



Leading Creative Teams

by Joel DiGirolamo

Our city is the midst of a transformation; nurturing creative talent to cultivate a knowledge-based industry. What can you do to foster the creativity of your teams? Research has shown that 10 elements are required to facilitate high performance creative teams. These elements are:

- Right, diverse mix of knowledge & skills brought into the team
- Effective team processes
- Safe environment to share views
- Value conflict & resolve it appropriately
- Time to gain experience and working knowledge
- Individual & team self-development
- Empowering
- Forgiving of mistakes
- Inspiring, knowledgeable leadership
- Appropriate resources

Selection & Processes

To begin with, you must have a team with an appropriate and diverse mix of knowledge and skills. If your team is homogenous, all members having the same knowledge and skills, then there is no reason to have a team since they will all be thinking in a similar manner with the same values.

Once you have created the team it must establish norms, or rules used to run meetings,

make decisions, and get tasks accomplished. A critical balance must be met regarding the amount of time spent tuning the team processes with the amount of time actually working on the tasks. Teams who spend little or no time developing processes frequently become dysfunctional or suffer from low productivity.

Culture & Leader Behavior

As your teams operate do the members feel it is emotionally safe to bring up innovative ideas or concerns, especially safety concerns? Do you as a leader accept creative ideas and concerns or minimize—or even punish them?

So-called whistleblowers are the extreme in this regard. Take the example of a June 2008 memo written by Mr. Matthew Lee, a Lehman Brothers senior VP regarding possible improper valuation of risky assets. Within weeks Mr. Lee was dismissed, reportedly as part of a broad lay-off, and in September of 2008 Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy.

One of the most important elements in a creative team is how you value conflict and the emergence of controversial ideas. These ideas are critical to breakthrough innovations.

Imagine one of your teams having the task of designing a new cell phone. A team member raises his hand and blurts out, "Hey I've got an idea, let's just put one button on the



front! The rest of the phone will be a sleek blank glass with a small hole for the ear speaker.” Would the other members of your team look at this individual as if he or she had two heads? It may be a good litmus test for your tolerance of paradigm-shifting thought.

Depending on the phase of a team’s work, a balance is necessary between openness to new ideas and marching down a path with a chosen solution. As design teams converge on directions for a given creation the number and scope of new ideas should be dramatically curtailed. Without a direction and focus little progress will be made.

New teams must be given time to create a bond, develop a good working relationship, and share knowledge related to their task. From this fertile garden a bountiful harvest of new thoughts and ideas may spring forth. In order for teams to remain vibrant both individual and team self-development must occur. Studies have revealed that self-development is a key attribute to maintaining a high performance team.

Team members often are assigned specific tasks with reports and proposals brought back to the team. How often do you let the team make decisions versus you as the leader making the decisions?

I frequently see individuals who are reluctant to cede control of group or individual decisions. Fear of making the wrong decision or losing control of the group drives this behavior. Good communication in a safe environment is central to working on this issue. If you, as the leader, communicate pertinent information from outside the group that they may not be aware of, you will go a long way toward

alleviating some of these fears. Further, by providing the information to the group they will likely create better solutions, thus enhancing your value as a leader in your organization. Fear will hold you captive. Working to move beyond the fear brings a paradigm of an expansive universe of solutions, adding depth to your group’s creativity.

Continuing in this line of thinking, we come to the topic of mistakes. They should be evaluated and honored. Making a mistake means the culture allows individuals and teams to take risks. Conversely, if mistakes are punished you will reinforce behaviors of fealty or loyalty. Calculated risks are important for the information they provide, whether the outcome is a failure or success.

Leading

How do you inspire and motivate your team? How deep is the knowledge of your teams’ tasks? Again, this is a balance. If you know little about your teams’ tasks, members will question your ability to lead. If you have intimate knowledge about the teams’ tasks you may have an urge to micromanage. Asking appropriate questions and working with the team to develop a compelling vision of the work product or mission is a good way of motivating your team. Respect and honor each person’s abilities and contribution to the team output.

Finally, does your team have adequate resources to do their job? If not, what steps are you taking to gather the needed resources or how are you assisting to reduce the resource requirements? Collaborating with your team in this regard will show that you care about their well-being and success rather than allowing them to flounder with inadequate support.



A Review of Your Leadership

If you are unsure as to how well you are fostering creativity a review may be in order. Take this list of 10 elements and create a survey for yourself and your team members. Create a scale from one to five for each element. Take the survey yourself and have team members take the survey. The results may be surprising—in terms of perceived differences between you and team members and in the consistent views of your strengths and weaknesses.

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