

Why sustaining creativity and innovation is vital for fostering future business leaders

I have long been fascinated by group interaction. My academic journey was kickstarted by my days as a professional jazz trumpeter, where group dynamics and team leadership were critical to how well teams could improvise creatively. As a social scientist, I have spent the last two decades studying similar issues in the workplace. So, how can teams foster creativity in the workplace?

Let's debunk a myth — that creativity is reserved for lone geniuses. When people think about creativity, they tend to think of *individual* scientists, inventors and artists. In museums, we don't see statues of *teams* of innovators, artists, or novelists. However, the reality in many fields today is that teams are the drivers of creativity and discoveries rather than a singular person. Another myth about creativity is that it's only relevant to the arts or research and development. But creativity is how we get new and valuable ideas in any domain, including the workplace – from groundbreaking new inventions to small improvements in everyday work processes.

There is more to fostering creativity than installing a ping pong table in your office or having a stylish breakout space for people to meet. In this article, I share the steps managers can take to encourage creativity in their teams.

Defining creativity

Researchers have identified three primary components of creativity that influence the creation of new and beneficial ideas — expertise, creative thinking skills, and motivation. Expertise is the technical skills required and basic knowledge, talents and abilities needed in a given domain.

Creative thinking skills are about having a flexible cognitive approach to tasks and a personality-based orientation towards independent risk-taking. Managers and business leaders might not have much control over these first two traits as they are personal to each individual, however, they can influence the third.

Motivation is a significant driver of creativity in organisations. Therefore, managers must understand the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is influenced by a person's interest, passion and challenge of completing work. Meanwhile, extrinsic motivation is the degree to which we complete tasks to meet external goals and pressures, such as rewards and competition. It's common for managers to believe fostering creativity can be achieved by paying teams innovation bonuses. Of course, it might work under some circumstances. However, matching people with the tasks they are most interested in and passionate about is a much more effective way of bolstering creativity in organisations, as covered by myself and fellow academic Teresa M. Amabile in our [*Simulating Creativity by Fueling Passion*](#) paper.

Encouraging lateral thinking

There are four methods of encouraging intrinsic motivation in the workplace. First, managers must create a challenging environment where teams aren't stuck with mundane tasks. Secondly, they must have autonomy over their work. The next steps involve supervisors encouraging creativity by advocating risk-taking to a degree, making it clear that making mistakes is acceptable and pushing teams to tackle the next big idea they are passionate about. Finally, managers must match people to tasks based on their interests and skills. An organisation with these four characteristics is much more likely to have workers with high intrinsic motivation that are able to come up with novel, beneficial and creative ideas.

Group brainstorming is often the port of call when people think about boosting creativity. There is some truth to throwing ideas out there; however, [*research*](#)

has demonstrated that collective brainstorming isn't as effective as once believed. The main challenge of group brainstorming is people not sharing as many ideas because they don't spend as much time and cognitive energy on coming up with alternatives. If only one person talks at a time, we won't hear as many ideas as if each individual brainstormed for the same time slot and wrote down every idea they had. I'd recommend teams brainstorm separately and then consolidate their ideas afterwards. This helps avoid the social anxiety of people speaking in front of each other, which might leave some great ideas on the table. Groups also tend to want to talk about one topic at a time. In other words, once an idea is introduced, people tend to keep building on that same idea and this creates a conformity of ideas within a group, stifling further creativity.

Jazz music has led me to think about improvisational approaches to creative collaboration. The first principle is to embrace errors as a source of learning. Accepting the unknown and that failure is inevitable helps organisations avoid the common business trap of planning their way out of a situation they know nothing about. Teams progress by acting, failing in a safe and contained way, and then learning from their mistakes. Similarly, jazz musicians have minimal structures that allow for autonomy within a group; however, they can quickly align and function with relatively high reliability even with musicians they don't know. Organisations often fail creatively when persistently trying to flesh out best practices to the point where they're constraining. Like jazz, businesses must have a structure that allows room for autonomy, so that teams can creatively solve challenges and uncertainty.

Creativity is essential for generating exciting and business-savvy new ideas, solving everyday problems, and making work more motivating and engaging for employees. Encourage wild ideas and diverse perspectives, but ensure you have a collaborative and inclusive process that sees them through to reality.

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