



Book Corporate Creativity

How Innovation and Improvement Actually Happen

Alan G. Robinson and Sam Stern
Berrett-Koehler, 1997

Recommendation

You can improve your company’s performance by increasing creativity and fostering employee innovation. Most creative acts are unexpected. Therein lies your company’s creative potential. A company is creative when its employees do something new and possibly useful without being directly shown or taught. Creativity can and should happen in every organization, including companies with highly standardized procedures. While creativity is intangible, you can see the results of it in your company’s improvements and innovations. The first five chapters provide an overview of creativity, outline the six essential elements that creativity requires. In the following chapters, the authors detail the six elements, provide several case studies to illustrate their points and show how to achieve each aspect of creativity. This is a useful book for any executive who wants his or her company, and the people in it, to realize their full creative potential. *BooksInShort* recommends this book to managers and executives in any industry.

Take-Aways

- Corporate creativity involves combining ideas, knowledge and skills in new, unanticipated ways.
- The majority of creative acts come from people you might not have thought of as creative.
- Routine aspects of work deliver high quality products and services; nonroutine aspects give employees the opportunity to act creatively.
- All employees, regardless of age, intelligence or expertise, are a valuable resource of creativity.
- Intrinsic motivation, the desire to work for its own sake, is more conducive to creativity than extrinsic motivation, the desire to work for rewards.
- Provide ways for employees to exchange ideas and encourage them to participate in activities unrelated to their work.
- Make frequent job rotations, even across boundaries and functions.
- Playing around with an idea and experimenting with it, gives the idea a safe haven to develop until you can handle opposition or criticism.
- An accident is fortunate if you have the insight to see its value.
- Serendipity may not happen in one monumental discovery, but in a steady, continuous "drizzle" of small events.

Summary

The True Nature of Corporate Creativity

The true nature of corporate creativity is that most creative acts are unplanned and unexpected. A company is creative when its employees do something new and possibly useful without being directly being shown or taught. Creativity can and should happen in every organization, including companies with highly standardized procedures. You can see the results of corporate creativity in improvements (corporate changes) and innovations (entirely new corporate activities). While you cannot predict who will generate creative ideas, what the ideas will be or when they will occur, you can increase the likelihood of creativity in your company.

The No-Preconceptions Principle

Preconceptions about who will be creative, what they do and how they do it, limit your company's creativity. The firm's real strength lies in promoting and recognizing creativity from all employees. Most creative acts come from employees who are not regarded as particularly creative. You cannot know in advance:

1. Who will initiate a creative act
2. What it will be
3. When it will occur
4. How it will occur

The Routine and The Nonroutine

High quality products and services require routine work, which must be planned for and executed consistently. Standardization is necessary for safety, quality and efficiency, but creativity still counts. People encounter unplanned-for events during even the most standardized procedures. These nonroutine aspects of work give employees the opportunity to respond with a creative act. Kathy Betts, a part-time government employee in Massachusetts, had an idea that saved \$1.4 million. Through her routine work, she gained experience and knowledge about Medicaid that nobody else had. Every employee knows something about your company nobody else knows. This is a valuable, untapped source of creativity.

Creativity and Intelligence

Research on creativity reinforces the No-Preconceptions Principle: you cannot know in advance who will initiate a creative act. Studies show:

1. Any person intelligent enough to perform his or her work is just as likely as anyone else to be creative.
2. Age has nothing to do with creativity.
3. Risk-takers are not more likely to be creative than other person.
4. Expertise can either help or hinder creativity.

The Six Essential Elements of Corporate Creativity

You can increase creativity in the workplace by implementing the six essential elements of all creative acts: alignment, self-initiated activity, unofficial activity, serendipity, diverse stimuli and within-company communication.

1. Alignment

Alignment occurs when all employees focus on your company's main goals so each person can recognize and respond to a potentially good idea. Very few companies are in alignment. First, alignment involves your company's intangible culture and environment. Perceiving it requires a holistic view. Developing and maintaining proper alignment takes time, resources and discipline. Often,

management prefers to put energy into measurable results rather than focus on aligning employees with company goals. Second, out-of-alignment companies can function and even make a profit. Still, strong alignment is necessary for your company to be consistently creative and reach its highest potential.

“The majority of creative acts are self-initiated, which explains why they are unanticipated by management.”

Recognize the value and the need for alignment in your company. While evasive, it affects how everyone makes decisions. Identify sources of misalignment. Scrutinize policies and practices. Are the actions and interests of employees in line with the company? Do people contribute new ideas? Are their ideas met with prompt action? Conduct surveys and focus groups to provide insight into employees' perceptions. Ask why good ideas did not receive prompt follow-through.

2. Self-Initiated Activity

Intrinsic motivation, or the desire to work for its own sake, is much more conducive to creativity than extrinsic motivation, the desire to work for rewards. People are naturally inclined to explore and create, which leads to initiation of new activities. Unanticipated creative acts, which companies tend to ignore, result only from self-initiated activity. Companies with high levels of creative activity are those which provide effective follow-through on employee ideas.

“A bad system will beat a good person every time.”

Example: In 1985, the U. S. Department of Agriculture criticized the Forest Service's Eastern Region for its bureaucracy and lack of creativity. In response, the region's management became more people-oriented. They changed their unresponsive suggestion system and simplified the suggestion form. Managers traveled to meet all their staff members and told them they welcomed suggestions. If a reasonably good idea did not get a response in 30 days, it was automatically approved and implemented. In the subsequent three years, employees responded with 12,000 ideas, 75 percent of which were used. To promote self-initiated activity, tap present resources with an effective system for responding to employee ideas. The system must:

1. Reach all employees
2. Be user-friendly
3. Provide strong follow-through
4. Record ideas
5. Be based on intrinsic motivation

3. Unofficial Activity

Unofficial activity occurs in the absence of direct official support, with the employee's desire to do something beneficial. A project or activity's official status can stifle all creative impulses. When you have time to play around and experiment with an idea, that gives the idea a safe haven to develop, until you can handle opposition or criticism. Corporate creativity involves combining ideas, knowledge and skills in new, unanticipated ways. Boundaries within the corporate structure can seriously block official activity, but they cannot block unofficial activity.

“Much creative activity is the result of informal poking around, experimenting, and exploiting the unexpected.”

For creative acts to occur, make room for and encourage unofficial activity. Most policies allot a specific amount of time for idea development. An executive at 3M said his company allotted 15 percent because anything smaller would send the message that unofficial activity was not worth the time or effort. A higher time allotment would require management of the unofficial activity. Tell employees your company encourages them to work unofficially if they have the opportunity to develop something new and possibly useful. Internal publications should cover employees' creative acts and stress the role that unofficial activity played. Ensure that unofficial activity does not remain hidden. Managers and employees should be aware of what their colleagues are doing. This legitimizes the unofficial activity and some may be able to contribute their expertise.

4. Serendipity

Serendipity is a discovery made by "fortunate accident" with the element of "keenness of insight" or sagacity. Creativity often involves

putting together things that seemed previously unconnected. Serendipity helps bridge the distance between them. It always combines something from the people involved (sagacity) and something from the situation they work in (the "fortunate accident"). An accident is fortunate only if you have the insight to see its value; it may take a keen eye. Serendipity may not happen in one monumental event, but in a steady, continuous "drizzle" of small events.

“Any form of quotas for ideas - whether implicit or explicit - is counterproductive.”

Example: In 1938 at the DuPont laboratories in Wilmington, Delaware, Roy Plunkett was researching new refrigerants. He made tetrafluorethylene gas, bottled it in cylinders and stored them in dry ice. One morning, he opened the valve on a cylinder and nothing came out. The gas had spontaneously condensed into a solid: Teflon had been born. It took 20 years to develop useful Teflon products, but finally another employee discovered how to coat wire in Teflon. Today, he has a company that produces Gore-Tex, a popular fabric for outdoor clothing lined with Teflon he buys from DuPont.

5. Diverse Stimuli

A stimulus can provide new insight into a project or activity. While you cannot predict how an employee will react, most will rise to new stimuli. Provide opportunities for employees to tell others about the stimuli they received and the possibilities the new circumstance suggested to them.

“Unofficial activity does not recognize official boundaries. Official boundaries often prevent the unanticipated combining of ideas, knowledge and skill that is so important to creativity. To an unofficial project, these boundaries don’t exist.”

Example: Hallmark has a Creative Resource Center with more than 20,000 books and magazines. It presents a lecture series and produces a monthly newsletter that covers art shows, exhibits and new books. Hallmark offers employees sabbaticals for personal growth and learning. One employee’s sabbatical resulted in a new product line of multicultural and ethnic jewelry.

“Fortunate accidents are rarely one-shot events. They arise when people interact with each other and their work. They are often a continuous drizzle of tiny, almost imperceptible events that may escape the attention of all but the most alert and motivated observers. Occasionally a cloudburst comes along and makes these events easier to see.”

Four strategies can produce diverse stimuli:

1. Identify stimuli and provide them to employees. (For example, lecture series, special events, libraries, newsletters and study sabbaticals).
2. Rotate employees in jobs.
3. Arrange for employees to interact with others outside the organization (customers, dealers, suppliers and distributors).
4. Create ways for employees to bring in stimuli they find. Less powerful people often receive the most stimuli. They need encouragement to communicate their ideas.

6. Within-Company Communication

Every company requires planned activities that establish the necessary lines of employee communication, yet formal communication routes do not foster creativity, which requires a degree of chance. Unplanned-for communications happen more in smaller companies. The larger the company the more likely that its people are creative. However, they are also less likely to attain their full potential without assistance. Management’s openness to unanticipated ideas will help employees fulfill their creative potential and achieve alignment. People require interaction to exchange information unexpectedly or to organize new projects in an organic way.

“A stimulus can either push someone in a completely new direction or give that person fresh insight into what he or she has already set out to do.”

Example: Kodak’s Innovation Center brought together employees who would otherwise not have met. This pacesetter center, opened in 1978, is an informal gathering place. As a result, three employees created 3-D technology, an imaging system for signs and displays. Their most powerful sales tool was a picture of Mickey, Minnie and Pluto which they made for Disney, one of Kodak’s most important customers.

“A company’s creative potential increases rapidly with its size. The larger the company, the more likely that the components of a creative act are already present, but the less likely that they will be brought together without some help.”

How to Promote Within-Company Communication

1. Find ways for people from different departments to meet. Once a week in Japan, Ito-Yokado managers travel from all directions to headquarters. Innovation centers and Techfairs provide opportunities for interaction.
2. Provide fun, interesting opportunities for employees to learn about how the organization works.
3. The more they understand, the more chances they have to make creative connections based on knowledge. Make responding to employee ideas a new organizational priority.

About the Authors

Alan G. Robinson is professor of management at the Isenburg School of Management, University of Massachusetts. He has researched corporate creativity in companies worldwide, including in Japan, Canada, Mexico, Great Britain, India, China and Russia. He has served as a consultant to more than 50 companies on the subject of creativity. **Sam Stern** is professor of education at Oregon State University and has taught at Harvard University’s Department of Economics. From 1990-1992, he served as Professor of Creativity Development at the Japan Management Association and led a research team in the study of creativity in 200 companies. He has acted as advisor in creativity to such companies as Hewlett-Packard, NASA and Polaroid.
