

LEADING TEAMS

How to Unlock Your Team's Creativity

by Rebecca Shambaugh

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As a leadership coach, I never miss an opportunity to ask senior-level executives what they see as critical for people and organizations to succeed in today's dynamic business environment. I met with an executive vice president of a Fortune 500 company this week (let's call her Ashley) who has built many national and global teams, and who serves as a highly inspirational leader for her organization and industry. Without reservation, Ashley told me that being creative and innovative are the top critical success factors – not only for companies, but for leaders and their teams. Research has validated these findings, identifying creativity as the top leadership competency for enterprises.

Ashley explained that leaders and managers can't continue to rely on the same ideas that have brought them past success, and can't be effective by surrounding themselves with people who parrot the leader's own ideas. "I don't want the people who work for me to just take orders or feed information to me," she said. "I encourage my teams to take risks in bringing fresh thinking and new ideas to the table, even if they are not 100% correct." Ashley added that the complexities of today's marketplace require innovative solutions, which at times call for disruptive ways of problem-solving that may challenge the status quo: "The business environment is too dynamic and the level of change is too complex – we can't rely on the same ideas or same ways to solve problems or expand markets with the same thinking we've always fallen back on."

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Therefore, Ashley looks for talent that puts thought into novel ways to address an issue or make a decision, versus operating in a vacuum of expected solutions. She believes that leaders must ensure not only that they have the right talent on their teams, but that those teams can thrive in an environment that facilitates the generation and expression of innovative thinking, inspiring people to tap into their best ideas and limitless creative potential. But how can leaders achieve Ashley's vision to unleash the full range of top thinking within their teams? Here are some strategies to get any group's creative juices flowing:

Avoid getting hemmed in by process.

Innovation is driven neither by processes nor systems; it's generated by human talent. No

matter what procedures you have in place, it's only the creative confidence and drive of individuals – and the collective intelligence of teams – that takes companies to new frontiers, revealing a better world and boosting an organization's bottom-line performance.

If a team is creatively blocked, a first step for leadership is to examine whether the processes that surround people are holding them hostage in their thinking. An over-reliance on systematically following rules can shut down collaborative brainstorming, as some may feel they have no

flexibility to express outside options that run counter to the standard process and way things have always been done. If this is the case, try removing the limitations of particular procedural structures during creative sessions, so that everyone can feel freer to contribute without bureaucratic constraint.

Facilitate spaghetti throwing. In my work with client companies, I've observed firsthand that teams that are truly empowered to exercise their creativity are purposeful, engaged, and inspired to do great things, finding ways to make life better for customers. Since this is the end goal of every competitive organization, it becomes critical for today's leaders to provide the right environment for teams to tap into their full range of creative thinking and ability. The fact is that while research shows that 80% of people see unlocking creative potential as key to economic growth, only 25% feel that they are living up to their own creative potential. From the employer side, McKinsey's research has revealed that an overwhelming majority of executives – 94% – are unhappy with the innovative performance of their company. That's a huge waste of talent in an area where leaders can make a major impact simply by allowing the work environment to be more conducive to creative contributions.

To facilitate experimentation and encourage people to see what sticks and what doesn't, work on creating an environment of psychological safety – where Heidi Brooks from the Yale School of Management says, a leader “walks the talk and doesn't simply ask people to voice outside-the-box thinking, but also demonstrates the same behaviors himself or herself.” To inspire creativity, leaders should also encourage healthy conflict and debate. Instead of micromanaging, empower others and give them the reins to explore and take risks, which can lead in unexpected directions.

Reveal “sticky floors.” Everyone possesses the foundation to become creative, which starts with team members believing in themselves as idea generators who have the ability to become a compelling voice for creative concepts. When someone on the team harbors the opposite of this belief – that they *aren't* inherently innovative – it can quickly become what I refer to as a “sticky floor”: a self-limiting belief or assumption that can sabotage success.

As a leader, part of your role in managing teams is to use emotional intelligence to determine whether any team members are unknowingly holding themselves back from tapping into their talents and full potential. If even one person hides their creative light under a bushel, the whole

team suffers. Take a proactive approach to address this issue: help the team member become aware of the sticky floor, and offer coaching and support around expressing innovative ideas within the team setting.

Encourage a growth mindset – laced with mindfulness. As part of coaching team members off of their sticky floors, it's key to help them understand how to develop a growth mindset. This term, coined by Dr. Carol Dweck, refers to how a person thinks about their own abilities related to intelligence and learning. People with a growth mindset possess an underlying belief that they can improve through their own effort. They accept setbacks and don't see them as failures, but rather as opportunities for growing and learning through a process of gradual improvement. This perspective is the counterpoint to a fixed mindset, in which people believe they have a set level of talent (or lack of talent) in a particular area that they can't alter no matter how hard they try. When encountering a sticky floor related to creativity, leaders should coach team members, explaining how the internal belief that they can become more creative helps them continue to develop their skills over time, learning from their mistakes and making improvements. In short, developing a growth mindset is about helping people move from fear to courage, and beyond perfectionism to seek a level of excellence that's "good enough." This leadership challenge calls for guiding people to step out of the norm, crack their old assumptions, and stay open to new possibilities for creative insights.

Studies suggest that a mindfulness practice can help teams amplify the results of a growth mindset by courting creativity. Many of today's leaders have lost their ability and the bandwidth to pause and prioritize what's important, or to put time aside to plan and be creative while inspiring others to do the same. Yet this omission is a mistake, in light of research that reveals that meditation awakens creative impulses in several ways, from improving working memory to increasing cognitive flexibility, as well as brainstorming ability. Increasing mindfulness can be as simple as taking a walk in the middle of the day while focusing on your surroundings. Avoid the tendency to multi-task by getting rid of tech distractions at set times for free-form thought, and engaging in a simple breathing exercise, following the rise and fall of your breath to oxygenate your brain and ignite creativity. If the simple act of pausing to breathe and reflect can drive a whole team's creativity, then it's a step worth implementing.

The goal of getting your team to think beyond the box is a no-brainer, but figuring out how to actually *achieve* greater group innovation isn't. As a leader, it's important to approach making this happen just as you would any other management challenge: creatively.

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