

GETTING CREATIVE AT WORK

"Creativity has no place in business". If you think that, you have no chance at fostering an innovative culture, writes **Matt Jackson**

Innovation, growth and competitiveness are the focus of many organisations' strategic plans for 2015. But, for many, these words remain catchcries for objectives they have no meaningful strategies for achieving. This is largely because the precursor of innovation, creativity, is a rare commodity in business.

Rather than bringing in another round of MBA-qualified consultants to address the problem downstream, mature businesses are turning to artists, the subject matter experts in upstream creativity, to teach staff to unleash their thinking. Though late to the concept by the standards of PARC Xerox or Apple, Australian companies are beginning to discover that the skills of artists can bring fresh thinking into any organisation.

The start of a new year is a great time for HR to help their organisations let go of bad habits and clear the way for generative, lateral thought.

To that end, here are six ways organisations kill creativity – and what you can do to avoid this occurring in your organisation.

1 THEY IDEATE AROUND A TABLE OR EXPECT IDEAS TO EMERGE FROM A CUBICLE

Creative people know that inspiration is fickle. The most productive creative people know that they can't just sit around waiting for the muse.

They develop rituals that trigger their creativity so they can be 'creative on cue'. These rituals vary widely between different types of artists and creative people in all industries, but common rituals seem to be biased towards an active state in which the mind is relaxed or even distracted after the problem has been fully understood. Many of history's greatest artists (musicians, authors and painters, among others) habitually took a long daily walk and found that wide horizons could lead to bigger ideas. People often report having a Eureka! moment in the shower.

The lesson for businesses is that the office environment is not always ideal for triggering creativity, and that the structured work day can prevent staff from accessing the problem-solving centres of the brain. The solution may be as simple as encouraging people to go for a walk around the block after being briefed on an issue or, in a sneaky bid to secure the company some free overtime, scheduling presentations on a particular thorny matter for the end of the day. Engaged employees may well find their subconscious does the hard yards on the problem in their sleep.

2 THEY ASK FOR BLUE-SKY THINKING AND WONDER WHY THEY END UP WITH AIR

Great art movements often suffer from a lack of resources. Instead of killing creativity, having to

make do with little or nothing seems to act like creative rocket fuel.

A great example is the film noir genre, which had none of the technology we now rely on (not even colour), very limited access to sets, and nothing that we would now call special effects. As a result, cinematographers experimented with light and shadow to create rich visuals that underscored and enhanced the plot – a technique that is still used and referenced to this day.

Creating this effect in business means being very strict with boundaries and budgets, something that will surely come as music to the ears of any CFO.

3 THEY ARE MEAN WITH TIME

Creative people will work on a problem for as long – or as little time – as it takes. We've all heard the story of a song that was written in a single session, because it "just came" to the artist at that time. You wouldn't ask that artist to go back and worry about it until they ruined it. But sometimes it doesn't come so easy. Sometimes a great idea takes longer than you've allowed it to come to fruition. When they have faith that an idea is great, artists don't give up on it. For businesses and employees this means understanding the give and take of time around outcomes. In a good relationship, there is flexibility on both sides.

4 THEY RECRUIT AND PROMOTE IN A LINEAR FASHION

Creative people are gluttons for experience. Often their non-linear lives provide the fodder for ideas. Increasing specialisation and rigid career paths are a limitation on the creative potential within an organisation, as key people are more likely than ever to only know one profession. Artists have often worked in a number of roles to support their creative pursuits, or have come to the game late, after a previous career. In the advertising industry, copywriters used to come from a wide range of experiences. Bryce Courtenay was a successful author before he started writing ads, Phillip Adams was a film director (and is now the host of a popular radio show), and even David Ogilvy started off in the mailroom of an agency, very far from the university-to-work path the industry has embraced more recently.

It's interesting to note here that start-ups, the businesses that are doing the most creative work in the modern economy, are once again breaking down these rigid silos.

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5 THEY ALLOW THE MANAGEMENT TEAM TO CULTIVATE AN AIR OF INFALLIBILITY

As well as empathy, creativity requires vulnerability. A sense that we are not infallible opens us up to ideas from all quarters. Senior leaders in particular tend to worry that they have to cultivate an unflappable exterior or their staff will lose confidence in them. But in creating a force field around themselves, they shut out ideas and prevent themselves from taking creative risks.

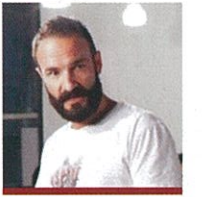
A CEO of an HR firm I worked with had created such a persona. But his perfectionism led him to a point where, if he couldn't be sure he would succeed at something, he wouldn't try. To help him create a chink in his armour and open him up to possibility, I asked him to deliberately forget to take his pen to meetings for a week and ask the person at each meeting who he found most intimidating if he could borrow a pen from them. He didn't do it at the first meeting, but when he did, he felt an enormous sense of relief. He also found that the act of asking for a pen – and in the process admitting a minor failing – started a conversation and formed a connection. That connection opened the way for collaboration by breaking down his fear of how others perceived him and offering them an opportunity to see him as an accessible human being.

6 THEY LET THEMSELVES BECOME SLAVES TO BEST PRACTICE

We're all familiar with the saying that "the great is the enemy of the good", but how many of us have considered, when faced with the absolutist 'best practice', that there might be a better way?

Artists know that locking themselves into a single way of doing things means they'll never find that better way, so they experiment with new routines and approaches. **HRD**

Over the following pages, HRD looks at how four market leaders are encouraging innovation in their organisations



Matt Jackson is an entrepreneur, poet and principal of The Affectors Academy, a company that teaches businesses to unlock their creativity. Visit affectorsacademy.edu.au.