



LIFTING THE LID ON CREATIVITY

Reverse mentoring may unlock hidden creativity in organisations, **Chloe Walton** explains more

The question that all businesses should be asking themselves today is, “Does our organisational culture encourage or restrict creativity and innovation?” and whatever the answer, we need to understand why they are so critical in today’s competitive environment.

Businesses that can truly embrace the idea of creative thinking and an innovative spirit can set themselves apart from all other companies. For the organisation itself, it can mean the difference between growth and stagnation; for the talent, resources and customers, it can mean improved engagement and retention.

Without creativity and innovation, every company follows the same patterns and processes, doing what they have always done, giving the same advice/direction and delivering the same output. Levels of energy and enthusiasm in such organisations

tend to be extremely low, resulting in a “tell culture” and existing rather than thriving. They risk functioning just behind the curve, playing safe and potentially putting their business at risk.

This article seeks to discuss why creativity is so important in business today, explore some of the challenges that organisations face when trying to instigate creativity and innovation, offer hints and tips as to what leaders can do differently, and give examples of successes that our clients are experiencing while embracing this creative journey through reverse mentoring.

Context

A study found that companies that embrace creativity outperform peers and competitors on key business performance indicators, including revenue growth, market share and talent acquisition. Of these companies surveyed, 82% believe there is a strong connection

between creativity and business results.¹

The smaller, more entrepreneurial and agile companies today are using this creativity and innovation to create a significant competitive advantage, while the larger, established and hierarchical organisations are losing the race and becoming stale not only in their thinking but actions as well. Just having “brainstorming” or “thinktank” sessions are simply paying lip service and are not enough.

“Creativity isn’t necessarily innovation,” Shawn Hunter told *Business News Daily*. “If you have a brainstorm meeting and dream up dozens of new ideas then you have displayed creativity, but there is no innovation until something gets implemented.”²

Today’s leaders cannot simply say: “We need to be more creative!” and expect everyone to fall in line. The meaning, purpose and strategic alignment need to be identified and



defined, and the skills to enable it to happen need to be learned – at all levels. It must be led from the top and leaders need to demonstrate that what is said is also acted upon. Without investment, a framework, support and people who role model these behaviours, there will be confusion and possible cynicism. One of the most significant challenges is what is meant by being more creative? This differs substantially depending on who you ask, at which level and from which organisation.

Energy, enthusiasm and creativity, therefore, tends to sit at the lower levels of organisations, not surprising when we remember that research shows that 98% of five-year-olds are creative but only 2% of 44-year-olds are creative.³

We are un-learning creativity. The older we get, the more we conform to expected behaviours and therefore are not being brave enough to produce anything new through



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fear of what people might think.

With organisations now comprising of up to four generations of society, the opportunity for leaders to embrace difference and make the most of that untapped potential is enormous.

The question

Entrepreneur Elon Musk has taken creativity and innovation to a whole new level. His creativity and innovative style is industry-leading and has made him billions of dollars with the creation of the mass market electric car. However, he has taken this to new

heights with the creativity of his SpaceX rocket launch mission; not just the launching of a rocket into space, but that the rocket would contain one of his electric cars with a crash-test dummy at the wheel and on the radio David Bowie playing on a continuous loop!⁴

By contrast, what might innovation and creativity look like within a hierarchical structure, especially one within a regulated environment, or service-oriented? How can we move it from a nice idea (brainstorm) to a culture of creativity (it's how we think)?

The real challenge is not, “We need to be more creative.” It is: “How, as leaders, do we create the space and permission for creativity and innovation to flourish within our organisation?”

The creation of this environment needs to be carefully considered, encouraged, and new skills need to be learned. It needs to start with upskilling company leadership. It needs to start at the top. →

The challenges

What is currently preventing organisations, leaders and employees from being creative and innovative?

- ▶ Being skilled: ideas should come from the top.
- ▶ Being aware: it's the way we do things around here.
- ▶ Being human: fear of failure.

Currently in hierarchical organisations, there is a deep-rooted perception that the leaders have all the answers and are the experts. This is loaded into their job titles, their presence and their behaviour. However, this expectation creates a barrier that prevents the leaders from saying “I don't know the answer” restricted by fear. It may also prevent the more junior colleagues from saying, “I think I have a suggestion” or “What if we think about it like this?” Leaders need to be aware of the power that they hold. They need to bring a level of curiosity to the conversations that they have, moving it from a “telling” to an “asking” dialogue.

This is the balance that needs tipping back as there is evidence to suggest that, as we get older, we lose the ability to be creative so we need to re-learn. This is about re-learning the skills of how to think with a



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beginner's mind, even if we are at the experienced end of the organisation.

Hierarchies within organisations have the benefit of offering structure, communication paths and identifiable lines of ownership and accountability. However, these may inhibit innovative conversations because people are afraid to speak up, which can stifle creativity. As a result, innovation may never take place.

As humans we gain security from

agreement, collaboration and validation. All these make us feel safe and comfortable. However, creativity is born out of difference of opinion, from being challenged, from hearing different perspectives and from thinking differently. To live this innovation means that it is acceptable to fail occasionally, as long as there are learnings. Organisations can get paralysed with “the way we do stuff around here” and simply stop listening.

Systems have the potential to restrict us. There are rules and regulations, auditors, shareholders, targets, budgets and performance reviews, all of which are often designed to ensure we make the right decisions and succeed. However, these often have the opposite effect and, in the true sense of being creative, how do we embrace trying new things and giving ourselves permission to get it wrong sometimes? How do we positively measure failures to create the environment to play and experiment?

Reverse mentoring

The challenge reverse mentoring solves is the creation of space and permission for creativity and innovation to flourish within our organisation. It will teach new skills to think differently, moving away from the safety of rigid hierarchies, and giving ourselves permission to fail. We can all benefit from external challenge and support in order to change the status quo that organisations can often find themselves in. Without external input and support it can be very difficult to challenge the very system that you are part of.

An innovative approach to creating new one-to-one conversations in the workplace that inspire and engage in a truly creative way are reverse mentoring programmes. The change is simple but bold, and starts with the conversations at the top.

By reversing the status quo, executive members of an organisation build a one-to-one relationship with someone with a different mindset and/or perspective, for example, more junior members of staff, those of a different gender, race or from a different company. They are invited to embrace the relationship with a complete beginner's mindset and to learn new skills such as being curious, listening and so forth. Providing a solid purpose, a framework and new skills,

offers the opportunity to work in an experiential way and to unlock the new potential for both mentor and mentee.

Provided it is carefully supported, a reverse mentoring relationship can become not only an unusual connection out of the formal hierarchy, but also allows the creativity to be reignited in the most senior levels. There is a risk that we may lose the ability to think differently as we conform to hierarchical structures and role expectations over time and, as a result, lose talent, resources and clients.

To embark on a programme like this, organisations need to:

- ▶ Be willing to try something new.
- ▶ Be willing to think differently.
- ▶ Give permission to fail.
- ▶ Sponsor it at the very top.

Conclusion

Creativity and innovation is a catalyst for business success and we believe it to be essential in attracting and retaining talent. To truly embrace it, and to create the environment and culture, needs significantly more than a few words or brainstorm. The exciting news is that the skills required already exist in the junior members of your teams. However, at both ends of the spectrum, new skills need to be learned and practised.

Reverse mentoring creates the new and innovative communication channel that, in a safe environment, reduces the fear and opens up the curiosity over an extended period of time. Embarking on these relationship shows to the world that your leaders are prepared to think differently and engage the talent – and that is inspiring. **TJ**

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References

- 1 *The Creative Dividend: How creativity impacts business results* (Forrester Consulting and Adobe, 2014)
- 2 Shawn Hunter, *Out Think: How Innovative Leaders Drive Exceptional Outcomes* (Wiley, 2013)
- 3 Bob Kelleher, *Who's sinking your boat*, <http://bit.ly/2GvkcF0>
- 4 <http://bit.ly/2pfbXW2>

Further Reading

- <http://xerox.bz/2tO1y8t>
- <http://bit.ly/2FDBoL0>