

# Does Living in a Garage Make you a Car?

## Creating an Innovative Culture

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... and How Can We Get It Back?"

- HR professionals can help identify blocks to creativity.
- Bureaucracy and rigid rules impede creative thinking.



Does living in a garage make you a car? Does sitting in a fast food restaurant make you a hamburger? This simple analogy used to amuse us greatly when we were children. We were reflecting on these memories the other day when it occurred to us that a lot of people think this way when it comes to creative thinking. They believe that simply attending a creative thinking workshop will make them creative. They see workshops in creative thinking and innovation as a quick fix to solve the organisation's problems. HR professionals often send their apparently uncreative employees to these workshops,



hoping that their staff will come back more creative. However, if there is no culture to support creative thinking in a company, all the information and knowledge in the world is wasted.

### Identifying creativity killers

When considering how to start promoting creativity and innovation in an organisation, it is useful for HR professionals to first identify potential blocks to creative thinking before teaching creative thinking skills. To ensure that the approach itself is creative, they could take a 'crime scene investigation' approach to the topic and consider how, where and why creativity can be killed, as well as how it can be rescued. Thinking about the potential impediments to creative thinking in such a way can get employees to open up freely and discuss the challenges to innovation in a safe environment, and it can prevent cynicism and resistance.

The creativity killer "gangs" we have identified in this 'murder mystery' approach include:

1. the Control Crew: oppressive and stifling systems (bureaucracy), bullying leadership styles;
2. the Fear Family: fear of failure, fear of taking risks, fear of the unknown;
3. the Pressure Pack: excess of stress, multi-tasking and addiction to technological devices, increased expectations;
4. the Insulation Clique: biased information sources (eg limited media access), sticking to like-minded people (homogeneity), lack of diversity;
5. the Apathy Clan: lack of motivation, lack of initiative, lack of drive;
6. the Narrow-minded Mob: blinkered expertise, prejudice, group think; and
7. the Pessimism Posse: negativity (eg negative language and emotions), lack of hope, lack of trust.

It is important for HR professionals and management to understand that every employee has his/her own individual blocks. Creativity killers can often skulk in the most rigid and structured departments of a company. More than 1,000 respondents from a wide range of organisations internationally have indicated, in a 2012 survey conducted by the organisational learning and development consulting company TIRIAN, that the higher up one goes in the company (eg the CEO, boardroom, managers), the more likely his/her creativity will be killed. Some said: "HR and finance have been the two most regulated fields in my line of work that have restricted creativity," and "creativity is killed anywhere where people are listened to and valued because of their rank rather than their talent and ability."

Each organisation has its own creativity killers, killer weapons and susceptible locations that hinder creativity. In large organisations, the creativity killers can come through the bureaucratic systems and structures while in smaller companies, it can be insulation and narrow-mindedness in homogeneous teams. It also depends on the business' industry. For instance, a client group from a financial



corporation may identify that 'fear' is the key killer through inflicting 'stress' in the 'executive's office'. Another group could pinpoint that 'pessimism' kills creativity through 'negativity' in the 'coffee shop'. With such a simulation, HR professionals can develop strategies to deal with impediments to creativity and build a more creative corporate culture.

### Promoting creative thinking and innovation

When pinpointing these creativity killers and potential 'crime' locations, it becomes clear that creativity should first be rescued at the top levels of the organisation, where power and influence are concentrated. HR professionals could create room and opportunity for creative thinking and innovation to grow at all other levels. The following are the rescuers we have identified and the ways they can deal with the killers of creative thinking:

1. Freedom (to deal with Control):

creative thinking grows where employees can think freely, express themselves openly and be empowered to contribute to others' ideas and solutions;

2. Courage (to deal with Fear): confidence is a critical quality for successful creative thinking because fear hinders innovation;
3. Independence (to deal with Pressure): it is critical to empower employees so they have more control over circumstances and become independent from perceived external constraints;
4. Openness (to deal with Insulation): encouraging a variety of ideas and potential solutions to ensure broad thinking;
5. Passion (to deal with Apathy): motivation comes from the employees' personal interest, involvement and engagement in work processes;
6. Flexibility (to deal with Narrow-mindedness): the ability to adapt

to different ideas, processes and solutions prevents short-sightedness and rigid practices; and

7. Positivity (to deal with Pessimism): an optimistic mindset and language create a positive work environment.

Then, specific creative thinking and problem-solving skills and tools can be taught to enhance individual engagement and capability. HR professionals could consider the following 'Strategy for Innovative Development' (SID) model, which targets specific skills in a comprehensive sequential way to develop creative thinking in individuals and ultimately transform the organisation's culture:

#### STAGE 1: ENQUIRY

Questioning and Challenging: Teaching employees to challenge current assumptions and rigid ways of doing things and fostering curiosity about alternative options will develop Freedom and Courage and lead to Independence and Openness.

#### STAGE 2: EXPLORATION

Brainstorming and Diversifying: Encouraging employees to open up to a wide range of possibilities and accept diverse opinions and ideas will develop Independence and Openness and lead to Passion.

#### STAGE 3: SOLUTION

Separating and Connecting: Teaching employees how to pull apart systems that do not work and reconstruct new concepts that have relevant meaning and purpose will develop Passion and lead to Flexibility and Transformation.

#### STAGE 4: APPLICATION

Testing and Implementing: Teaching employees how to analyse and test different potential solutions with determination and perseverance will ensure Flexibility and Transformation and lead to growth of creativity.

We had some successful rescue cases. When a training company used this model with their staff, employees gained such confidence and felt so empowered that a number of them started demonstrating more responsibility and initiatives in their positions. As a result, these employees progressed quickly to key leadership roles and significantly higher levels of morale were reported throughout the organisation. In addition, when an executive team in the hospitality industry worked through this process, customer satisfaction scores increased. A financial institution that also tried this approach with one department found that members ended up with a more cohesive and collaborative team as a result – and they came up with some great new ideas to implement.

#### Ensuring buy-in

Where there is a resistance to the need for creative thinking, working through the SID process would ensure there is engagement in and ownership of the process and buy-in for the results in the long run. We have seen a number of initially cynical employees – who claimed “I am not creative” or “I do not need to be or want to be creative” or “the last thing this organisation needs is creative thinking!” – appreciate the value of creative thinking as they progress through the stages. Employees are transformed by this

process when they realise that it could lead to better ideas generation and problem-solving capabilities, and contribute to positive individual and organisational change. In fact, using such a process changes the management technique itself.

Additionally, it was shown that people who learn in creative environments and who are able to develop creative thinking skills have better relationships, solve problems more easily, come up with more inventive ideas, handle stress better and are more flexible, more optimistic about the future, more adaptive to change, more engaged in the process of learning and thus achieve better results.

#### Nurturing a creative work space

If there are hotspots where the creativity ‘criminals’ hang out, there are also hothouses where creativity lives. For instance, some companies encourage their staff to spend time in coffee shops to foster creative thinking. This type of organisation recognises that the suitable environment nurtures a creative culture, which ultimately contributes to success. The more rigid areas of the organisation can become the champions of creative thinking. As mentioned above, HR department has been considered a regulated field that restricts creativity. Rather than focusing on maintaining rigid systems and structures, for example, HR professionals could identify ways to make the recruitment process less official but more inspiring by creating games to test a candidate’s certain required capabilities. They could also engage employees in the process of

designing better systems, use creative methods for training and developing staff and ensure that creative thinking and innovation become embedded in the organisation’s DNA.

The environmental factors that HR professionals could take into account include:

**1) Space to play:** Play creates a mental state for employees in which they can feel safe to explore ideas without restriction. Free play (as opposed to controlled play) ensures that brain resources are diverted away from dealing solely with the primitive survival functions so they can access creative thinking. Creating ‘playgrounds’ in the workplace is neither difficult nor costly. HR professionals could simply set up an area in the office where employees can play cards or scrabble. They could also allow the time and provide the resources for employees to be playful during meetings, at lunchtime or during coffee breaks (stress balls, play dough or juggling balls, for example). It is often during these ‘breakaway’ periods, after moments of intense concentration, that the real ‘aha’ moment occurs. The brain then accesses its powerful unconscious processing and discovers unique solutions. HR professionals could design specific “play spaces” (separated from the workplace) and devote “play time” so that it does not prevent employees from performing their roles. Instead, through giving permission for employees to feel they can relax at specific times, the staff’s working time and overall working experience will be enhanced. Employee energy and morale will improve

and, ultimately, a constructive working culture will be created.

**2) Opportunity to take risks:** English economist Tim Harford identified overriding themes based on failsafe failures – what he calls the ‘Palchinsky principles’: firstly, HR professionals could encourage staff to seek out new ideas and try new things. For example, competitions that drive employees to come up with the most innovative solutions to a difficult organisational issue can encourage broader thinking. Secondly, when they try something new, employees should be able to do it on a scale of which failure is tolerated. HR professionals could provide staff with enough scope to try something completely different, within a set budget and time frame. Thirdly, HR professionals could enable employees to seek out feedback and learn from their mistakes. Staff should know that they can approach peers, leaders and direct reports alike to get specific feedback about what could be improved and what they can learn for the next time. ‘Creatively successful’ people – people who are perceived to consistently do well in life – are particularly open to possibilities. They are often prepared to take risks and relaxed enough to see the opportunities in the first place. Those who are not ‘creatively successful’ are often stuck in routines and unable to break out of the rut.



**3) Permission to slow down:** HR professionals could help employees slow down their thinking process and allow new synaptic connections to occur. In a 2010 article “A Slow Mind may Nurture More Creative Ideas” published in the *New Scientist*, English author Linda Geddes reveals that when divergent thinking scores increase, the amount of white matter – myelin – in the left frontal cortex decreases. Less myelin in the brain means that information is transmitted slowly. This experimental finding has given rise to an unexpected idea: although an efficient-performing brain supposedly enhances creative thinking, people who have brain synapses that fire slower than usual may be able to think more creatively. Indeed, in that fraction of a milli-second between the firing of an impulse and the reception of that impulse, the message has the opportunity to make other new connections. In creative thinking, the pathway from one thought to

another is not a straight line so the brain needs the time and opportunity to explore different paths. Giving permission to slow down, by enabling employees to set their own deadlines or take more breaks in the day, induces a relaxed state of mind that paves the way for creative thinking. For instance, some companies provide massages and sleeping pods. In contrast, stress can ‘shut down’ or ‘switch off’ significant areas of the brain so they are no longer effectively accessed.

### Conclusion

If you want to foster creative thinking and innovation as a leader, do not just send your team to a creativity workshop. Employees cannot embrace and practise innovation if their work environment does not support it. The magic trick is to consider carefully what the organisation can do differently to support creative thinking at all levels.