Coax Creativity Out of Your Team With These 4 Processes



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March 25, 2018 6 min read

A Note From The Editor

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When PricewaterhouseCoopers recently asked CEOs what their companies most lacked, a surprising 77 percent cited something they probably have in spades: creativity.

Why can’t company leaders seem to tap their teams’ creativity? Accustomed to working with clear-cut Gantt charts and team hierarchies, executives often struggle to embrace employees’ original ideas. By definition, such ideas haven’t been tried before, so leaders worry they won’t succeed. But by clinging to concepts that have worked in the past, leaders teach workers that their fresh ideas aren’t wanted.

Perhaps the issue lies partially in the corporate conception of creativity. Most companies separate their “creative” workers from their “non-creative” counterparts, which effectively walls off company decision makers from those who craft its product. Yet 72 percent of workers across all domains say that creativity is key to their professional success, according to a 2017 Steelcase study.

Separating decision makers and creatives might work when business is good, but it inevitably costs companies when the landscape shifts. When incumbents such as Blockbuster are faced with new technologies and business models such as streaming video, they struggle to recreate themselves quickly enough survive.

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Whether leaders like it or not, the only way to combat catastrophic failures is with smaller, more manageable ones. And the only way to facilitate small failures is to create the sort of environment where employees feel free to take creative risks.

Why do some work environments promote creative freedom while others squash it? The key difference is psychological safety, a sense of security that employees must feel in order to offer up risky ideas.

Psychological safety can’t be dictated, though. It must come from cultural processes, protocols, and tactics that allow ingenuity to thrive:

1. Emphasize collaboration over delegation.

Teamwork promotes imagination because it tells individuals who are trying to solve tough problems that the whole team has their back. Companies that adhere to Balanced Team principles instill a sense of camaraderie in their teams because they bring together employees from across disciplines to solve problems faster and better than they could alone.

What does a balanced team look like? On our teams, an engineer, a designer and a strategist sit together, solve problems together and fail together. They cross-pollinate to develop unique, functional designs that no one member could create on his or her own. While members own their specific functions, they share responsibility for the broader project.

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2. Define principles before beginning work.

Because our primary line of work is the creation of new products, creative ideation is part of every project we take on. But that doesn’t mean we just throw ideas at a wall until our clients spot something they like. Instead, we begin by defining what the project, product or organization stands for. While the product’s features or look might change, the values that underpin it should stay the same.

For example, we recently worked with a Mexican company that

wanted to cut the churn rate of its salespeople, who felt demotivated, lonely and unsupported by company leaders. While we didn’t have an answer in mind from the start, we did have a series of principles. We wanted our solution to take risks, give salespeople actionable steps for success and show them a vision for the future. We sought to build something that salespeople would love on first sight and want to continue using well into the future.

Determining your own project or company principles is a matter of asking questions upfront: What’s the most impactful customer problem you could solve? What audience could your solution help? What does that audience care about? Those answers are the bedrock principles your product should stick to.

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3. Structure ideation with converge-diverge cycles.

Performance anxiety and fear of judgment are creativity killers. Patterning problem-solving sessions with convergent and divergent phases reduces individual worry and enables people to hone their ideas before confidently and succinctly presenting them to others.

Ed Catmull, president of Pixar and Disney Animation Studios, highlights the importance of divergence with what he calls “ugly baby” syndrome. Just as real babies need time to mature, young ideas must be grown into concepts worth considering. According to Catmull, the pressure to “feed the beast” often causes companies to run with immature ideas.

Team members put their previously “ugly babies” on the table during the converge stage. Done well, they anonymous and unbiasedly determine which ones align best with the formerly

described project principles. Apps such as Dotvoter, which we built for this very purpose, help teams decide which ones to move forward with by gathering everyone’s feedback.

4. Experiment relentlessly.

No matter how beautiful your team’s baby is, it’s unlikely to be the right one. Get team members comfortable with a constant flow of iterative, experiment-driven ideas by giving them the freedom to fail. Only with that freedom can employees relax and take risks, and only with regular risk-taking can breakthroughs occur.

What if your team isn’t yet comfortable with failure? Celebrate it when it happens. Ritualize learning from mistakes, missteps and misunderstandings. At the end of each week, write down what your team learned in the past seven days. Then, share your revelations. Doing so creates healthy distance between failure and judgment, reinforcing the idea that trying new things is more important than being correct.

Creativity isn’t as elusive as it appears to most executives. It bubbles beneath the surface of every team, bottled up by the fear that new ideas might fail. Releasing it is a matter of realizing that everyone can contribute to the team and that everyone’s contributions are valuable even when they don’t pan out. Ideas that fail are simply the seeds of those that succeed.

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