Managing Creativity Checklist 177

Introduction

An organisation's ability to innovate by developing and utilising people's creativity and generating new ideas is considered a key to competitive advantage, particularly in the context of rapid change in business and society. It is vital for organisations to foster and manage creativity and innovation on an ongoing basis to help them achieve and sustain success.

Creativity has not always been prominent in management theory and practice and it used to be the case that a lack of control was seen as a threat to organisational wellbeing. Nowadays however, there is more of a balance between the exercise and encouragement of personal creativity and organisational governance.

This checklist focuses on organisational processes, steps and techniques for managing the creativity of employees, rather than on developing one's own personal creativity.

To clarify:

- Manager A is a highly creative individual who is always coming up with new ideas for the team to implement
- Manager B on the other hand has few creative ideas of his own but is willing to listen, encourage and help others come up with ideas that can then be put to the test.

This checklist is primarily concerned with supporting and developing Manager B and providing guidance on managing creativity in an organisational context.

Definition

The terms *creativity* and *innovation* are sometimes used interchangeably. Making a distinction between the two helps to understand them clearly so that they can be better managed.

Creativity has been described as the formation and gathering of thoughts in a way that leads to a different understanding of a situation. Innovation is more often associated with the development of a new product or service. The concepts are distinct but they fit together - creativity is the process of generating new ideas, while innovation relates more to the process of implementing new ideas for the benefit of the organisation.

Action checklist

1.   Identify potential sources of ideas, or stimuli to creativity

Research has tended to be associated more with the invention of products, but it is just as likely to come up with ideas for new processes as well as products. These could be academic research papers, newspaper reports, or the latest article from a trade or professional journal.

Employees handle the day-to-day problems, processes and plaudits; they are the key to spotting opportunities or threats, better ways of doing things, or ways of doing different things.

Customers may make suggestions and give feedback which we do not like, but it is vital to stay close, listen and explore their comments, feedback and complaints. In recent years online networking technologies have opened up new ways to connect with users of your products and services and take advantage of their ideas and suggestions.

Relationships with suppliers can develop into partnerships which can be used for mutual benefit.

Competitors will have their own agenda for creativity; actively seeking out intelligence on a competitor's activities can provide an early alert to new developments.

Happenstance: it has been said that creativity is often stimulated by circumstances which are unplanned and undirected, be this in the bath or on the golf course. The key here is to facilitate the capture such ideas by encouraging employees to record them and having systems in place which give them the opportunity to put them forward. An idea is an idea, whatever the source. The question of whether it will be work or not can be considered later.

Idea generation: a range of idea generation techniques can be also used to stimulate new ideas, especially in response to or in anticipation of a change or problem.

2.   Set an example yourself

This is a matter of attitude and approach rather than being creative yourself, although that can obviously help now and again. Set an example by:

- encouraging new ideas consistently rather than when, or if, you have the time
- discussing all ideas in open forum - not just those that you think are good
- welcoming new explorations and different directions rather than enforcing a platform of unchanging stability
- looking out for new ways of working rather than always relying on the tried and tested.

Although you may be the team leader, become a team member as well. Challenge others about the way they do things, even what they are doing, and encourage them to challenge you. You need to adopt a number of different roles to get the best from teams - sometimes you may find it useful to change between:

- the manager who sits back, listens and encourages, and knows when to move away from an unprofitable track
- the communicator who interprets input from different individuals
- the devil's advocate who is trying to get people to see that there is an alternative approach
- the builder who makes links between a number of possibilities
- the co-ordinator who sums up when a consensus begins to appear.

3.   Be aware of team members' personalities and cognitive styles

Some team members may appear openly creative; others may express their creativity in more subtle ways, or need active encouragement. Adaptation-innovation theory, developed by Michael J Kirton suggests that all people solve problems and are creative, but that they do this in different ways: adaptors prefer a more structured approach; innovators are more likely to think 'outside the box'. An awareness and acceptance of such differences can help teams to function creatively.

4.   Develop a climate which encourages creativity

Employees need to be motivated to put ideas forward and push them through from conception to implementation. The development of an organisational climate which welcomes and supports new ideas will help here. Creativity has been seen to thrive best in an environment of openness and interaction. This involves:

- an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust where people feel free to interact, rather than a climate of deference to rank or position
- not allowing rules and procedures to control activities rigidly and inflexibly

- a sense of individual energy, enthusiasm, open-mindedness and commitment, which uses conflicting ideas constructively (while minimising personal conflict).

5. Use techniques for creativity

A number of techniques which may be use to develop creativity and generate ideas are listed below. All of them have their strengths and weaknesses and there are conflicting views of their benefits. This means that it is important to evaluate any techniques you plan to use and choose those which you feel will work well in the context of your organisation and its culture.

Lateral thinking (pioneered by Edward de Bono) takes us outside our familiar, organisational way of reasoning and opens up many different ways of thinking about a problem. This approach requires logic and analysis, but challenges and tests the assumptions that tend to govern our 'normal' thought processes.

Mind-mapping (pioneered by Tony Buzan) is a tool that mirrors the way in which the brain stores and retrieves information and is a powerful means of expressing the thought patterns, pictures and associations that exist in the brain.

Brainstorming (invented by Alex Osborn) involves spontaneous, open-ended discussion in the search for new ideas. Brainstorming is widely used and can generate large numbers of ideas, but has also been criticised for attempting to produce ideas too quickly, leading to dull and poor quality results.

Rich pictures a concept developed by Peter Checkland as the starting point for soft systems methodology by, provides a means of capturing and expressing unstructured and 'messy' situations.

Focus groups enable a particular topic to be explored in greater depth, allowing people to develop related ideas as they go along and build on the views expressed by others. Participants can be encouraged to think laterally rather than sticking to the usual line of thought.

6. Build in breathing time/space

There is no secret here - if you want people to be creative, you can't expect to see them 'doing' all the time. People need "white space" for thinking and time to explore different approaches in different ways. Creativity is more likely to thrive when there is time for reflection than in a stressed and pressurised working environment. If you trust people with space and time, generally they will be more able to come up with new ideas and fresh approaches.

7. Build systems for creativity

Organisational systems can smother or hinder creativity, especially if their structures are cumbersome and bureaucratic. However, it is also possible to identify processes and systems which will facilitate creativity and build them into your working practices. These may include:

- **performance appraisal** – if an organisation values creativity, it makes sense for this to be included as an item for assessment in individual and team appraisals. You may also wish to consider the provision of training in creativity techniques. 360 degree appraisal which provides feedback from a range of different people such as customers, subordinates, peers and managers may also be helpful

- **self-directed teams** - small groups of people genuinely empowered to manage themselves and the work they do. These require flexibility and support from the organisation, and multi-skilling and self-discipline from the team members

- **flexible working** – standard working hours may no longer be appropriate in all cases; introducing greater flexibility as to when, where and how work is carried out and gearing work to the employee rather than vice versa can improve morale and release creative energy

- **suggestion schemes** - capturing employees' ideas through a staff suggestion scheme can have many benefits including improved employee engagement, a positive effect on staff morale resulting in a happier and more productive workforce leading to a positive impact on the bottom line.

8.   Work out inexpensive pilots

It is important to try out ideas that seem to promise much but may need significant investment. Find ways to pilot such ideas on a smaller scale so that you can put them to the test, gain evidence to justify the investment required and draw lessons from the initial phase which will be of benefit to later, fuller implementations. Departmental applications, telephone surveys of existing customers and seed corn money can all be used to lay a foundation for innovation while avoiding unnecessary expenditure.

9.   Feedback and reward

Feedback and reward can play a vital role in encouraging creativity and innovation. Let employees know how their suggestions are turning out and keep them informed on progress, or better yet involve them in the process. Feedback should be constructive and encouraging, and cover all those ideas that employees have contributed. Consider a small reward for viable ideas or perhaps a percentage bonus for profitable ideas.

Managers should avoid

The creative process is often complex and can be seen as chaotic and unmanageable. It is all too easy for creativity to be stifled unintentionally by a pervasive resistance to change or an inflexible approach.

Therefore managers should avoid:

- assuming that all the best ideas come from the top
- dismissing ideas out of hand without evaluating them
- ignoring suggestions for small changes – they may nonetheless lead to major improvements
- forgetting to give feedback on ideas whatever the outcome
- failing to involve employees in the implementation of ideas
- excessive rigidity in the application of rules and regulations
- reluctance to move beyond formal job descriptions
- a culture of blame where failure is penalised rather than being seen as an opportunity to learn
- over-reliance on financial incentives and rewards – creative people enjoy a challenge and tend to be motivated by intrinsic rewards.

National Occupational Standards for Management and Leadership

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

LB: Provide leadership in your area of responsibility, unit A2
LC: Identify and evaluate opportunities for innovation and improvement, unit A1

Additional resources

Books

Dangerous guide to leading innovation: How you can turn your team into an innovation force,
Simon Gardner and others
London: Bloomsbury, 2011

Creative genius: an innovation guide for business leaders, border crossers and game changers,
Peter Fisk
Chichester: Capstone, 2011

John Adair's 100 greatest ideas for amazing creativity, John Adair
Chichester: Capstone, 2011

Little bets: how breakthrough ideas emerge from small discoveries, Peter Sims
London: Random House Business Books, 2011

Out of our minds: Learning to be creative, Ken Robinson
Chichester: Capstone, 2011

The fine art of success: how learning great art can create great business
Jamie Anderson, Jorg Reckhenrich, Martin Kupp
Chichester: John Wiley, 2011

Brilliant business creativity: what the best business creatives know, do and say, Richard Hall
Harlow: Pearson Education, 2011

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from the CMI's library. More information at www.managers.org.uk/library.

Internet resources

CMI members can access information on a range of creativity tools in ManagementDirect at:
www.managers.org.uk/mgtdirect

Creativity Unleashed www.cul.co.uk
Articles, software and book recommendations

Mycoted http://www.mycoted.com/
Provides a repository of tools, techniques, mind exercises and puzzles.

This is one of many checklists available to all CMI members. For more information please contact

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