Creativity And The Organization

Mike Collins, Author, Saving American Manufacturing

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An IBM survey of 1,500 CEOs found that – more than rigor, management, discipline, integrity, or vision – successfully navigating an increasingly complex world will require creativity.

But if creative people are viewed as the answer to solving the massive problems confronting large and small manufacturing companies, how will we identify them? There was a test invented by the J.P. Guilford Group in 1967 that used word associations to measure creativity. Another popular test is the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, which is a test of divergent thinking; one called The Creativity Achievement Questionnaire measures creative achievement across ten domains. But before you tell the HR department to add these tests to their interview procedures, I will warn you that these tests have as many critics as supporters. As far as I know, there are no tests that absolutely determine whether a person is creative.

There is also the problem of personality. Many creative right brained people are not conformers but are performers. Many don't fit the human resource profiles of good loyal workers: They will always have strong opinions and can cause conflicts. They are often not "yes men" and it takes a strong confident leader (with empathy) to understand them well enough to get all that they are willing to give. On the other hand, they are creative, intense, self directed, and good to have during a crisis.

The problem for manufacturers is that creative people must also have a very good understanding of their products, so just hiring a very creative person is not the answer. Rock stars and water color artists may simply not have the basic skills to develop new and unique products for production line machines. So the cognitive processes involved in finding a creative machine designer are more complex and harder to find.

Instead of trying to hire creative people, why not consider fostering creativity in the people who are already employees? There are some people who are very good right brain thinkers and were born with a pre-disposition to creativity. But I believe that most people use both right and left sides of their brain and can become more creative in an organization that supports creativity and training. So you may not have to hire creative people because you may already have them.

Control vs. Flexibility: A Balance

Why is it that small start-up companies often have more than their fair share of creative people compared to a large manufacturer? Could it be that as the company grows and adds employees that the organization automatically changes to include

more rules, controls, and management tools to manage more people?

This growth in management systems and controls is often codified in The Bible of rigid organizations — the employee handbook. Handbooks began as a tool that informed employees about vacations, holidays, and steel-toe shoes, but eventually, the tool morphed into a bureaucratic tool to control employee behavior, which eventually takes away the autonomy of the supervisor and the worker. The handbook was eventually expanded to include personal standards of conduct, ethics, customer relations, personal responsibility, and a host of other issues.

I believe that expansion of control leads to reduced flexibility and freedom for the employees and it stifles innovation, creativity, and motivation. Once the organization attains a level of control over all levels, flexibility and innovation get crushed and the hiring of new employees will turn to safe employees who fit the conformer profile. This contradiction between control and creativity creates a real dilemma for corporations and big organizations in general. If it is true that creativity is the answer to helping corporations deal with all of the changes in the economy, then having a rigid organization based on controls is a contradiction.

So how do you change the organization to improve creativity? In a survey called Team Creativity & Work II, Edward Glassman, PhD, answers the question of what changes are necessary to improve creativity. He found that people in corporations wanted:

- More time.
- More freedom.
- Less red tape.
- More respect.
- More recognition.
- Better communication.
- Fewer meetings.
- Better teamwork.
- Fewer penalties.

Most of these requests are just common sense, but they fly in the face of the rigid organization that emphasizes formalization and control. At a minimum, there must be a new balance between control and creativity and it actually may take a totally new approach to the organization and complete change of culture. I can’t imagine this happening in the Fortune 500 companies no matter how much they need creativity because they are, by design, focused on the short term, with profit, efficiency, and control as the primary drivers. They may have to create separate divisions or to buy smaller companies with a creative culture.

The Prospector Organization

The best organization to promote a culture of innovation and creativity is a flat and de-centralized organization where authority is continually pushed down to the people who are doing the work. I call this a “prospector” organization, and I find it

to be a type of manufacturing organization that works well in a changing environment where the company must quickly respond to customer demands, find new opportunities, and foster creativity. A prospector's prime capability is in finding and exploiting new product and market opportunities in a changing marketplace.

I think that increasing creativity in a manufacturing organization is less about hiring the lone genius and more about getting creativity out of existing employees. I believe that creativity can't happen without changing from a rigid organization that depends on control, rules, and a formal structure to a flexible and less formalized organization where employees are encouraged to take risks, experiment, and question the status quo without reprisal.

To create an innovation culture, some companies have developed teams of creative people, formed separate organizations to develop new ideas, or purchased a start-up company. Every manufacturing company (large and small) is facing the control vs. creativity question because they all know that we must be innovative to survive.

Mike Collins is the author of Saving American Manufacturing. You can find him on the web at www.mpcmgt.com *[2].*

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