

CREATING A CLIMATE THAT ENCOURAGES

CREATIVE THINKING

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The purpose of this paper is to share my understanding of what action is required to be taken to successfully improve creative thinking within a work place.

Defining creative thinking

I define “creative thinking” in broad rather than narrow terms; that is, creative thinking relates not only to innovations (big jumps) but also to incremental improvements (small jumps).

Importantly, I have also adopted the position that “climate” is not solely related to an organisation’s underlying culture. The investigations I’ve undertaken on creativity has led me to realise that creative thinking can be enhanced at both micro-individual and macro-group levels.

Of particular interest to me is research showing that whilst fewer than 1 per cent of people are “exceptionally” creative, all humans have significant creative potential albeit to varying degrees and it appears that much of this individual creative thinking potential lays dormant due to various restraining forces (Robbins, Millett, Cacioppe & Waters-Marsh, 2001, p.175).

Evidence shows that these restraining forces can be neutralised by making interventions at both the individual and cultural levels. Therefore, a climate that maximizes encouragement of creative thinking will be one that does so at both the individual and organisational levels, and therefore I intend covering both aspects within the bounds of this essay.

This essay will now discuss how I would have gone about producing a climate that encourages “creative thinking” within ABC Bank (fictional) a conservative UK workplace, given its very peculiar and somewhat “discouraging” business culture.

A project plan to create a climate that encourages “creative thinking” at ANZ Grindlays

The nature of the change required at ABC Bank to enable a more encouraging “creative thinking” climate would not have been structural, technological or product based. The changes needed would predominantly have been cultural, skills and leadership based changes; changes requiring the application of behavioural science knowledge and techniques to alter deeply entrenched organisational behaviours and mindsets. Corporate cultures are of course relatively stable, and company-wide changes within a culture like that maintained at ABC Bank would require a major planned intervention.

This essay will not focus however on how I would implement a culture change program, although clearly a radically different business culture would be required to achieve better “creative thinking”. Rather than focus on the much broader and bigger issue of changing the ABC Bank culture, I thought I would lubricate this need by recommending specific actions around the more concrete issue of improving “creative thinking”, which inevitably would be an incremental step towards culture change, in that it would demand considerable behavioural change throughout the enterprise including more participative management practices.

Of course, many efforts (up to 80%) to change organizations (especially cultural change) fail to produce the outcomes desired. Poor leadership, limited employee participation and low commitment to learning are some key reasons for cultural change failures.

To guard against failure, I would establish a specific “creative thinking” project to diagnose and manage the implementation of improved creative thinking process within ABC Bank. The key diagnostics I would employ would involve senior team process consultation and employee survey instruments. Project funding would be needed for a number of years (rather than months) and key emphasis would be placed on the project gaining the explicit and active commitment of the Managing Director, Board and other senior executives - without this influential power base, change will unlikely succeed. The interventions would be company-wide, signaling the view that everyone in the business has the ability to improve their creative thinking contributions.

The ABC Bank territory is wide, so I’d suggest the project is implemented in a regionally phased manner, commencing the first phase in the important London head office operation. The project would require a stepped and cascading implementation plan, which would look something like the following:

Project Plan Steps	Summary Purpose
<p>1. Authorisation: Managing Director/Board Owned Initiative</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain power stakeholder project ownership and articulation of the new “creative thinking” vision. An inspiring charismatic leadership style would be advantageous given then need to gain acceptance to new underpinning management values. (Stace, 1996, p.553).
<p>2. Senior Team Awareness, Commitment and Leadership Behaviours</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist senior executive self-awareness and personal leadership development by implementing 360 BY DESIGN leadership feedback process (I am licensed to implement Centre for Creative Leadership instruments). • Conduct workshops with senior team to improve awareness of the benefits of improved creative thinking, to learn creative thinking skills and to gain their buy-in to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ the need to change, ○ the review process, and ○ to establish the vision of the NEW “creative thinking” culture. • Ask senior team to research for themselves creative acts that have occurred in their areas of influence, and (ala Robinson and Stern) evaluate how they really happened, how they originated and add this intelligence to an executive “creativity knowledge bank”. • Secure authorization/commitment from all senior team members (i.e. must be unanimous). NB: remove from office executives not fully committed to the change process. • Instruct senior executives to immediately implement a weekly meeting process in their own spheres of influence that encouraged creative thinking contributions from all employees (e.g “Cascading Creative Thinking Model” articulated by J.Moulder).
<p>3. Create a Project Team to Manage the Corporate Change</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire external expertise (provides “outsider advantage”) to manage a dedicated project team formed to diagnose and facilitate the corporate change process. • Establish a stakeholders project steering committee to guide project leadership. • Establish a project management plan that describes all the activities to be performed (in work breakdown structure packages) and the resources needed to complete the key project steps: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Authorisations, ○ Project Structure ○ Scope Planning & Management ○ Funding ○ Scheduling

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Implementation Management ○ Change Control Procedures ○ Control & Evaluation ○ Project Closure
4. Data Collection: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administer a cultural assessment instrument like Quinn’s Competing Values questionnaire or Amabile’s KEYS survey • Implement training needs survey of all employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection to measure “stimulants” and “obstacles” and identify creativity learning needed, via a process that reinforces employee participation.
4. Analyse the Data & Design the Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine learning and environment needs to produce improved creative thinking
5. Implement the Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement creativity training with all employees • Establish “adaptor” and “innovator” think tank teams • Implement HR policies that encourage creative thinking (e.g. new idea schemes). • Implement environment/culture audits
6. Evaluate and Align Plan Progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use “Balanced Scorecard” process to measure change and align strategic objectives into on-going operational objectives (e.g. supporting on-going innovation and learning)

Five key aspects of this “creative thinking” change program

There are a number of fundamental issues underlying this “creative thinking” project plan about which I will now elaborate.

1. Articulate a new “creative thinking” vision

Any change (especially cultural change) is exceptionally difficult to achieve without the active support of the most powerful and influential organizational stakeholders, often the Chairman and Managing Director.

These key executives need to own the change and spend time defining and articulating their creative thinking vision to coalesce and guide the project and change effort, establish the projects sense of urgency and assist in removing obstacles (Kotter, 1995). I think an appropriate vision would be well grounded in what de Bono forecast; that is, “...the future needs better thinking” (de Bono, 1992, p.viii).

2. Project team - size, composition and modus operandi

The project team needs to be set up and led as a “creative thinking” demonstration capsule, operating consistently with “creative thinking” principles as identified in the research of Amabile and others (Williams, 2001) and as also discussed by Harnish (1995).

In this respect, the project team needs to comprise employees who not only are a cross-sectional representation but also who provide the team with both diversity and the expertise and skills needed.

Often projects are run without enough resources which places time pressures on project operations that can inhibit the quality of outcomes, so thought needs to be given to funding a sufficient number of project resources to ensure adequate time for thinking.

Creative thinking tools and techniques, and participative management practices need to be applied in the project as normal work process by the project team leaders.

3. Teaching effective leadership practices

The ABC Bank project plan places significant emphasis on formally teaching business managers the soft skills of effective leadership, especially as these impact creativity generation.

Amabile suggested that our business managers typically unintentionally “kill off” people’s creativity by pursuing “business imperatives such as coordination, productivity and control” (Amabile, 1998, p.77). Stern also noted “the bulk of a company’s potential creativity is virtually unreachable with the usual ‘plan and control’ style of management (Stern, 1998, p.62). Similarly Karpin (1995) pointed out that it is leadership that is the catalyst - effective leadership is the catalyst that will produce effective enterprises that would respond positively to competitive pressures. It is therefore imperative that we teach our managers the skills necessary to enable our enterprises to develop (rather than restrain) creativity generation.

Amabile (1998) specifically raises the importance of teaching managers about the 6 levers available to them to increase employee creativity by increasing intrinsic motivation – challenge, freedom, resources, work group design, encouragement and organizational support. I’ll talk more about the creativity encouraging cultures in a few paragraphs, however the key here is that managers need to be taught these skills; that is, the critical soft people management skills including leading people, producing motivating environments, and developing innovative problem solving, of managing people - skills that lead to manager behaviours that support and encourage employee participation in all business processes.

Interestingly, Williams article emphasizes that “training interventions intended to teach managers how to foster their subordinates’ creative performance may indeed be more valuable than training interventions directed at the subordinates themselves” (Williams, 2001, p.63).

4. Teach, integrate & develop individuals creative thinking skills

The project plan for ABC Bank provides for the teaching of creative thinking skills and techniques to all employees. As we have discussed in lecture, skills and techniques of creative thinking can be taught to individuals to increase their creative thinking contributions. Of course, everyone can think. But, we can all learn to think better, in much the same way that an elite athlete trains to learn to improve their skills.

The Torrance pilot case study suggested to Robinson and Stern that training was ineffective, leading them to theorise that creativity could not be taught. I think they badly misinterpreted the signals from this case, and instead they should have surmised that the pilots had simply being trained in the wrong survival skills.

Williams (2001) cites considerable research showing that teaching creativity problem solving techniques is effective in increasing an individual’s creativity. Training in skills and tools can help individuals to overcome inherent conceptual blockages (like vertical thinking, stereotyping, thinking complacency and patterned thinking) that all individuals have; blockages that can be treated by learning to apply “blockbusting” techniques such as lateral thinking, attribute listing, Janusian thinking and synectics.

I think it is self-evident that learning these skills and techniques helps people to break away from habits, rituals and routines that stifle creative thinking.

My recommendation is that all ABC Bank employees participate in structured creativity training that teaches blockbusting techniques plus also concepts like the “Four step process”, “brainstorming”, de Bono techniques (like “Six hats” and “PMI”) and includes purchasing and instructing employees how to use various electronic creative thinking enhancing software tools.

The training should also teach employees about the macrobiotic states that produce alpha-state brainwaves that are more known to be conducive to facilitating creative thinking process (as discussed by Verne Harnish in the 1995 video “Creativity and Innovation”).

Finally, employee application of these concepts needs to be encouraged as a normal part of their job function and on-the-job performance. As a result, job descriptions will need updating to integrate creative thinking, as an integral part of everyone’s roles and then the employee’s application needs to be monitored and assessed via a performance review process. For the latter, I’d suggest that a Balanced Scorecard approach to performance

management would enable the business to effectively integrate both the business imperatives with the new behaviours.

5. Encouraging the creative thinking culture

A very significant condition that impacts creative thinking about which all creativity researchers and theorists seem to agree, is the environment, culture or climate in which creativity takes place. To illustrate, Amabile comments that an atmosphere of fear (e.g. downsizing) will kill creativity. Robinson & Stern put it another way stating “a bad system will beat a good person every time” (Robinson & Stern, 1997). Miller also comments that to foster a creative climate “you need more than just leadership, creativity training or new appraisal systems” (Miller, 1999, p.180).

Different creativity researchers and authors have provided their models of the ingredients necessary to create a culture that encourages creative thinking, and three of these (Amabile, Miller and Robinson & Stern) are summarized in table 1 below:

Key Ingredients to producing a more creative thinking environment		
Amabile (1988)	Miller (1999)	Robinson & Stern (1998)
<u>Stimulants:</u> 1. Organisation encouragement 2. Supervisor encouragement 3. Work group support 4. Sufficient resources 5. Challenging work 6. Freedom	1. Cooperative Learning 2. Risk Awareness 3. Empowerment 4. Appraisal and Rewards 5. Transition Management 6. Intuition and Logic 7. Vision & Values 8. Expedited Decisions	1. Alignment 2. Self-initiated activity 3. Unofficial activity 4. Serendipity 5. Diverse stimuli 6. Intra-company communication
<u>Obstacles:</u> 1. Organisation impediments 2. Work load pressures		

Table 1

I find there is considerable overlap between these theorists and so I have created an integrated model of the common threads which I’ve listed in table 2 below:

Common Ingredients that Encourage Creating Thinking Environments

1. *Leadership that.....*
 - visions, encourages, aligns and inspires (rather than commands & controls),
 - treats customers and employees with equal respect,
 - actively commits to change and removes obstacles.

2. *Organisation structure & processes that...*
 - encourage/empower employee participation and initiative, and
 - enables diversity and adequate time in participation

The key of course is an environment that encourages open, honest and vibrant participation. Therefore, at the early stages of the project, I'd recommend that ABC Bank employees are encouraged to participate in fairly non-threatening ways (at least until the leadership skills have been matured to ensure a safe, supportive and protective environment). Survey instruments would be ways to encourage "safe" participation and would also help to diagnose the "creative thinking" environment of ABC Bank. The two instruments I have recommend for administration to employees are:

- "360 BY DESIGN" leadership feedback survey (Centre for Creative Leadership, 2003), and
- the 78-item KEYS questionnaire (Amabile)

Another way participation could be encouraged is via "new idea schemes", although I would only support such initiatives if it was properly funded and resourced, as modeled by the very successful Disney Gong Show. Additionally, I also believe many employees would welcome the opportunity to voluntarily participate in "adaptor~innovator" think tank teams, which the project team could also establish.

I believe it is likely that the less structured (almost anarchistic) "6 elements" Robinson and Stern creativity model and the Jack Stack "Open Book Management" approaches would be too radical and meet insurmountable resistance from the highly command and control ABC Bank executives, and therefore should not be adopted at this time. However, some aspects of these concepts would resonate well with the existing management culture and could be adopted as part of this change process – e.g. "alignment" (Robinson & Stern, 1997, p.239) could be introduced by implementing a "Balanced Scorecard" approach to performance management.

Conclusion

For ABC Bank to remain successful it would have needed to take many of the actions outlined in this paper in order to create a climate that encouraged creative thinking. My aim would have been to flood the business with creative thinking opportunities and stimulants.

The project would have led to the following important improvements:

1. leaders learning and becoming accomplished in the skills of creative thinking,
2. employees learning the skills of creative thinking, and
3. creating a workplace environment that encouraged creative thinking.

The project would have also led to creative thinking becoming a regular and routine part of operating procedure.

Our employees (including leaders) have creative potentials much of which is locked away by various restraining forces in our enterprises. Business today needs to harness this potential in order to survive in today's highly competitive business markets. We can remove the restraints and unlock the potential by our leaders changing the environment and by teaching our people the skills - both actions will unlock the creative thinking potential that our organizations desperately need to prosper in the 21st Century.

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