



Chapter XV

Contextual Characteristics of Creativity: Effects on IT-Supported Organisational Brainstorming

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Abstract

As a much needed quality in today's businesses, creativity is an important area of research. Creativity is a complex and multi-faceted concept and can thus be studied from a variety of perspectives. In this chapter, we describe an attempt to support organisational creativity with information technology—in this case, an electronic brainstorming device. While implementing and evaluating this prototype, it was noticed that the sheer presence of technology did neither guarantee usage nor success. Contextual factors such as organisational culture and attitudes seem to have an equally important role, and this observation called for a more focused analysis of the motivational aspects of creativity management. Based on the empirical data from the electronic brainstorming system evaluation and literature on organisational creativity, three general pieces of managerial advice to promote corporate creativity are suggested: reconsider the use of extrinsic rewards; recognise creative initiatives; and allow redundancy.

A Need for Creativity

As noted by many commentators, the importance of creativity in industry has risen dramatically during the last few decades. During the peak of the industrial era, a company could prosper from slowly developing and refining one single product or service. The increasing pace with which business now reshapes itself—propelled by the new capabilities offered by information technology (IT)—places higher demand on the organisational members to be able to see and grasp new opportunities. Globalisation, and the competition that accompanies it, further adds to the need for creativity in an entrepreneurial way, and it is argued that employees of tomorrow will be valued more for their ability to create new knowledge than for being able to manage known facts (Carr, 1994; di Sessa, 1988; Drucker, 1993; Reich, 2002). Successful handling of creativity is, therefore, a factor of increasing importance and should be considered a vital aspect of (knowledge) management.

Creativity is typically defined as the development of ideas that are (1) novel or original, and (2) useful (or potentially so) (Amabile et al., 1996b; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Paulus, 2000), and creativity is seen as a pre-requisite for innovation (e.g., the implementation of useful ideas in the organisation). An important part of the creative process is, therefore, to support and enhance idea generation (Paulus, 2000), and a traditional approach has been to encourage employees to submit their ideas to a suggestion system. This approach has been used in U.S. and European companies since at least 1880 (Robinson & Stern, 1997), and companies with suggestion systems have shown that this leads to production improvements. The ideas submitted are typically attended to and reviewed by a proposal-handling committee (PHC). Good suggestions are usually rewarded in some way, while not so good proposals are rejected.

Although being a well-known approach in practice, relative little research exists on suggestion systems (Frese, Teng, & Wijnen, 1999). Nonetheless, a number of serious shortcomings with the suggestion system approach have been identified (Frese et al., 1999; Stenmark, 2001b). First, there is a problem of communication. Suggestions are seldom shared with the entire organisation. Good ideas may be implemented locally but remain unheard of in other parts of the organisation, resulting in the “reinventing-the-wheel” syndrome. Other ideas may be prematurely rejected due to the user’s inability to accurately communicate the vision that he or she has, or the PHC’s limited capacity to understand and appreciate the quality of a perhaps innovative—and thus unconventional—suggestion. Had these ideas only been made public, they could have started other creative ideas elsewhere in the organisation (Stenmark, 2001b). Second, many ideas are never proposed at all—for several reasons. One thing generally recognised as a serious performance blocker is evaluation apprehension: the fear of being measured by ones’ peers. We are reluctant to present tentative and immature ideas if we risk losing face in front of our colleagues.

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