



Creativity and innovation:

A competitive advantage, but is it happening in your workplace?

When people talk about creative workplaces they often describe the building's modern, quirky 'break out' spaces, or how they encourage people to think outside the box on their team strategy days or incorporate equine therapy into their leadership training. These elements can and do have an impact, and yet there is so much more to fostering creativity at work – especially to instil creativity as part of how the organisation fundamentally operates.

The world's most successful organisations thrive on this capacity to live and breathe innovation at all levels of the business – Apple, Amazon, Google and 3M to name a few. New Zealand businesses are no different. It was innovation and challenging convention that brought us Xero and My Food Bag.

Markets and industries are changing faster than imaginable, and the disruption across numerous industries from publishing to retail and professional services means it's the companies that innovate and stay ahead of the curve that will fare the best.

Whilst it's easy to look at a global giant like Apple or Amazon and say, 'Well, of course they innovate, that's their style of business', the reality is that creativity and innovation are necessary in every organisation.

Xero went live in 2007 (and is now used in 180 countries). In 2013 I asked my accountants to move me to Xero. In the end I had to move to another firm because they were not ready to – nor remotely interested in – switching me to Xero. Businesses need to be able to move faster than that, but they also need to want to move faster.

Creativity at work

While for most of us the word 'creativity' might make us think of painting or song-writing, it has a very real place in the context of work. Peter Himmelman, who ticks many of the artistic categories from author to artist and musician, and is also consultant to corporate giants like 3M and McDonalds, points out that creativity is more a state of mind. It's not about being specifically

artistic, it's about how you think and feel.

Whether you're writing a proposal or solving a customer problem, creativity is really about bringing to any moment an attitude of openness, presence, love or passion, curiosity and freedom.

That means open to possibility, present in the moment and paying attention to what's in front of us. It means loving what we do; wanting to bring the best possible solution to a customer or to be the best in the industry. Himmelman says our love for it drives our creative spark. Curiosity makes us want to find out more, not take things at face value and to keep wondering. Freedom means being able to search, explore, brainstorm, offer up ideas and test them unfettered by fear, rules or restrictions.

It's not about creativity for the sake of being a bit zany either. Creativity is about bringing to bear the best quality thinking available in service to your organisation's mission or purpose, and in service to being nimble, smart and courageous enough to keep pace with the world.

Strategies that work

So what do successful, creative organisations and people do that can drive innovation and enhance competitive advantage? Here is a range of strategies, along with questions to prompt fresh thinking for your organisation.

Demand invention

Truly creative workplaces actively ask people to be creative and expect it. It's part of 'how we do things around here'. Amazon is a prime example of this; their culture is built around innovating on behalf of customers – it's what you're expected to do if you work there. They have fourteen leadership principles; three of these speak specifically to 'invention' and nine of them refer to challenging the status quo and continuous improvement.

Q – Where and when can you start talking regularly about creative thinking and innovation with your team?

Start and start again

Organisations that constantly innovate are not very attached to the status quo and the current way of doing things. Permeating Amazon is a start-up mentality or what they call 'Day One thinking' – having small teams single-focused on a problem or opportunity as you would at start up. But they're doing it every day. It's their 'normal'.

Himmelman asks leaders: "Do you really want more creativity and innovation in your workplace or are you just giving lip-service to a kind of change you have no intention of implementing? Let's be honest... very few employers actually want a group of creative, initiative-taking leaders; their companies just aren't set up to change at that kind of rapid pace. But the problem is the world is changing fast - faster than any of us know."

Q – How willing are you to relinquish the way things are currently done? How do you really feel about constant change?



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Reward for creativity

Many organisations still have their performance and reward systems built heavily around KPI's and financial results. Consequently people may not feel appreciated for their creative contribution and start putting their efforts elsewhere – or go elsewhere where their creative brilliance will be truly valued. Amazon actually bases promotion decisions on someone's creative output; it's part of their performance

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management process and a mandatory part of promotion documentation.

Q – How aligned is your current reward structure with the level of importance you give creative thinking in the business? Are you putting your money where your mouth is?

Align HR strategy with innovation

Barbara Dyer, MIT Senior Lecturer and former president and CEO of The Hitachi Foundation says “everything from the company’s vision to its HR procedures and financial management structure, when properly aligned, can encourage creativity in the workplace.”

Once more the example, Amazon’s HR tenets are headed up with “We build a workplace for Amazonians to invent on behalf of customers.” Like the rest of the organisation, their entire HR function is focused around invention.

Q - How could your recruitment and/or induction processes support creativity and invention in your workplace?

Technology in its place

Obsession is not too strong a word to describe most people’s relationship with their smartphone or tablet right now. Unfortunately it’s taking a toll on the quality of our thinking because we are filling up every available moment with devices and input. Whether it’s listening to podcasts during their commute or reading the news online while waiting at the dentist, many people are constantly plugged in, and not in a good way. Our day-dreaming time is disappearing.

Author, speaker and innovator, Simon Sinek, talks about what happens when we don’t have our phone with us as we wait for a friend to re-join us at lunch: “If you don’t have the phone, you just enjoy the world. And that’s where ideas happen. The constant constant constant engagement is not where you have innovation and ideas. Ideas happen when our minds open and we see something, and think, maybe we could do that? That’s called innovation. But we’re taking away all those little moments.”

Sinek is emphatic we need to take devices out of meeting rooms so that (a) people will actually talk to each other and connect properly and (b) so that true thinking and innovating can take place.

Trying to squeeze ideas out of your head while glued to your computer screen or around the boardroom table (with eight pairs of eyes on you) can be torturous. It’s no accident that when you finally give yourself a stay of execution and walk down the road for sushi that one of the best ideas you’ve had all day pops into your head.

It’s basic biology: when we’re relaxed

our brain works well and our instinct and imagination become available. It’s the daydreaming state Walt Disney famously utilised to build an extraordinary legacy. Luckily for Walt, when his team was brainstorming story ideas they weren’t looking down at their phones.

Q – What new agreements around technology would your organisation benefit from?

Encourage unfettered brainstorming

Walt Disney is one of the most famous creators at work and while he may feel like a somewhat out-dated example for some, his methods for creating wonderful stories and successful business ideas are timeless. The linchpin to his creative process was unfettered ‘dreaming’ – brainstorming with no critiquing or vetoing at all. All ideas accepted, put on the table or the storyboard and added to. The simple act of NOT taking ideas off the table changes the dynamic of brainstorming altogether. Our human tendency to say ‘Yes, but ...’ can’t get in the way of the next great idea and often does.

Q – How will you as a leader promote and facilitate unfettered brainstorming in meetings and conversations?

Give people space to create

While Google no doubt requires deadlines to be met and projects finished, organisations like this don’t hold on to old definitions of work such as fixed hours of work. With flexible hours and paid work time for their own projects (from which Google often benefits, admittedly) there is space to create, think widely and literally dream up new solutions and opportunities. And they are trusted to do so. But many professions and organisations are still rather attached to their structures and outdated measures of ‘hard work’.

Mental space is just as important for fostering creativity, which makes minimising stress also essential. Whilst a bit of pressure can get our creative juices flowing, it can just as easily stifle them. As soon as the pressure intensifies and flicks us into the stress response (which takes us out of our creative brain) our internal creative engine will halt.

Q – What are three ways your organisation can give people more time and headspace to be creative?

Embrace the absurd

If someone had said to you twenty years ago they were going to build a global business based on people paying for rides in privately

owned cars instead of taxis, or people staying in private homes for an agreed fee instead of a hotel, how would that have sounded? Uber or AirBNB, anyone? It might have been hard to believe that someone was going to make a world famous business from having people actually paying to jump from a great height with elastic tied around their ankles. AJ Hackett did it.

Each of these ideas was quite absurd at one time. Unheard of! People rolled their eyes. They were ‘too creative’ or risky. Plenty of people either didn’t like the sound of them, didn’t think they would work and/or remained unconvinced for a long time.

Q – How could you personally get more comfortable with absurd, out of the box ideas at work?

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Himmelman would say “encountering occasional absurdity is one of the costs - and benefits - of creative freedom.” It can be unnerving but it can also unnerve your competition in the best possible way. What is your organisation’s biggest opportunity in building a more creative edge? **HR**



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