

Forward Motion Coaching Newsletter

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Creating a Culture of Innovation

Although everyone in business agrees that innovation is vital to continued growth and success, creating work cultures that encourage creativity is easier said than done. Bowing to competitive pressures, we demand immediate paths to profitability and 100% success. "Doing more" is confused with increased productivity, even though it's well documented that negative stressors like anxiety and fatigue lower performance.

An article titled "*Who Needs Nature?*" describes the "free-range expeditions of discovery" experienced by those of us who, growing up in a different time, spent hours of unstructured and unsupervised time "messing around" outside as kids.¹ Beyond lamenting the loss of the archetypal American childhood, the article serves as a reminder that "messing around" is a crucial part of innovation, and has its place in the adult landscape of work.

Writing about insight in his book, *Scientific Methods*, Richard Jarrard explains that, "...the combination of mental relaxation with either physical relaxation or mild exercise..." creates the conditions that are conducive to insight.² We've all experienced this phenomenon when the answer to a problem suddenly pops into our minds as we're driving to the store, gardening, or otherwise distracted from thinking about it. Conversely, "I have seen anxiety ... cut worker productivity by about 50% and cut discoveries by nearly 100%..." Jarrard continues.³

Ensuring that you and your employees have some time to mess around with *what ifs* and *why nots*, without pressure to produce results, is a prerequisite for creating a culture that fosters innovation. So is making your work environment conducive to insight. For instance, are employees encouraged to use all of their vacation time and to take it without checking email? Do people take a break at lunchtime and eat away from their desks? Is your organization "right-sized" in terms of staffing, so that people have enough, but not too much to do?

Frenzied schedules fueled by adrenaline inhibit creativity,⁴ and while the above suggestions are simple, they can have a profound affect on people's ability to think outside the box. Here are some additional tips to keep the inventive ideas coming:

Keep your options open. Instead of choosing between two solutions, think about how you can have both. One trick is to use "and" instead of "or," asking, for example, "*How can we lower marketing costs and generate more leads for the sales team?*"

Save the analysis for another day. Limit your brainstorming meeting to just that – the rapid generation of good, bad, and crazy ideas. Debating the merits of each one as it's presented slows down the process, and may result in some inspired ideas never making it to the table.

Don't assume that silence means agreement. People may not feel confident expressing opposing viewpoints, particularly if they contradict those of a senior manager. Ask people what they like and don't like about an idea.

If it didn't work in the past, don't assume it won't work now. Remember that market conditions, technology, and customer appetites change, so don't be afraid to revisit ideas that may have been ahead of their time.

1 *Who Needs Nature?* By Chris Leahy and Gerard A. Bertrand, Connections, A Newsletter for the Members of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, Volume 4, No. 3, August – October 2006
2, 3 Scientific Methods, © 2001 Richard D. Jarrard, Department of Geology and Geophysics, University of Utah

4 See the previous Forward Motion Coaching newsletters, “More Effort, Fewer Results” (January 2006), and “Attention Deficit Trait” (April 2005), in the archives section of my Web site, www.ForwardMotion.info.

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