MIT**Sloan**
Management Review

Spark Team Creativity by Embracing Uncertainty

Focusing on getting the creative process just right can hamper your team's innovation.

Aithan Shapira   •   January 07, 2020   READING TIME: 4 MIN

As an artist who also works for a business school, I often talk with managers about how to inspire more creativity from their teams. It's not that these managers don't appreciate their left-brained, analytically oriented employees. On the contrary:

They value their logic and practicality. Still, they lament, something is missing. Managers today seek inspired ideas, inventive solutions, ingenuity, originality, and new pathways to innovation. But their teams are not delivering.

The problem is *not* that professionals lack creative impulses but that they are too focused on getting the creative *process* right. For example, in supporting organizations that are implementing agile methodologies, I work with many teams so consumed by getting their chapters aligned or doing their sprints correctly that they miss the opportunities that spark imagination. They avoid the unknown — the uncertainty that breeds creativity.

So how can you help your team develop the skills to embrace uncertainty and unlock creativity? Start by setting conditions that foster a creative culture:

Understand your motivation. There's a saying in the art world that's attributed to Picasso: "Every painting should start with an idea, but it shouldn't be a very good one." Whether or not the master really said it, the point remains. In the beginning, you ought to have some vision of what you want to do, but a plan that's too fully formed or too blindly followed leaves little room for innovation. Ask yourself (and your team) what the organization is trying to do. What's our purpose? What problem are we seeking to solve — and why? Understanding your motivation will help direct you toward your goal. Remember, it's not about going from A to B. It's about going from A *toward* B and knowing why.

Test your motivation by encouraging conflict.
Creative tension is essential to making great art. It's also essential to executing great business strategies. If there's no tension, you need to invite it. Identify the fieriest member of your team and encourage that person to challenge you. Offer some bait. Ask, what are we missing? Are we moving in the right direction? What if we did this differently? You're not inviting nitpicking but asking for honest opposition. Leadership note: It's important to ask these questions publicly and not behind closed doors to show the rest of your team that it's OK to push one another — and to push the boss — while setting the tone for how to push one another productively.

Invite unexpected contributions. Try not to be overly focused on the functional expertise of the individuals on your team. Don't assume that the finance person's opinion is only relevant for budgetary matters or that the marketing lead must only weigh in on customer messaging. Instead, relate to your team members as intelligent humans with great ideas and worthy aspirations. Invite them to operate from what they *don't* know as well as what they do, approaching challenges with curiosity rather than solutions. Encourage your team members to connect with one another through problem-solving. This will help them find their work more meaningful and arrive at unexpected outcomes.

Develop *bothness*. As a painter, I am practiced at looking at both sides of a problem to find a solution. When I want an object on my canvas to be lighter, I
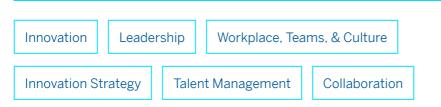
turn to my black paint and actively darken the surroundings until the object has enough light. Teams can more effectively solve problems in a changing world if they learn to develop skills for visualizing and working in opposing perspectives — for lack of a better word, *bothness*. There are positives and negatives to every choice, and you need to make a habit of considering what's right and what's wrong about each decision rather than defaulting to a "best" practice. Relentlessly ask: What's the upside? What's the downside? A decision could be right given the circumstances today, but tomorrow things might be different — and you'll be more prepared to adjust if you practice developing bothness.

Tilt toward the future by concentrating on the present. Your role as a manager requires a dedicated focus on your team's deliverables. But the map is not the territory. Too many managers devote maniacal attention to getting to the end while ignoring the conditions of the present. Ask yourself what your team needs right now: Does it need some tension? Invite opposition. Does it require more structure? Develop guidelines. Does it beg for more cohesion? Cultivate connectedness. Focus on enabling your team to thrive in unknown territory.

Establishing conditions to help your team become more creative requires your commitment to navigating uncertainty, not just your team's. The better you are at shifting your mindset and approach and concentrating on relationships in the moment —

without losing sight of your motivation — the more likely you are to steer your team toward success.

Topics

Innovation   Leadership   Workplace, Teams, & Culture

Innovation Strategy   Talent Management   Collaboration

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aithan Shapira is an artist and lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management. He is working on a new book, *Tilt: Transforming Creative Process Into Cultural Practice*. He tweets @madetotilt and @aithanshapira.

TAGS: Collaboration,   Creativity,   Ideation,   Innovation Process

REPRINT #: 61322