Leading Creatives: Research and Implications on Leading Creative Work Teams

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Abstract

The role of creativity in organizations is growing in importance. Research into creativity in organizations reveals that investment in creative output does positively influence an organization’s competitive advantage. While making this investment, however, leaders may find that the usual tools of management will not provide the same outcomes as they did before. This article reviews the research in four areas and provides implications for those leading creatives: understate incentives, provide autonomy, enable connection, encourage risks.

The creative process is a mystery to many. Even the definition of creativity is hotly contested, with over a hundred different versions presented in the literature (Meusburger, 2009). While the subtleties of definition and process are being worked out, research into the benefits of creativity have already shown links between creativity, innovation and an organization’s competitive advantage (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller & Staw, 2005). Successful new product introductions or program implementations require individuals or teams to have good ideas and pursue those ideas beyond their initial ideation (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby & Herron, 1996). Creativity yields invention, which when applied yields organizational innovation (Oster, 2011). Creativity is an issue growing in importance. The reason is that we are increasingly working in a knowledge economy, where organizations expect creativity as part of their process or product (Gibb & Waight, 2005). Some in the popular press literature have argued that the very nature of work in the developed world has shifted its cognitive demands from the left-brain actions (logical, process oriented) to the right brain (random, creative) thinking (Pink, 2005). Some have even argued that business demand for individuals with MFAs (Master of Fine Arts) will outpace those with traditional MBAs (Bell, 2008).

While a precise definition is still being debated, most scholars seem to adopt, as an operational definition, that creativity involves the process of developing novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1988, Amabile & Hennessey, 2010; Oldham & Cummings, 1996, Woodman et. al., 1993). Drazin et. al. (1999) argue that this operational definition is output focused – which implies the question “How do you increase creative output in organizations?” Research has been underway in just how to lead in the new demand for creativity. For leaders of creatives, or teams tasked with creative work, four areas of...
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research hold particularly vital implications: incentives, autonomy, connection and risk. This article reviews the research in these four areas and provides the implications for those leading creatives.

Understate Incentives
While pay for performance work is often considered the ideal standard, recent research has suggested that it might not be the best to use monetary incentives, or even extrinsic motivators, to produce creative work. Deci (1971) found that extrinsic rewards often decreased an individual’s intrinsic motivation to perform a task, thus suggesting a decrease in overall performance. Further research has confirmed this discovery (see Deci, Koestmer & Ryan, 1999 for a meta-analysis of prominent research). Intrinsic motivation is the desire to do something solely for the enjoyment of the task itself. Intrinsic motivation is conducive to creativity (Amabile & Hennessy, 2010). Interestingly, research has found that no amount of domain knowledge or creative skill can override the lack of motivation to perform (Amabile, 1988). In several studies of creativity, products made by participants working for rewards were assessed as less creative than products made by participants who were not being rewarded (Amabile, Hennessey & Grossman, 1986; Hennessey, 1989; Kruglanski, Friedman & Zeevi, 1971). These studies also imply that tangible, salient rewards (such as compensation) can produce a greater detrimental effect on creativity than verbal rewards or recognition (Amabile, 1983; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Often the challenges of creative work produce the same kind of intrinsic motivation in individuals and teams that this research implies is negatively affected by external rewards. Consider the case of the digital encyclopedia race. In 1995, Microsoft launched a project to create a digital encyclopedia using a team of well-compensated writers and editors to ensure the project was complete on time and under budget (Pink, 2009). However, 15 years later Microsoft shut down its MSN Encarta project, concede victory to a group of unpaid hobbyists working uncompensated to create an online resource accessible for free: Wikipedia.

Leaders of creative teams must be careful that the group does not become too focused on the rewards of having completed the task that they lose sight of the task demand itself. In addition, leaders can rely on another tool to help properly stimulate motivation and performance: feedback. Deci’s (1971) research found that giving teams unexpected positive feedback positively affected their intrinsic motivation. Indeed, feedback has another spillover benefit for motivating creatives as well: it is low-cost. By reducing the salience of incentives, leaders can shift the attention from the rewards and back onto the creative work itself.

Provide Autonomy
While the conventional idea of pay for performance is being challenged by research, so is one other element of convention: assigning specific objectives. Researchers from Brandeis University, lead by Teresa Amabile (now with Harvard Business School) conducted an intriguing study in creative work. The researchers 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 (Amabile, Collins & Phillips, 1994). The researchers presented the 460 works to a panel of art experts, from museum curators to gallery owners, to rate the creativity of the works while being blinded from knowing which works were commissioned or noncommissioned. The study found that the commissioned artworks were rated as significantly less creative than the noncommissioned pieces.

Autonomy is the degree to which individuals are given the freedom, discretion and independence to determine what procedures should be used to carry out a particular task (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Research has shown that individuals produce more creative work if they feel they have a choice in how to produce that work (Amabile & Gitomer, 1984). In an interview study of R&D scientists, the most
stated factor of high-creativity events was individual freedom (Amabile & Gitomer, 1984). The results imply that if leaders want to enhance the creativity of their team, then one possible method is to allow members of the team (or the entire group) to have purposely-structured blocks of time set aside for autonomy – that is, times of the day or even certain days where the individuals or teams are free to work on whatever they would like, whether it pertains to the project at hand or not.

In fact, many organizations are experimenting with just that. Consider Australian software company Atlassian. Once a quarter, usually on a Thursday afternoon the entire staff of Atlassian drops whatever they are working on (Pink, 2009). Instead, they devote the next 24 hours to total autonomy; employees are free to work on whatever projects interests them or whatever problem annoys them. Atlassian reports that these 24-hour breaks have led to a wealth of new product ideas, software fixes and process improvements. In traditional organizations, winning the battle for autonomy, even defined limitation autonomy, may be difficult. However, it is a battle leaders of creative teams should consider fighting. Freeing up their team members to pursue their interests can recharge their creative juices or provide a creative solution to the teams’ setbacks.

Enable Connection
Atlassian’s experiment benefited not just from the influence of autonomy, but also of connection. At the end of the 24 period of free time, the entire company would gather together to share the projects they had worked on and the ideas that work inspired. The reason this is so vital is suggested by research from the field of molecular biology, or rather research on the field of researching molecular biology. Psychologist Kevin Dunbar (1995) studied the workings of four prominent microbiology laboratories for insights into the creative work of experimentation. The findings from these field studies defied the conventional image of the lone scientist staring into a microscope to reveal a great discovery. Instead, Dunbar found that the most creative insights and greatest discoveries actually occurred during regularly scheduled lab meetings, where individual researchers revealed their latest findings and shared their most difficult setbacks. The creative discoveries produced by these labs occurred only after these individuals conspired together to find a solution or draw connections between previously unconnected insights. Paulus and Nijstad (2003) argued that sharing among groups yielded large increases in creative ideation, provided that the group itself was heterogeneous. They assert that functional, informational or cognitive diversity is associated with creativity because it increases the perspectives from which problems are considered and solutions generated.

These findings imply that getting individuals to connect and share their work, setbacks and insights can amplify the creativity produced by the team. However, in the modern organizational world, there is a growing trend away from meetings. Consider the use of language in the popular press such as death by meeting (Lencioni, 2004) and meetings are toxic (Fried & Hansson, 2010). However, opportunities for connection are not limited to regular meetings. Consider Google, often praised for its free meals program, where employees have access gourmet quality meals on demand. This free food is not just to increase employee happiness – it increases creativity as well. The former Chief Information Officer at Google reveals that one reason behind the free food is that it encourages Googlers to sit down, interact with others outside their department and share what they are working on (Merrill, 2011). 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 (1995) microbiology labs. By creating connection opportunities, be they regular meetings or gourmet lunches, leaders can magnify the creative output of their teams.

Encourage Risks
Creative endeavors are not without considerable risk. Risk can be described as the extent to which uncertainty exists about whether individuals or groups will realize potentially significant and/or
disappointing outcomes (Dewett, 2004; Sitkin & Pablo, 1992). The realization of a creative idea is a dynamic process: when first generated, a new idea is often dismissed as weird or impractical but, this same idea can later result in an outcome that is judged as novel and useful (Staw, 1995). Recent studies even suggest that when faced with uncertainty, many individuals hold a subtle bias against the proposition of creative ideas (Mueller, Melwani & Goncalo, 2011).

Several scholars have implied that a link exists between perceived risk and creativity in organizations (e.g. Fidler & Johnson, 1984; Jalan & Kleiner, 1995; Shalley, 1995; Tesluk et. al., 1997; Zhou & George, 2001; Dewett, 2004). Creative efforts are typically outside the normal range of work activity and the status quo, and thereby invite risk (Dewett, 2006). In a survey study of 165 R&D personnel, Dewett (2007) demonstrated the connection between willingness to take risks and employee creativity. Willingness to take risks was shown to mediate the relationship between intrinsic motivation and creative outcomes. This organizational climate is important because, while employees do not need permission to generate new ideas, they will eventually need managerial approval as well as time and resources to elaborate on those new ideas (Staw, 1990).

Dewett (2006) notes that individuals engaged in creative efforts are likely mindful that their work may or may not be ultimately judged as creative. Therefore, Dewett asserts, willingness to take risks becomes an important antecedent to creativity. Advertising firm Grey Group’s New York division does more than encourage risk taking, they celebrate it. Every quarter, the company awards a “Heroic Failure” trophy to individuals or teams who take bold risks to meet client needs with creative solutions (Shellenbarger, 2011). The award was developed as a way to move employees away from conservative solutions to bolder, edgier ideas. Pursuing these creative ideas leaves individuals and teams open to failure, but also open to large-scale creative success. By protecting employees from the negative impact of failure and encouraging them to take more risks, leaders can help build a culture that is more favorable for creativity.

**Conclusion**

These four areas (incentives, autonomy, connection and risk) do not embody an entire list of investigation and insight into how to lead creatives. However, they represent the three areas of that defy conventional wisdom and traditional management tactics the most. As the demand for right-brained, creative work increases, leaders may find that business is no longer business as usual. Leaders must learn how best to get their creative individuals to operate on a team and how to amplify the creative output of that team. By understanding the power of incentives, the influence of autonomy and the importance of connection, leaders can better cultivate innovation and help ensure that their teams’ creativity yields the desired competitive advantage.

**About the Author**

David Burkus is assistant professor of management at Oral Roberts University. He is the author of *The Myths of Creativity: The Truth About How Innovative Companies and People Generate Great Ideas* and founder of LDRLB. His work has been featured in *Forbes, Fast Company, Psychology Today, Bloomberg BusinessWeek, and the Harvard Business Review*.

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