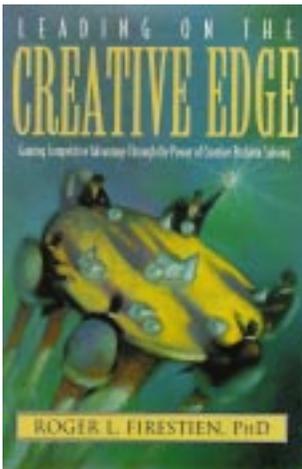


Creating a climate for creativity

How can you, as a leader, develop a staff of creative, knowledge-sharing, problem-solving employees?



Roger Firestien, Ph.D., answers this question in his new book, *Leading on the Creative Edge*. “Creativity isn’t just for artists and musicians,” he observes. “It’s a strategic business weapon, and it’s crucial to gaining and maintaining a competitive edge. The organizations that will thrive over time are not the ones with the deepest pockets, but the ones that unleash and apply the creativity of their workforce.”

Firestien says leaders’ behavior is the single most important factor in determining whether the people who

work for them will be encouraged to think creatively for the benefit of the organization. The climate of most organizations simply reflects the leader’s attitude and actions.

Firestien cites the findings of Goran Ekvall (University of Lund, Sweden): “Sixty-seven percent of the statistical variance accounted for on the climate for creativity in organizations is directly attributed to the behavior of the leader.

“I know of many organizations that spend millions of dollars designing beautiful places to work, expecting their employees to move in and immediately become creative! When that doesn’t happen, they are surprised,” Firestien observes. “Yet they probably have spent almost nothing to train their managers and supervisors on how to lead their people to find creative solutions to tough problems.”

Firestien believes too many leaders have learned that the way to climb the corporate ladder is to compete with each other instead of cooperating and that asking questions is a sign of incompetence. Now they find themselves overlooking such basics as:

- Looking at problems as situations that can be resolved rather than as insurmountable obstacles



Roger Firestien, Ph.D.

- Deferring judgment
- Looking for the strengths in an idea before declaring it unworkable

Leading on the Creative Edge suggests several ways to foster creativity. Here are some highlights:

Improve yourself. Leaders must serve as models. Let your people see you struggle with your own creative ideas and give them space to develop their own. Be ready to capture ideas wherever they appear (with a notepad or pocket tape recorder).

Vary your routine. Read and listen to a variety of material. Network and develop personal support systems. Reawaken your sense of humor. Above all, be passionate about your future vision.

Identify problems that can and should be solved. Firestien believes too much energy is wasted on solving the wrong problem, or worse, approaching a problem with the belief that it probably can’t be solved. Often, the biggest challenge is not coming up

Environmental stimulants to creativity and innovation

- Freedom in deciding what to do or how to accomplish the task; a sense of control over one’s own work and ideas.
- A manager who serves as a good role model: one who is enthusiastic, has good communication skills, protects the team, matches tasks to workers’ skills and interests and sets a clear direction without managing too tightly.
- Access to necessary resources, including facilities, equipment, information, funds and people.
- Encouragement and enthusiasm from management for new ideas.
- A corporate climate of cooperation across levels and divisions.
- An atmosphere where innovation is prized and failure is not fatal.
- A general sense that creative work will receive appropriate feedback, recognition and reward.
- Time to think creatively about the problem and explore different perspectives.
- A sense of challenge arising from the nature of the problem itself or its importance to the organization.
- A sense of urgency generated from outside competition or a general desire to accomplish something important.

*Theresa Amabile, keynote address at the Conference for Creativity and Change, Buffalo, NY 1995, as quoted in Firestien’s *Leading on the Creative Edge*.

Attributes of an innovative culture

- Meeting and talking with others. “Water cooler” discussions, informal coaching, peer-to-peer problem solving, and a host of other opportunities provide a springboard for knowledge sharing.
- Respecting peers and learning from them. Knowledge-oriented workers never overlook an experience-based opinion or fact.
- Communicating openly, clearly and effectively. New technology tools such as e-mail, discussion groups, video conferencing and bulletin boards augment but cannot replace face-to-face discussions.
- Sharing. Wise leaders realize that shared knowledge brings greater benefits to the giver and to the receiver.
- Cooperating. Teamwork and synergy contribute to a more enjoyable and productive workplace.
- Learning. An organization that values learning gains value in the eyes of its customers, partners and employees.

FYI: Knowledge management resources

Web sites

- Yogesh Malhotra, Ph.D. WWW Virtual Library on Knowledge Management™, © Copyright 1994-98, @BRINT, KNOWLEDGE LIBRARY | DISCUSSION | BUSINESS RESEARCH | WHAT'S NEW | HELP & FAQs | @BRINT
- www.knowledgeinc.com
- www.kmonline.com

Books

- Davenport, Thomas and Prusak, *Laurence Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*, Boston, MA, Harvard Business School Press, 1998.
- De Geus, Arie. *The Living Company*, Boston, MA, Harvard Business School Press, 1997.
- Leonard-Barton, Dorothy. *Wellsprings of Knowledge: Building and Sustaining the Sources of Innovation*, Boston, MA, Harvard Business School Press, 1995.
- Nonaka, Ikujiro & Takeuchi, Hirotaka. *The Knowledge-Creating Company*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 1995.
- Stewart, Thomas A. *Intellectual Capital: The New Wealth of Organizations*, Currency/Doubleday, New York, NY, 1997.
- Tom Peters' *Liberation Management* also has a good section.
- Sveiby, Karl Erik. *The New Organizational Wealth: Managing and Measuring Knowledge-Based Assets*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, CA, 1997.

with ideas, but finding the right problem to solve. Once you can say, “Here’s the situation; we need ideas,” it’s easy to solve it. Otherwise you may be wasting your time.

Generate lots of ideas. Defer criticism as you strive for quantity. Look for ways to combine and build on ideas. Set a quota: generate 30 or 50 ideas before judging any of them. Remember that ideas are not action. One study shows that when judgment is deferred, people come up with 70 percent more good ideas.

Conduct structured idea-generating sessions. Schedule time for team problem solving. Some informal learning always occurs, and it is to be encouraged. However, creativity is greatly enhanced when you provide time to develop and explore new ideas. Often there’s so much to do that we don’t have time to think about ideas. Develop a process for creative problem solving so that the next time a situation arises, your staff will be ready and eager to contribute ideas. (Firestien’s book offers guidelines for conducting such sessions.)

Evaluate ideas positively. When judging a new idea, evaluate the pluses, potentials and concerns. Welcome employees’ ideas and suggestions as potentially valuable opportunities for improvement.

Praise and recognize ideas. Sustain positive, supportive environments through praise. Criticism can have devastating effects on motivation, energy, confidence and enthusiasm. You can’t accomplish your goals as a leader without the support of your entire team, so be eager to listen to their ideas, then recognize and praise them for showing initiative in trying to solve company problems.

Make mistakes and learn from them. A failure is simply a result you hadn’t anticipated. If you view mistakes as learning experiences, they can lead to later success. View failures as the price of being innovative. Don’t let your people be afraid to take risks in seeking new and better ways to do things.

Encourage a structure of interconnected teams. Typical hierarchical organizations inhibit creativity. Begin by breaking down divisions between departments and developing teams around work that is to be done. Encourage people to work across previous boundaries and to share what they know.

Simply put, your approach makes a dramatic difference in whether people will express their creativity or stifle it. ■