Creative Thinking

Idea In Short

Creativity is a managerial discipline as much as a personal gift. Researchers define it as the production of ideas that are both original and effective, which means novelty alone is not enough. Teresa Amabile's work shows that creative performance depends on expertise, creative-thinking skills, and motivation, and that managers shape all three through daily choices. Her diary study of thousands of workdays found that the work environment affects creative output, with pressure and tight deadlines often harming it. Leaders can build creative capacity by protecting time, matching people to work they care about, granting autonomy over methods, and treating early failures as information. Start by auditing one team's conditions against these factors.

Few executives would admit to opposing creativity, yet many organizations say they want creativity and then build systems that suppress it. They set tight deadlines, tie pay to narrow targets, and punish experiments that fail. Creative thinking, in contrast, grows from a set of conditions that leaders can learn and create. This article defines the term, summarizes the research on what drives it, and lists practical steps for managers.

What counts as creative

Mark Runco and Garrett Jaeger reviewed the history of the concept and proposed a standard definition with two parts. An idea is creative when it is original and when it is effective, which means that it fits the problem and works in practice.1 Originality without effectiveness yields eccentric ideas, and effectiveness without originality yields routine solutions.

The definition protects managers from two errors. The first is to reward novelty for its own sake, which fills the company with gimmicks. The second is to reject anything unfamiliar, which keeps the company safe and stagnant. A useful test asks of each idea whether it differs from existing options and whether it solves the problem better.

A short history

The scientific study of creativity gained momentum in 1950, when J. P. Guilford used his presidential address to the American Psychological Association to urge psychologists to take the subject seriously. A chapter on the address in a later volume discusses its place in the history of research on creative thinking.2 Since then, researchers have studied creativity as a trait, a process, and an outcome shaped by context.

Managers benefit from the context view, since they control context far more than they control personality. Hiring talented people matters, but the same person can produce brilliant ideas in one setting and none in another.

Three components

Teresa Amabile summarized her research in the Harvard Business Review. She argued that creativity depends on three components inside a person: expertise, creative-thinking skills, and motivation.3 Expertise covers the knowledge and technical skill that a person brings. Creative-thinking skills cover the flexibility and imagination with which that person approaches problems. Motivation, especially the intrinsic kind that comes from interest in the work, determines how much of the first two the person actually uses.

Managers influence all three. They shape expertise through assignments and training, they shape thinking skills through the habits they encourage, and they shape motivation through the way they set goals and give feedback. Of the three, motivation responds most quickly to managerial action, which makes it the best place to begin.

What the diaries revealed

Amabile and her colleagues collected about 12,000 diary entries from employees at seven companies, and the Harvard Gazette reported on the work. The findings suggested that pay did not boost creativity and that tight deadlines tended to hurt it.4 The result challenges a common assumption that pressure and incentives produce better ideas.

A manager can draw a practical lesson. Reserve tight deadlines for work that needs execution, and give ideation work room to breathe. Where an incentive is necessary, keep it modest and tie it to the quality of learning, so that people feel recognized rather than

controlled.

The role of the immediate manager

Harvard Business School's Working Knowledge summarized research on how managers stifle creativity, and it placed much of the responsibility on the person's immediate boss.5 A senior leader can announce a commitment to innovation, but the employee experiences it through the weekly interactions with the direct supervisor. If that supervisor dismisses early ideas or demands constant justification, the announcement means nothing.

The lesson is to train and coach middle managers. Teach them to ask questions before judging, to separate the generation of ideas from their evaluation, and to credit contributions publicly. A manager who changes these habits can alter a team's output within a few months.

Practical steps

A Time article offered six ways to encourage innovative ideas at work.6 A team can adapt the spirit of those suggestions into a simple routine:

1. Protect uninterrupted time for thinking
2. Give people autonomy over how they reach a goal
3. Match assignments to interests and skills
4. Separate idea generation from evaluation
5. Treat a failed experiment as data and share what it taught

Each step targets a specific component of creative performance. Protected time supports expertise and thinking skills, autonomy and matched assignments support intrinsic motivation, and the last two steps reduce the fear of failure that silences tentative ideas. The routine costs little and changes the climate quickly. Teams that adopt it often notice a rise in the number of proposals and a drop in the fear of voicing half-formed thoughts.

Running an idea session

Idea sessions often fail because they mix generation and judgment. A better format begins with a clear problem statement and a few minutes of silent writing, so each person records

ideas before hearing anyone else's. The group then shares the ideas without comment, builds on the most promising ones, and only afterward evaluates them against the two tests from the definition: does the idea differ from current options, and does it work for the customer? The facilitator keeps criticism out of the first phase and asks questions in the second.

Follow the session with small experiments. Choose two or three ideas, define the cheapest test for each, and assign an owner and a date. The commitment to test turns discussion into learning, and it shows participants that their contributions have consequences.

A hypothetical team

Imagine a service company whose support team handles repetitive requests and rarely proposes improvements. A new manager studies the conditions. Staff lack uninterrupted time, since the queue runs constantly. Goals are set as ticket counts, which leaves no room for experiments. Several members have skills in data analysis that nobody uses.

The manager blocks two hours each week without queue duty, changes one goal from ticket volume to customer outcomes, and invites the analytically minded employees to pilot a tool that groups requests by cause. Within a quarter, the team proposes six improvements, and two of them cut repeat requests noticeably. The manager did not hire anyone or raise pay. She changed the conditions that shape expertise, thinking, and motivation.

Protecting intrinsic motivation

Intrinsic motivation grows when people find the work interesting, challenging, and meaningful. Managers can support it by explaining why a task matters, by matching assignments to the skills and curiosities of each person, and by giving feedback that informs rather than judges. Controlling language, such as constant surveillance of progress or threats tied to targets, can shift attention from the work to the reward or the penalty. A team in that state tends to choose safe, familiar solutions. Leaders who notice such a shift should ask what changed in the climate before they blame the people.

Synthesis in practice

Much creative work combines existing elements in a new way. A manager can encourage

this by exposing people to unfamiliar fields, rotating assignments, and pairing colleagues with different backgrounds. Synthesis also requires depth, since a person who knows little cannot combine knowledge well. The best creative teams therefore pair broad exposure with real expertise.

Finally, measure what matters. Count the experiments run and the lessons recorded as well as the ideas launched. The measures signal that the organization values learning, and they keep attention on the process that produces good ideas. Review the measures quarterly and retire any that push people toward volume without learning.

- 1The standard definition of creativity
- 2Guilford's 1950 address and the study of creativity
- 3How to kill creativity
- 4HBS's Teresa Amabile tracks creativity in the wild
- 5How managers can stifle creativity
- 6Creativity at work: 6 ways to encourage innovative ideas

Summary

Creative thinking rests on three ingredients that managers can influence: deep knowledge, flexible ways of approaching problems, and intrinsic motivation. The standard definition of creativity, which pairs originality with effectiveness, reminds leaders that the goal is useful novelty and not mere difference. Evidence from long-running field research suggests that pay alone does not raise creative output and that pressure can undermine it. Practical steps include protecting time, giving autonomy, and supporting people when experiments fail. Pick one team this month, list the conditions that help or hinder its ideas, and remove the biggest obstacle. Then review the results after a quarter and adjust the conditions again, since creative climates need continuing attention.