Schools of Innovation:
How Academic Organizations Foster Creativity

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Abstract
In the ever-important search for innovation, many companies are looking to their alma maters for ideas on how to motivate and inspire greater creativity in their workforce. While many might envision the university as a repository of aging professors and ivy covered buildings, the dynamic of the academic organization is replete with elements designed to stimulate the creative output faculty members. This paper reviews five such elements: Progress, Sabbaticals, Connection, Autonomy, and Lectures. Examples from the for-profit sector are also discussed.

In the western world, the realm of industry is shifting. As more industrial and even technological work is being outsourced, businesses are looking to creativity, innovation and design in order to compete in an increasingly crowded market. Research has already demonstrated a link between creativity, innovation and an organization’s competitive advantage. In their search for creativity, many in business might be tempted to overlook one sector for insights into innovation: the university. While many might envision the university as a repository of aging professors and ivy covered buildings, the dynamic of the academic organization is replete with elements designed to stimulate the creative output faculty members. Businesses that incorporate these elements into their organization can leverage the creativity of the university to increase their creativity and competitive edge.
Progress

Recent research into motivation and knowledge workers has shown that, above commonly conceived motivators, progress can stimulate motivation more than extrinsic elements such as money or recognition.\(^3\) In many organizations, progress often comes in the form of promotion and promotion often requires moving to new positions, which the individual may or may not be suited for. This dynamic has even been parodied as the Peter Principle, which claims that in any hierarchy, individuals eventually rise to the level of their incompetence.\(^4\) Within the university, faculty members have the opportunity to feel progress, while still staying in their discipline. Faculty members move from assistant professors, to associate professors and, eventually to full professor—progressing to new positions without leaving their specialty. A similar phenomenon is found at Zappos, where motivated employees move through a multistep career path, designed to leverage their interests and develop their skills, while still signaling their progress.\(^5\)

Sabbatical

Within the academy, the ritual of sabbatical is widely practiced. Faculty members regularly take semesters or whole years away from teaching duties to do research or expand into a new field of interest. These sabbaticals provide a source of psychological renewal that can break individuals out of a rut and provide a new perspective.\(^6\) While the concept of sabbaticals in the university is nothing new, this ritual is becoming a growing trend within businesses as well. At outdoor retailer, REI, employees earn month-long sabbatical pay after fifteen years of service and every five years thereafter.\(^7\) During these sabbaticals, employees are free to travel, study or engage in whatever projects they would like. REI believes these sabbaticals provide employees with a fresh perspective that will help bring innovation to their business unit or to the entire company.

Connection

Research into the inner workings of four prominent microbiology laboratories yields interesting insights into the creative work of experimentation.\(^8\) The most creative insights typically occurred during regularly scheduled lab meetings, where individual researchers revealed their latest findings and shared their most difficult setbacks. These results argue that creativity occurs most often when individuals connect, which contrasts the conventional wisdom of the mad scientist or lone artist. In the business world, consider Google, which leverages its free food program to increase creativity by encouraging Googlers to sit down and interact with others outside their department who might be able to provide a different perspective.\(^9\) The benefits of these connections are difficult to track, but it is not unreasonable to assume they are similar to those experiences at Dunbar’s\(^10\) microbiology labs.

Autonomy

The commonly held belief about performance in business is that if you want more performance, you must pay more. However, recent research into creative tasks challenges this assumption. Researchers led by Teresa Amabile asked 23 painters and/or sculptors to randomly select 10 pieces of commissioned artwork and 10 pieces of artwork created solely for their own pleasure.\(^11\) The researchers presented the collected work to art experts who rated the creativity of the works while being blinded from knowing which category the pieces came from. The study found that the commissioned artworks were rated as significantly less creative than the non-commissioned pieces. Several businesses are now experimenting
with the idea of non-commissioned worktime. In October 2010, web company Twitter hosted what it called “Hack Week.” During this week, Twitter engineers abandoned their regular tasks and pursued whatever they found interesting. At the end of the week, they shared their results: bug fixes, process improvements and a host of other innovations.

Lectures

Individuals and groups have a tendency to develop set methods and fixed thoughts. Exposure to new ideas and different perspectives can help keep them, and their ideas, from growing stale. Within the university, visiting professors and guest lectures provide this fresh exposure. Universities host experts in the field for single talks, or for whole semesters worth of visiting instruction. The result is a wealth of new ideas and varying perspectives. In order to tap into this fount of creativity, businesses are following suit. Hallmark, home to one of the largest staff of creative employees, brings in more than 50 guest speakers for stimulating lectures. The company looks for a broad range of guest lecturers, from the vice president of Cirque du Soleil to the founder of the retail empire Neiman Marcus. In addition to the random talks, the company’s Research University conducts larger scale lecture series targeted at internal divisions or external subjects. These lectures serve to educate and inspire the staff at Hallmark to continue to produce high quality creative products.

Conclusion

To many in the business world, it is tempting to look at the university as a bureaucratic monastery of stale ideas that “wouldn’t cut it in the real world.” However, in the ever-important search for innovation, many companies are looking to their alma maters for ideas on how to motivate and inspire greater creativity in their workforce. From sabbaticals to visiting lecturers, the university culture is full of dynamic elements that help faculty to increase their creative output. These same elements can release employees to be more creative and bring innovation and competitive advantage to that same “real world.”

About the Author

David Burkus is a professor of management at Oral Roberts University and editor of LeaderLab, an online think tank that shares research and best practices through articles, videos, and podcasts. He has written for numerous scholarly journals and practitioner magazines on leadership, strategy, management, creativity and innovation. Burkus is a graduate of Oral Roberts University and holds a Master of Arts in Organizational Dynamics from the University of Oklahoma. He is a doctoral candidate at Regent University.

References


