Fostering an Environment of Creative Problem Solving

“Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will take you everywhere.”
—Einstein

Creative leaders are those who can continuously solve meaningful problems. They enable employees to draw important insights, take smart risks, and arrive at workable solutions. An environment that breeds innovation is one that is guided by strong values and efficient processes that empower people to think creatively. This article is based on the premise that people are full of meaningful ideas to help a business grow; what is often missing is a common framework to capture and capitalize on those ideas.

Strategies for fostering an environment of creative problem solving:

**Establish Values**

Apple is known as a great company because of the numerous innovations it has produced over the past several decades. While the company’s success can be attributed to Steve Jobs’ exceptional leadership, it is their core values that have shaped their brand and culture. Apple is known to *think different* and make *insanely great* products. These rules are locked in to the decision-making process of the organization to establish targets that rise above and beyond just *good*. They aim to build remarkable products, and in most cases they do.

Zappos, an online shoe company, which was sold to Amazon for one billion dollars, places a strong emphasis on building a company culture around its core values. Zappos has established ten core values that are constantly reinforced and practiced by all employees; including “do more with less,” “deliver WOW through service,” and “be creative, adventurous, and open-minded.” They are not just signs hanging on the wall. The values inform hiring processes, rewards programs, and performance reviews.

Values can be tailored to specific situations as well. IDEO, a global innovation firm, uses a specific set of rules during brainstorming sessions that include: “encourage wild ideas,” “defer judgment,” “build on the ideas of others,” and “stay focused.”

To favor innovation, a company must align its core values with new ideas so that it can seize emerging opportunities, rather than settle for existing norms.

“The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.”
—Marcel Proust
Work the Process
Innovation is often thought of as a risky endeavor. However, by understanding the forces that shape successful ideas, one can systematically tailor a process that reduces the risks while maximizing the returns on innovation efforts.

IDEO provides a classic example of a consistent and repeatable process. IDEO applies a methodology they call “design thinking,” which is highly collaborative, customer-centric, and loaded with prototyping. The process includes five main phases and is consistent with methods used among the world’s most innovative companies. It is not necessarily a step-by-step process but one that evolves organically to fit with what is needed for the moment.

Empathize
Observe the customer and get to know what it’s like for them to experience your product or service. What are their desires and pain points? Gather critical insights about what the customer is trying to do and how they feel about the task.

At its core, innovation is driven by the need to satisfy an identifiable desire. In his seminal work, *The Innovator’s Solution*, Clayton Christenson provides a comprehensive model on what makes innovative ideas succeed and fail in the market. He proposes that ideas must be targeted at “jobs” that customers are looking to get done. Innovations often fail because they target customer profiles or product features rather than addressing what the customer is actually trying to accomplish. Through this jobs-to-be-done framework, companies can focus their innovation efforts at the circumstances of the customer rather than customer demographics or arbitrary attributes of a product or service.

Define the Problem
As insights are gathered about the customer’s experience, it is necessary to define the problem(s) that need to be addressed. This is when the scope of the project becomes clear and the team needs to create consensus about what will make the greatest difference for the customer.

The founders of Instagram, the popular photo-sharing website that was recently sold to Facebook for $1 billion, initially set out to solve three basic problems they observed when people shared photos online: photo quality was poor, photo sharing took too long to process, and it was boring. By focusing to solve these main problems, Instagram went from a basic concept to a billion dollars business in less than two years by creating a unique photo sharing experience!

Ideate
Once the problem to be solved is clearly identified, generate a wide range of ideas with different perspectives about how to solve it. During brainstorming sessions, IDEO involves people with diverse backgrounds and skill-sets as they set a goal to reach 100 ideas before ending the session. There is no limit to the human imagination; it is
constantly on and accessible. The worst thing one can do during an ideation session is to dismiss an idea too early or assume that something will not work. Check all assumptions at the door and just listen to the flow of ideas that are presented. Ideation is about creating options and later the team can converge to determine the best ones to pick.

Pixar, the animation studio that created famous films as *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*, uses a technique called “plussing” or adding to ideas. This is a principle drawn from the world of improvisation where people are constantly building on each other’s ideas. The key is to accept every offer and make your partner look good rather than being dismissive or judgmental. Teams at Pixar are constantly complimenting each other’s ideas and asking “what if” questions to expand on what is already there. *Plussing* has helped Pixar form an atmosphere of intense creativity and rigorous problem solving.

**Prototype**
Choose the best idea, or a synthesis of various ideas, and create a sample of what it would look like. It could be a sketch, storyboard, video, or a tangible product that would demonstrate an aspect of the idea. By taking a bias toward action, we can overcome the fear of failure and recognize that the only way to learn is to build something. Celebrate mistakes as they provide further insight into the customer’s need and guide the next version of the idea.

Best-selling author, Anne Lemott, uses prototyping to launch herself into her writing projects. She begins writing what she calls a “*&^#@! first draft” to get her ideas onto paper. She says, “All good writers write them, this is how they end up with a good second draft and a terrific third draft.” When we expect too much from ourselves too early, it can block our perceptions and inhibit our ability to simply do the work. By removing the initial barrier, we are free to build something without fear that it may not be good enough. The goal is to build *something* and simply continue from there.

**Test**
“Fail fast, fail early” is a common saying among entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. The mantra refers to the prototyping process. No matter how good an idea may seem in the beginning, it must be prototyped and tested against real customers. This is a process also referred to as validated learning. Whatever prediction you start with must be tested and validated as true or false. The feedback serves as a building block to determine what needs to happen next. Refine the idea until it perfectly fits the specified need.

**Let People Innovate**
A paradigm that has emerged among innovative companies is to give people freedom to do work they are passionate about, also referred to as giving *permission to innovate*. For example, 3M dedicates 30%
of sales revenues in its four year projections to “breakthrough” innovations. To meet this objective, employees are allowed 20% of their time to be spent on personal projects (aka “bootleg time”) that may or may not be related to the business. The requirement is to show the results and be open to receive feedback. High potential ideas are then developed further and trialed in the market.

3M’s approach generates a culture that is not afraid to fail and makes prototyping ideas a way of life. It also builds engagement and loyalty among employees as they are trusted to do the work they are passionate about. Of course, this strategy only works if you are recruiting people who are aligned with the company’s mission and core values.

The innovation imperative has dawned on most companies as leaders are constantly pressed to solve new problems. To effectively innovate, organizations must be strategically designed to identify and seize new opportunities by establishing the right values and processes. By applying a systematic framework around the problem solving process, companies can grow to increase the success potential of new ideas and continuously satisfy customer needs. This is not to escape the wrath of failure, but to embrace the whole process and use mistakes as opportunities to discover more.

"Failures are made only by those who fail to dare, not by those who dare to fail."  
Lester B. Pearson

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