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Creativity in Leadership: How to Cultivate It

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Creativity is not just for artists and musicians. Creative leaders can add real value to their companies using these seven tactics.

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Creativity may be difficult to measure but it's an essential business asset. We look at how leaders can encourage their teams to be more creative in the workplace.

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If I asked you how creative you are, what would you say? “Fairly. I dabble in watercolors and play the guitar,” or “Not at all, I don't have an artistic bone in my body!”

Whenever creativity is brought up in conversation, we tend to immediately think of artists and musicians. However, creativity spans all skills and disciplines, including business management. Creative leaders are adept at producing original ideas, meeting challenges with imagination, and recruiting five-star talent.

There's just one problem.

Creativity is difficult to measure, so few companies include it in their performance appraisal and development systems. That doesn't mean it's not an essential business asset. But it does make it harder to develop as a leadership skill.

So, let's look at creativity from a leadership perspective and consider if this is a trait that really can be cultivated.

Why Is Creativity Important for Companies?

I think most of us would agree, without any evidence, that the world's most successful companies have a flair for originality and ingenuity. Apple, Microsoft, Starbucks, L'Oréal and Salesforce.com are all great examples. However, [McKinsey research](#) has managed to demonstrate a strong correlation between creativity and performance.

According to their in-depth analysis, creative companies are more innovative and profitable than their less-creative peers. What is it that creative companies are doing differently? It seems that they:

- make creativity and innovation a business priority
- go to great lengths to understand customers and their pain points
- launch products and marketing campaigns quickly and nimbly
- use data and analytics to continually adapt their offering

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Together, these four business practices are applied to create additional business value. That's useful to know if you're a leader. These days we operate in a more innovation-driven economy, and there's considerable pressure on us all to churn out ideas and new offerings at a constant rate.

But what does this mean for you if you're not particularly blessed with imagination and don't consider yourself the next Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos. What if you're not up to generating a long line of new products that will amaze the world?

The Definition of Creative Leadership

I would define creative leadership as providing an environment that promotes creativity, embraces change, and encourages collaboration. It doesn't require managers and executives to be original thinkers. For me, it's all about giving employees the resources they need to overcome problems and find solutions not only for their company but also for their customers.

In the Brand Identity Document of Open Gate Consulting, I actually have creativity as one of our core values:

Creativity – We imagine the possibilities together and partner to make them a reality.

This is what it's all about, in my opinion. Looking for creative ways to serve our clients. Not being afraid to break the mold and imagine new possibilities for getting things done. I want us to turn challenges into advantages and ideas into reality.

Why Creativity Should Be One of Your Business Priorities

If you checked your job description right now, I doubt you'd find "creativity" in your list of key skills. So, if you're not expected to be creative, coaching your team to be imaginative and innovative is probably not one of your priorities. But bringing out the best in your people and optimizing business performance are surely high on your agenda, right?

"Our data show there's a link between workplace engagement and creativity, and everyone recognizes the link between innovation and market share."

[Gallup, 2017 American Workplace Study](#)

As a leader, it's your job to help your employees resolve problems, seize opportunities, and streamline their activities. That requires engagement and imagination. Engagement because staff who are highly involved in and enthusiastic about their work and workplace are much more likely to accept your invitation to be creative. Imagination, because—without it—there's simply no creativity.

Encouraging Employees To Be Creative and Imaginative

A couple of years ago, [Gallup did a study](#) of more than 16,500 employees. It revealed that "only 29% of workers strongly agree that they're expected to be creative or think of new ways to do things

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at work.” What does this mean? It means that companies are missing out on opportunities to add business value.

That should concern you as a leader. If your team don't think they're required to be creative, why would they bother finding new ways to help the company succeed? Think of all the bright ideas you could be letting slip simply because you haven't expressly asked your team to be creative in their work.

“Executive leaders often schedule creativity into their calendar because building vision and strategy -- a very creative endeavor -- is part of their job. But lower-level employees need to justify their time with discernable results.”

Gallup

How To Cultivate Creativity as a Leadership Trait

It's clear that creativity has real business value. Therefore, it's a capacity that is worth developing in yourself and in your team. Below I've given you seven suggestions for cultivating creativity in the workplace:

1. Show that creativity is a business priority

Allot your team time and resources to think creatively, use their imagination, and discuss new ideas (and not just once or twice a year). One approach is to hold guided brainstorming sessions.

2. Know your customers inside out

Ensure each member of your team really understands the people that they're serving (both internal and external) and encourage them to find ways to ease or eliminate their pain points.

3. Think about your team's physical environment

Aspects such as color, temperature, sound and lighting can all affect the creative process. Perhaps you could set aside a relaxation area so that team members can remove themselves from their daily tasks (where they must organize their thoughts) and indulge in a little blue-sky thinking.

4. Consider the diversity of your team

Not just in terms of gender and ethnicity but also cognitive abilities and personality. Having a bunch of different people who approach problems from different angles in an inclusive and collaborative way can spark ideas. Not sure where to start? A tool like [The Team Strengths Grid](#) can be really useful in exploring the individual and collective talents of your

team.

5. Give your team freedom to take risks

Don't dismiss new ideas out of hand or punish well-intentioned failures. That's the fastest route to stifling creativity. Reassure your team that they have permission to take calculated risks.

6. Acknowledge good ideas

When team members do come up with an idea for a better way to do their job or devise an innovative product, ensure they are publicly recognized (and maybe even rewarded).

7. Analyze your own personal leadership style

How risk-adverse are you? If you are naturally reluctant to take risks, maybe this is something you could work on with a mentor or leadership coach.

Conclusion

The ability to be creative is not confined to artists, musicians and actors. It extends to business leaders, too. And, as we've seen, creativity helps companies be much more successful. So, let me rephrase the question that I asked at the very top: Are you a creative leader? What would your answer be now?

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7 Steps to Becoming a Creative Leader

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Think creativity is just for artists and musicians? Not true! Creative leaders can add real value to their companies. But what if you don't have a gift for creativity?

Thankfully, you don't have to be the next Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos to add a little creativity to your leadership style.

But you do need a few tactics up your sleeve to encourage your team to come up with new ways of doing things.

(Or maybe even develop a new product or two.)

In our latest article, "Creativity in Leadership: How to Cultivate It," we look at the importance of creativity as a leadership trait and what you can do to develop it.

#personaldevelopment #cliftonstrengths #leadershipmentoring