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Innovation in the Healthcare and Non-Profit Workplace

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In the for-profit world, most companies have recognized that innovation is critical to their success. Now, as health care and non-profit organizations face an increasingly complex and competitive environment, it has become more obvious that innovation is key to our success as well. So, how do we encourage creativity and innovation in the health care and non-profit sector?

How Can We Be Creative When...?

I often hear the comment, "how can we be creative when we're so heavily regulated?" Or, "how can we innovate when we're struggling to balance the budget?" My answer is that it's even more important for us to be creative given the number of obstacles we face. The more difficult the task, the farther "outside the box" we may need to go for a solution. To encourage innovation in the health care and nonprofit sector, we must first overcome some common blocks to creativity.

Blocks to Creativity

Many people say "oh, I'm just not creative." But, creativity is a skill, not a gift. It's something we all have. Think about it, all of us were extremely creative when we were children. We had to experiment over and over again just to learn to walk. So, what happened to that creative drive? With experience, we've learned to think in patterns instead of always making new connections. It's more efficient for the brain, but it's hard to break free from those thought patterns. And, over time, our creativity can be squelched by cultural, perceptual, emotional and intellectual blocks.

1. Cultural: As we grow, we're socialized that it's inappropriate to do, say and think certain things. This is also true in organizations where certain "sacred cows" or behaviors are off limits. These taboos limit how we can solve a problem. That is why something that seems so obvious to an outsider might be unthinkable to someone within an organization.

2. Perceptual: Perceptual blocks to creativity include obstacles that prevent

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"The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them."

Albert Einstein

people from being able to recognize the problem. These include defining the problem too narrowly, inability to view the problem from different perspectives, mistaken assumptions and stereotyping. For example, the dictionary defines “patient” as “able to endure waiting or delay; able to tolerate being hurt without complaint” as well as “somebody being given medical treatment.” In our current environment, patients aren’t patient anymore. How are our perceptions affected by calling our customers “patients”?

3. Emotional: Emotional blocks to creativity are the most prevalent and perhaps the most difficult to overcome. Examples of emotional blocks include: fear of failure, fear of ridicule, negative outlook and low self esteem. People who are afraid to fail do not risk suggesting unusual ideas. Those with negative outlooks will kill new ideas prematurely. Thomas Watson, the founder of IBM once said, “the fastest way to succeed is to double your failure rate”. People must feel that it is safe to fail if they are to be truly creative.

4. Intellectual: We use several different “thinking languages” to solve problems. Examples include verbal, mathematical and visual thinking. Generally, we automatically select the mode of thought without considering if there is another way to solve the problem. For example, if you are given a mathematical problem, most people will try to solve it mathematically when using visual thinking may actually work better. In fact, using only “rational thought” can be the biggest block to creativity because intuition and non-linear thought patterns are often the best way to make great leaps in problem solving.

Tools for Creativity

The good news is that our creative muscles are still there, they’re just weak from being underutilized. We can strengthen our creativity skills by practicing with tools designed to encourage innovative thinking. Most creative thinking tools work by breaking our normal thought patterns or reducing some of the blocks we just described.

Brainstorming, the most commonly used creativity tool, works by removing some emotional and cultural barriers such as fear of failure or ridicule. Done correctly, brainstorming generates a large number of ideas from a group in a short period of time. The key is volume, not quality. That’s why the best brainstorming sessions are playful and encourage “crazy” ideas, high volume, and prohibit judging or editing by others.

Beyond Brainstorming

There are many useful tools that go far beyond conventional brainstorming to aid groups and individuals to be more creative. Here are a few examples:

- **Analogies:** In this method, participants use an analogy to think about the problem in a different way. For example, using an airport as an analogy for a hospital, has led administrators to schedule discharges throughout the day to improve patient flow. Think of a creative analogy for your organization, what ideas does it spark?

- **Assumption Reversal:** To use this method, list all of your assumptions about a problem. Then reverse your assumptions and try to solve the problem. It is useful to question each assumption for validity because we often assume things that don't hold up after further scrutiny.
- **Picture Stimulation:** Using this method, participants use pictures from magazines or other sources to stimulate ideas by relating the problem to what they see in the picture. The picture can be totally unrelated to the problem, yet will stimulate useful associations.
- **Brainwriting:** This technique is like brainstorming but it is done silently. Each member of the group writes their initial ideas on a piece of paper. Next, the papers are passed to the right and each member adds to or improves on the ideas listed on the paper received from their neighbor. This continues until participants get their original paper back or run out of ideas. Usually three exchanges are enough to generate a large number of ideas.

To learn more about creativity tools, we recommend the books listed below.

Suggested Reading:

- Michalko, Michael. ThinkerToys: A Handbook of Creative Thinking Techniques. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2nd Edition, 2006.
- Higgins, James. 101 Creative Problem Solving Techniques. Winter Park, FL: New Management Publishing, 1994.
- Plsek, Paul. Creativity, Innovation & Quality. Irwin Professional Publishing, 1997 (available in e-book format at www.asq.org)

If you're interested in learning more about increasing creativity in the workplace or applying creative thinking tools to process improvement efforts, contact us at 610-627-1124.