What Does It Mean To Have A Creative Workforce

Mike Collins, Author, Saving American Manufacturing

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Creativity is crucial to innovation and innovation is a key factor in competing in the globalized market place.

In November 2007, a study by the Conference Board and Americans for the Arts in partnership with the American Association of School Administrators, interviewed school superintendents and business executives to find out their views of creativity.

Both groups thought creativity was important in the American Workplace. The study found that:

- 85 percent of the employers concerned with hiring creative people say they cannot find the applicants they need.
- Employers hiring creative people rarely use profile tests to assess the creative skills of the potential employees. Instead they rely on face to face interviews. [1]

The Fundamentals Of Creativity?

Right & Left Brain

Right brain thinking has always symbolized the seat of creativity in the mind. Obvious candidates for right brain thinking are actors, poets and artists. Left brain people are most exemplified by accountants, engineers and computer programmers.

These generalizations serve to act more as bookends for a wide range of thinking, and seldom are people all right or all left brained. Although the pure right brained people like artists and poets represent creativity, everybody in the range from right to left have some capacity to be creative.

Patterns & Synthesis

Daniel Pink in his recent book, A Whole New Mind, says, “What’s in greatest demand today is not just analysis but synthesis- seeing the big picture and crossing boundaries, being able to combine disparate pieces into an arresting new whole." [2] I have always referred to this as the ability to see patterns in things that would lead to a holistic view. Creative people seem to have the ability to look at a collection of random data and facts and intuit a pattern or bigger picture.

A good example is the process Einstein used in discovering his special and general theories; which he stated “No collection of empirical facts, no matter how comprehensive, can ever lead to the general theory of relativity. In many of his famous papers he made a point of insisting that he had not relied much on any specific experimental data to induce his new theories.”

Einstein’s strength as a theorist was his keen ability to come up with what he called “the general postulates and principles” which serve as a starting point.

Called thought experiments; such as, visualizing a man in an elevator in free fall (which was the idea for the equivalence of gravity and acceleration), it was a process that mixed intuition with a feel for the patterns to be found in experimental data. Once he had wrested a principle from nature he relied on a by-play of physical intuition and mathematical formalism.

This ability is useful in marketing, where you gather all kinds of data from the field and eventually see the trends and target a market. The very best Strategic and Marketing thinkers I have met in my career seem to have the ability to gather all kinds of disparate data and then use their intuition to see the patterns and make projections of where they should go in the future.

Imagination & personality

Creative people are often different in personality and habits, willing to make huge imaginative leaps over conventional wisdom.

Many creative right brained people are not conformers but performers. They will have strong opinions and cause conflicts, and are often not “yes men.”

However, they are creative, intense, self directed and good people to have around during a crisis. The problem is that in today’s corporation with HR departments and employee handbooks these kinds of people get into trouble because they do not fit the “safe profile.”

An Atmosphere Of Creativity

Einstein believed that to create an atmosphere of creativity and imagination requires nurturing free thought (in Einstein’s case it was rebellious free thought). According to biographer Walter Isaccson “Einstein thought that the freest society with the most rebellious thinking would be the most creative”. So the obvious question: Can this be done in a manufacturing organization?

What Kind Of Organization?

I would like to make the case that the typical manufacturing company with a top down centralized organization is counter intuitive to creativity. These Defender organizations use centralized command and control, centralized decision making; and their focus on formalization makes them inherently deviancy intolerant.

In fact, I make the point that any centralized and rigidly controlled organization with top down thinking is a killer of creativity.

A new type of organization, I call the Prospector organization, is designed to prospect for new customers and markets. The organization is flat and decentralized.

Communication and decision making are pushed down to the people who are doing the work. Flexibility is favored over formality and there is much more tolerance for employees who don't fit the profiles of the perfect employee and team player.

Retaining Creative Talent

One idea that I think would promote retaining creative employees is assisting young employees in planning out their careers. Instead of just hiring them for some specific job profile, companies should identify their interests and help them map out a complete career, showing the education and training needed and how they can reach their monetary goals, and satisfy their creative needs.

The Subconscious Mind

Have you ever had the moment when you got into a zone and could shove out all of the thoughts bouncing around in your conscious mind and focus deeply on a problem? This is essentially reaching into your subconscious mind for answers and is similar to meditation and self hypnosis.

Training & Techniques

- **What to read** – Innovation Inc., Unlocking Creativity in the Workplace [3], makes the case that everyone in the company can be creative with practice. It is a "how to do it" book based on good exercises.
- **Use "How to" statements** – Help you formulate the problem in a way that is useful and what is missing to reach a solution; for instance, how to get purchase parts to production on the day the machine starts assembly. If we could get the parts there on time it would save a lot of assembly hours and money (the positive part of the statement) but they have to all be there on the same day (the specific problem).
- **Diverge** – Divergence is a creativity technique of writing down as many ideas that may be logical, illogical or even ridiculous into a list of possibilities. The key is to open up the possibilities and not censor the data or judge the ideas when making the list. It assumes the more ideas you begin with, the greater the chance you can find one that would be a solution. .
- **Converge** – The book then describes many techniques to analyze and dissect all of the ideas (converge) into the best solutions.
- **Do an interest -skills matrix** - In 1987, I invented a matrix tool that combined all of my

> interests with my alleged skills into various kinds of work that I could do in the future. It is a simple spread sheet with all of my interests listed above the columns and all of my skills listed at the beginning of rows. I simply drew intersecting lines between skills and interests I thought could lead to a usable skill set. It worked remarkably well and helped me pursue art, writing, poetry, teaching, speaking and other interests in addition to my manufacturing career.

Daniel Pink in A Whole New Mind, goes beyond classifying people as either right or left brained. He makes the case that we are in the transition from the information age to the conceptual age and from L-Directed thinking to R-Directed thinking.

L-Directed thinking was dominant as we led the world in technology development, but now every nation is catching up and any job or skill that can be digitized or put on the internet is in danger of going overseas.

R-Directed thinking in a new conceptual age makes sense from a competitive point of view. The conceptual age will be dominated by those countries and companies that foster innovation, creativity and people who can rise above data and see patterns.

I think American Manufacturing is going to have to move beyond the left brain, internal strategies that have been so popular, and learn to focus more on external strategies like monitoring customers, finding new markets, inventing unique new products, creating new services and creating new sales channels.

Thomas Friedman goes further and says, “If we are going to have any advantage over China, it is because we nurture rebellious, imaginative, free thinkers rather then try to control expression.” [4]

- 1 Ready to Innovate: Are Educators and Executives Aligned ion the creative Readiness of the U.S. Workforce, THE CONFERENCE BOARD, James Litchtenberg, Christopher Woock, Mary Wright, November 2007.
- 2 A WHOLE NEW MIND, Daniel H. Pink, RIVERHEAD BOOKS, 2005.
- 3 INNOVATION INC., UNLOCKING Creativity IN THE WORKPLACE, Stephen R. Grossman, Bruce E. Rodgers, Beverly Moore; Wordware Publishing 1988.
- 4 Bound by culture, U.S. and Chinese schools lack the right stuff, Thomas Friedman, The Oregonian, April 29, 2009

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