, when experienced frequently, they chip away at morale. Lower morale, such as that cultivated by undue criticism, blaming employees for failure that is beyond their control, and infrequent praise, results in employee apathy. Managers that create a positive and supportive environment, however, promote enthusiasm and constructive relationships, both of which are essential for creative endeavors.

In fact, Madjar, Oldham, and Pratt (2002) found that "explicit support for creativity from work (supervisors/coworkers) and nonwork (family/friends) others made independent contributions to employees' creative performance." (763) This is important for a number of reasons, including the potential for organizations to encourage outside support as way to enhance creativity in the workplace, especially among less naturally creative employees (shown by the authors to receive a larger impact from outside sources of support). Outreach to families, perhaps in the form of opportunities to celebrate creative achievements or socialize with members of the organization at sponsored events, is one manner in which employers could encourage positive support of creativity from outside sources. Perhaps more importantly, however, the authors suggest that support of creativity from coworkers and supervisors is essential to fostering creativity in both highly creative and less creative employees (2002). In most organizations, group projects are a normal activity, so support from colleagues becomes key to successful collaborative endeavors.

Sethi, Smith, and Park (2002), however, suggest that group support carried too far can

become counterproductive. The authors, along with Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron (1996), acknowledge that a shared vision is essential to effective creativity in a team environment; they go on, however, to point out that teams that are too socially united will refrain from needed debate. Creativity is promoted by the constructive discussion and criticism of ideas and teams that are *too* comfortable with one another will seek compromise and agreement, thus undercutting innovation (2002). That said, teams can be an effect motivator for creativity, especially when they are comprised of people with diverse areas of expertise.

Mumford (2000) has suggested that having several areas of expertise represented (either individually or in team setting) can enhance creativity by encouraging employees to look at problems from different vantage points. In fact, such diversity of opinion is a good solution for combating the stagnation of creativity, and can generate a range of ideas for consideration. Additionally, leaders can assist employees in the creative process by providing time for them to think through the issues. Either a group or an individual that is allowed to muse over the problem has an enhanced ability to refine the problem at hand, which can sometimes generate a better solution to a more well-defined issue. Mumford (2000) and Longenecker (2007) also point to team training as an important factor in the success of group creativity. Supervisors require training to develop the skills to support innovation, such as interest in the project and process of the group, without controlling, monitoring, or checking their work. Additionally, employees engaged in group collaboration can benefit from teamwork training programs for a number of reasons. For starters, they can develop the ability to patiently consider other ideas without passing judgment, and subsequently debate the validity or feasibility of those ideas in a passionate but professional manner. More importantly however, Mumford (2000) suggests that holding such training programs is a signal to employees that a team project is valued by the

organization—a sure motivator for the creative process. In fact, leadership and managerial attitudes are among the most important aspects in determining the innovation of employees in an organizational setting.

Creative Leadership and Leading Creativity

Leadership in an organizational setting is defined by Bennis (1989) as something that transcends management. He states, “the manager administers; the leader motivates . . . [and] the manager relies on control; the leader inspires trust.” (45) These elements are key in any discussion of creativity in an organization, since leaders define whether the climate is conducive to innovation or fear. For example, Riggs (2001) suggests that libraries are at a point where they need to move past long-held procedures and ideas about service and embrace the onslaught of technological change. In order to do this, library leaders (at all levels) need to create an image of change as an opportunity, and incorporate this idea into a shared vision and mission for all employees. Setting broad but clearly defined goals is an important step in enabling others in the organization to come up with creative ways to meet these objectives. Several researchers, including Ford and Gioia (2000) and Shalley and Perry-Smith (2001) found that organizational leaders who modeled creativity and passion for work were likely to inspire such behavior in employees. In the latter study, Shalley and Perry-Smith found that when people were provided with an example of a highly creative solution, they were more likely to learn by example and produce more creative solutions themselves. This effect was influenced, however, by perceptions of how the work would be judged.

Ford and Gioia (2000) and Shalley and Perry-Smith (2001) both noted that trust was an important factor in determining creativity. Leaders that were open to dialogue and that offered feedback that was informational rather than highly critical inspired much higher levels of

creativity. This is likely because openness and assessment of process without punishment for failure create a less hostile environment—one where employees do not feel ridiculed for suggesting innovative ideas. This idea was echoed by Amabile and Khaire (2008) in their suggestion that creative leaders embrace failure as a learning opportunity, and encourage employees to do the same. In adopting such an attitude, leaders can encourage a truly supportive environment for experimentation. Further, they suggest that effective leaders can help employees to abandon projects that are not working out by encouraging them to redirect their efforts to a different challenge. By facilitating a transition to a new project, the leader can avoid the impression of controlling the situation by exerting authority and pulling the plug, so to speak.

Amabile and Khaire (2008) also noted that effective leaders understand the different phases of project development, and steer clear of imposing rules and procedures during the initial creative process. Additionally, outside pressures such as deadlines, which can inhibit the creative process when viewed as obstacles, can be recast by effective leaders as a part of the challenge of the project. Skilled leaders can shift the vantage point of the creative team in such ways in order to inspire the best in them, while dealing with outside pressures in a way that minimizes their impact on the creative process.

Libraries and Innovations

In the last decade the need for libraries to embrace change has become increasingly apparent, and much of the management literature aimed at defining and dealing with creativity has begun to be translated into a practical approach for such organizations. Riggs (2001) suggests, however, that the severity of a lack of clear leadership in the library field is an issue that should be more actively pursued through research and change. When he asks, “Are we ready for a leadership crisis,” (8) he might better be asking what creative solutions exist to head

off this issue. He rightly insists that “unprecedented [sic] changes in libraries are demanding more and better leaders,” (16), and that suggests a need for creativity at every step of the change process. Dwindling resources are a real issue for many libraries, and so the idea of leading change by inspiring innovation and collaboration sounds both wonderful and cost-prohibitive. One solution, however, that is innovative and tech savvy in its own right, may provide a way to increase collaboration and creation across the library field. Larach and Cabra (2010) suggest that virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are a largely untapped source of creative inspiration. By setting up meeting spaces in such environments, leaders can encourage collaboration across great distances without sacrificing the sense of “shared space” (19) that occurs in effective meeting sessions. Virtual excursions can become a part of the creative process, encouraging fresh thinking and outside inspiration. Participants can react to one another in a more active manner than is possible with other collaboration technology, and engage in debate and sharing that is facilitated by an engaging environment and human connection.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that creativity is an important component for libraries to embrace as they plan the way forward. Leadership that models and encourages innovation will be the best resource for handling technological change and inspiring new and better ways for libraries to serve patrons. An environment that encourages risks and rewards creativity with praise and support will undoubtedly become the only model for effective library management in the future; stagnation will result in obsolescence. In short, leaders that understand the creative process, and know when and how to bring ideas to fruition, will encourage all employees to become actively engaged in improving all aspects of the library in order to maintain relevance, access, and quality service for the most important motivators of all—patrons.

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