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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Leaders who master the "art of conversation" create cultures in which imagination and innovation can thrive. A leader who can't communicate is like an Orchestra Conductor leading an orchestra without instruments: Music just isn't going to happen. This newsletter highlights seven principles that will help a leader build innovative capacity, through communication, in his or her organization.

Building Innovative Capacity Through Conversation

"Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet they don't just exchange facts; They transform them, reshape them, draw different conclusions from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards, it creates new cards."

- Theodore Zeldin, An Intimate History of Humanity

Communication is an essential medium of an innovative culture. Mastering the nuances of communication is the surest path to success for any leader seeking to implement a culture where creativity and imagination can thrive. Personal communication is one of a leader's most vital tools since it brings challenges down to the human level, where creativity and imagination flourish. Using face-to-face communication when it comes to assigning tasks, stating expectations, monitoring progress, gathering information, solving problems, and providing input, will open the door to spontaneous dialogue and new ideas that will lead to productivity and innovation in an organization.

Often what gets in the way of having communication that promotes creativity, is our inability to dialogue. Dialogue is very different from debate. Dialogue is a form of communication that encourages an opening up about problems, issues and topics (Ellinor & Gerard). Dialogue comes from the Greek roots of *dia* (through) and *logos* (meaning). It expands what is being communicated by opening up many different perspectives and gaining shared meaning about the topic being discussed. Dialogue involves seeing the whole among the parts, seeing connection between the parts, inquiring into assumptions, learning through inquiry and disclosure, and creating shared meaning among many. A dialogue conversation will more likely stimulate creative conversation than a debate conversation.

John Kao, in his book *The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity*, offers seven principles to follow to promote creativity and innovation through communication:

1. **Creativity is a two-step.** A leader's first priority is to allow ideas to develop by keeping possibilities open – you have to suspend disbelief and avoid making judgments too soon. It might take the second, third, or even fiftieth idea before something clicks.
2. **Use positive-speak to inspire confidence.** Nothing shuts down creativity faster than a negative or judgmental tone. Fertilize creative ideas with supportive comments like, "I like it. Tell me more or can we explore one other option."
3. **Discover the gold nuggets in the muddy stream of ideas.** Downplay negative feedback. Try to find the positive aspects in even the worst ideas. A bad idea could have elements that serve as starting points for excellent ideas.
4. **Your schedules, timetables, and deadlines should harmonize disparate work styles.** Recognize that creative people view time differently. A leader needs to acknowledge this reality and sometimes negotiate a mutually satisfactory agreement about time.
5. **Well-set boundaries define extensive possibilities.** Leaders need to set some boundaries. At times, you do need to be firm and keep creative people from going beyond time limits.
6. **Ask questions that get to the essence of problems.** Use a technique like the *five "whys"* to break through superficial understanding of a problem to reveal the fundamental truth. Practice genuine dialogue that leads to an explosion of ideas.
7. **Remember that you are dealing with individuals, rather than interchangeable parts.** A creative leader must be like a detective, using exploratory questions about "big" matters to gain a much-needed sense of employee's personalities. Leaders need to treat each employee as an individual since each person has a unique set of skills, needs, and interests.

What's the Bottom line

Personal communication, that includes dialogue and the principles of "creative conversation", are key to conversation that doesn't just reshuffle the cards, but creates new cards (ideas and possibilities).

This newsletter was adapted from John Kao's book, *The Art & Discipline of Managing Creativity*, New York: HarperCollins, 1996 and Linda Ellinor, & Glenda Gerard's book, *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998.



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If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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