



A Lookingglass Lens

11 Ways To Harness The Creativity in Your Business

At its simplest level a business has only two states of being.

Those trying to become relevant to potential customers. And those trying to take advantage of the fact that, for now, they are.

Whether you are the former or the latter, the capacity to innovate is essential.

In our experience, innovation is fueled by creativity. A renewable resource that sits, largely untapped, within every organization. Even those, ironically, that sell it.

Here are eleven keys to harnessing the latent creativity within your company and institutionalizing the capacity for innovation within your organizational DNA.

1. **Understand your true value to your customer or client.** Apple has evolved from a computer company into the largest manufacturer of portable electronic devices in the world. Their capacity to innovate is founded on their endless search for un-met - and often unrecognized - consumer needs, supported by a supply chain that is rated as the best in the world. Understanding your value, which is often not what you are selling, means looking at your business through the eyes of the customer. And doing so with determination to see the truth.
2. **Provide support at three levels.** Organizations are built on three rings. The individual. The group. And the whole. Any practice that does not account for the impact on each ring will fail. Either for lack of front-line support or for lack of resources.
3. **Create flexible structures.** The tallest buildings in the world sway in the wind. Their architects having long since learned that rigidity brings literal disaster. If you stick rigidly to an organizational flow-chart without taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of individuals you will produce one of two results. A shallow business model capable only of predictability. Or a tall, fragile one in which management's most pressing concern is papering over the cracks that keep appearing without warning. Build on people's strengths and provide support for manageable weaknesses.
4. **Cultivate collaboration.** Large organizations work more comfortably vertically than horizontally. Specialization and protection of turf being two keys to traditional success. But creativity is maximized when stimulated, challenged and encouraged. And horizontal perspectives are both fresher and more honest than hierarchical views. This requires hiring 'T' shaped collaborators - who possess both vertical expertise and horizontal empathy - and opening up internal communication channels, both electronically and inter-personally.
5. **Trust in transparency.** Creativity is fueled by confidence. In the goals of the company, and the process by which it works to achieve them. Providing your staff with an open and consistent view of what is happening and why, even when being transparent about what you can't tell them, is both reassuring and liberating.



A Lookingglass Lens

11 Ways To Harness The Creativity in Your Business

6. **Give your people access to more information than makes you comfortable.** Most companies protect their information at all costs, including from their own people. Which suggests two things. You don't trust them. And they can't use it to offer you their insight into what it means. Which raises two questions. If you don't trust them, why do you employ them? And if you don't value their expertise, why should your customers? This change usually requires re-engineering your systems so that information flows from the front of the organization to the back. Too often we see businesses whose systems feed information into the finance department who then filter it and pass it back to the people on the front line. By which time, its too late to be valuable and too processed to be nutritional.
7. **Give people regular feedback.** A recent study in the Harvard Business Review revealed that the attribute which people value most in their day is a belief that they have made one thing. Progress. Knowing they made a difference rewards and motivates them to invest more of themselves. But the proof of progress is one that only their managers can provide, since without goals and measurements we can not determine whether something is better. Only different. And innovation is not simply about change. But improvement.
8. **Hold accountable.** Only by tasking creativity can you hope to innovate. For creativity is unlocked not by limitless freedom as many people think, but by being challenged to solve specific problems. This requires room to think and explore. And a limit to both.
9. **Fire sooner rather than later.** Not all weaknesses are manageable. Or worth the benefits of the upside. In which case you undermine the confidence and the enthusiasm of those that are performing by enabling the employment of those that are not.
10. **Publicize success.** The recognition of achievement is one of the business world's most mis-understood currencies, the value of which is both ignored and diminished in equal measure. Publicize success often enough that it is habitual. But not so often that it is no longer aspirational.
11. **Try.** It is an old saw that innovation requires the willingness to fail. But encouraging people to fail has never been a recipe for success. The key instead is to encourage people to try, and to focus on the process rather than the outcome. One of the best ways to do this is to empower small Pilot Programs initiated by a select few, and then publicize them quietly but widely. This creates gravitational interest and exploration, without fear of risk or expectation of reward.

Taken together, these steps will dramatically increase the output of original thought in your business, and create a structure in which the most valuable of it can be focused, refined and applied.

It will take three months to begin to feel their impact. Six months before you can see the results. A year before you can measure them in the bottom line.