

Be Creative

By

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“Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower.” – Steve Jobs

“Creativity is a lot like looking at the world through a kaleidoscope. You look at a set of elements, the same ones everyone else sees, but then reassemble those floating bits and pieces into an enticing new possibility. Effective leaders are able to do this.” — Rosabeth Moss Kanter

The leader is not afraid to be creative or to encourage it in others. Without embracing a culture of creativity, the organization will not survive.

In this section I use the words creativity and innovation interchangeably, as having the same meaning: the ability to transcend traditional ideas, thinking, rules, patterns, and relationships and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, or products. I particularly like the notion of transcending traditional things (ideas, rules, etc.). To some this is similar to “thinking outside the box,” but it is more than that. In a corporate officers’ meeting some years ago, when I was promoted to senior vice president, I was described as an iconoclast. The label sounded good to me; I vaguely thought it meant that I was an “out-of-the-box” thinker and doer. I guess I should have looked it up. If I had I would have found that it may also mean a person who attacks settled beliefs or institutions and seeks their overthrow.

In some ancient definitions it went as far as being a destroyer of religious symbols. I think I like the newer version or, better yet, what Oren Harari calls “creative disruption.” However, even that definition does not define how I think of myself or how I believe you should think of yourself. It is one thing to “attack” the status quo, but it is quite different when you know when to do it and when not to. Sometimes, I may have missed that part in the past when I wasn’t as smart as I am now, of course.

But, attacking or challenging the status quo or tackling a new problem requires that you provide a solution as well—the creative part of creative disruption. Don't you hate it when some sort of crisis erupts in a movie and, inevitably, someone shouts, "Do something!" Well, all too often in life we are faced with the need to "do something," which often requires the hero (the leader) to pull from your brain, or the brains of others, a workable solution. More than likely, that solution is expected to be something new, innovative/creative. Why do so few people seem to have that creative knack or at least the willingness to speak up and take action? While that is probably a good topic for some research, experience suggests that speaking up is often risky: You might be wrong or have to take responsibility or pay a penalty. Leaders are willing to step up, speak up, and take action. More importantly, they are not paralyzed by the idea of risk taking or the notion of transcending the traditional. Leaders, as I have suggested early on, are visionaries. Leaders also bring out the creativity in others and establish an environment that encourages innovation. Further, as you will see later, leaders are flexible.

Example

Ed was the deputy director of engineering for a large, well-established aerospace company. He had been with the company for over thirty years and in his current job for the last ten. He prided himself for having long-established processes and procedures with which teams were comfortable and proficient. Ed also had a preference for re-hiring previous employees who had been laid off for, as he viewed it, solely economic reasons. Ed's views and practices were mirrored throughout the whole company.

Unfortunately, the company was not doing well; in fact, it seemed to be in a steady state of decline. Orders for traditional products were dropping off. If anybody had asked, customers would have told Ed and the company that the competition had better products that fit with changing technology and customer needs. But nobody asked.

When the director of engineering quit, Ed was sure that he would get the job. However, the relatively new vice president hired a new director from one of the more progressive and successful competitors. Ed was angry. He was especially upset when the new director, Craig, started making changes such as hiring new people whose experience and methods were more up to date. Craig also set about creating new processes and procedures that met current regulations and standards, developing new relationships within the organization, and openly asking for new ideas both internally and externally. Slowly but surely, business started picking up. New products were proposed and placed into production. Ed, however, was still upset. He was sure that Craig was not taking full advantage of his experience and respecting long established operations. Ed still thought he should have had the job.

Suggestions

1. Ask questions, listen, pay attention to details, and learn ... *before* being creative.
2. Put aside traditional thoughts for a moment, and use your imagination to solve a problem or deal with a crisis.
3. Always believe that there is a solution.
4. If you don't see a creative solution, ask the opinions of others.
5. Accept that there will be risk.

6. Encourage and reward creativity in others.
7. For those who swear they don't have a creative bone in their bodies, go online and read a process developed by Robert Eberle called SCAMPER, which stands for
 - S: Substitute one thing for another.
 - C: Combine things in some way to improve them.
 - A: Adopt new technology or alter the function.
 - M: Modify in some way like changing size/scale, color, etc.
 - P: Put to another use.
 - E: Eliminate elements; simplify or reduce functionality.
 - R: Reverse, turn upside down or inside out to make it work.

Dr. Farlow is a partner and coach at Wolf Leadership Development, LLC. He works with executives and pre-executives who desire to increase performance and take their leadership skills to the next level. His specialty is improving performance at work by improving relationship behaviors required of successful leaders. He can be contacted at mfarlow@wolfleadership.com.