

Creative Leadership

Max De Pree

King Lear tells us that nothing comes from nothing. So do scientists, for that matter. Everything in the world already exists; whatever seems new is only something old rearranged. So how do we explain innovation? The relatively short history of the United States glistens with innovation. Our open meritocracy has bred and nurtured innovative people with new ideas. Leaders in all sorts of organizations want desperately to encourage creative, innovative persons.

Innovation is a form of change. For the most part our culture welcomes change, but people proposing it do, as you might expect, run into barriers. As our society has become more complex, we find important segments of it becoming larger, more structured, more bureaucratic, less nimble, and less hospitable to unusual persons. Leaders can resist hardening of the



arteries. Leaders can help unusual people produce innovations—even if it's not out of thin air. But leading creative people in this age of diverse work arrangements and electronic relationships requires leaders themselves to be thoughtfully innovative. The secret, I believe, lies in how individual leaders in a great variety of settings make

room for people with unusual and creative gifts and temporarily become followers themselves.

Creative persons stand out from the rest of us. Somehow their contributions affect large groups and move organizations toward something better. John Masters calls them “explorationists” (the most creative people in his organization discover oil and gas). Yet they function, for the most part, outside of or away from organizations. They work in all kinds of places—in cafés, in airports, at

home—and they benefit from unusual relationships with the organizations they join. They often have odd reporting relationships, but somehow they instinctively insert themselves into organizations wherever they are needed.

The changes and innovations they bring are often more like leaps than the small steps most of us experience. They think of the world in large terms. They work for institutions or societies or cultures or ideas, not for individuals. Their creativity comes from the novel connections they make between their work and their experience or observations. They are usually curious and need a field in which to exercise that curiosity. Leaders can work to bring the special and creative gifts of these people to bear on the efforts of a group.

Leaders in companies and colleges and banks, in churches and government, in high schools and museums, have already chosen to follow the gifted people who can bring renewal, vitality, and opportunity. Once a leader becomes committed to a new way of dealing with creative people, we can define the process quickly. I would call it a search for beneficial surprise. Traditional education does not prepare us for this. Though familiarity with technology helps us deal with such a search, all the technology in the

world won't help us begin to discover the ideas and experiments and failures and successes we will need.

If we are to find new sources and perspectives, it seems to me two questions, if thoughtfully considered, are likely to yield good results. The first looks at innovation from a leader's point of view; the second, from the view of creative persons.

How Does a Leader Approach the Process of Creative Work?

A leader first makes a personal commitment to be hospitable to creative people and a broader commitment to open himself to contributions from many quarters. This commitment entails a number of ideas and guidelines. Let me give you some starters.

A leader protects creative persons from the bureaucracy and legalism so ensconced in our organizations.

A leader remains vulnerable to real surprise and to true quality. I do mean surprise—the totally unexpected. I also mean a new level of quality, one that I might not have considered before. Neither of these things is easy; really creative people shake up organizations.

A leader connects creative people to the entire organization. A wise counselor to Herman Miller (the company where I worked for over 40 years) once advised a key executive to get to know one of the truly creative designers who worked with the company. The executive failed to set up the meeting. When the counselor asked about the visit, the executive apologized for the delay, admitting that it would do him good. The counselor replied, "I'm not worried about what *you're* missing. The *company* needs you to know this person."

A leader does not demand unreasonable personal or corporate loyalty, understanding that creative persons are loyal to an idea and often appear to others as nonjoiners. I realize that this is difficult; yet creative persons need breadth of opportunity and the assurance of fair treatment rather than hierarchy and control. Their work rises from discovering and connecting. People remember the story of Archimedes' discovering the principle of displacement while taking a bath because creative people have insights in all kinds of contexts. Art Fry realized the potential of Post-it notes while singing in his church choir. Hewlett-Packard began in a garage. Leaders understand the potential of connections like these and make it possible for creative persons to discover them.

A leader will be careful about measuring the contributions of creative persons. Return on assets has become a Baal in too many organizations. All things cannot and must not be quantified. Financial and legal matters are truly important, but they do not lie at the heart of our future. Resist the urge to structure all things alike.

We also need to keep in mind that moving up in the hierarchy does not confer competence or wisdom. The discernment and judgment necessary to evaluate true innovation, to doom or give life to good design or breakthroughs in technology, lie with people trained in those fields. I can remember interrupting a discussion among our executive team about the relative merits of a graphic design with the following question: Who here is a graphic designer we trust? Of course, none of us was, and so we called in a competent judge. Sometimes leaders do forget what they don't know.

A leader arranges for projects to proceed along a narrowing path. The majority of data and opinions, dreams and constraints, should be made available at the beginning. Then a leader will narrow involvements and focus responsibilities and begin a careful—but not oppressive—scrutiny of progress and direction. Innovation will never be a democratic event. It's just too risky

for groupthink. Majorities seldom vote to change. A small group of accountable leaders and the creative persons involved must take the risk. If you're fortunate enough to come across a truly revolutionary idea, remember what Peter Drucker once said: "When you have a real innovation, don't compromise."

A leader sets an example for openness and imagination and acceptance. Learn to live constructively with eccentricity. Creative people can be great teachers; leaders prepare the classroom. In selecting architects for building projects over the years at Herman Miller, a key question we asked ourselves was, "Who among these very good architects will teach us the most?"

What Do Creative Persons Need to be Fruitful in the Worlds of Organizations?

Creative persons need access to senior leaders. A leader will let it be known that relationships with creative persons are important, that creative persons are at the heart of the organization.

Creative persons work well in the ethos of jazz. A leader will pick a tune, set the tempo, and start the music—define a style. After that, it's up to the players to be disciplined and free, wild and restrained. Jazz

band leaders know how to integrate the voices in the band without diminishing their uniqueness. It matters a great deal how the leader starts the process. In 1977, Herman Miller built a manufacturing facility in Bath, England, which won the *Financial Times* award for the best industrial building of the year. Nicholas Grimshaw, the architect, said at the time that the spirit and quality of the building could never have been achieved without the poetry and constraints in the brief given him by Herman Miller.

Creative persons, like the rest of us, need constraints. The famous industrial designer Charles Eames once called restraints "liberating." And I doubt that Rembrandt ever began a painting on an unlimited canvas. One of the most striking characteristics of the creative persons I know is their ability to renew themselves through constraints.

Creative persons need license to be contrary. Leaders will use the essential contribution of contrary opinion wisely, especially when dealing with creative persons. Cynicism has no place in an organization, but leaders welcome the committed skeptic who wants to be held accountable and demands a share of the risk.

Creative persons need a reasonable chance that their work will see the

light of day. Whatever the results are—hardware or software, information or communication—there must be the potential of reality lying ahead as creative persons meander along toward real innovation. They need to know that they will have help in making the results of their work real.

Creative persons need a fundamental level of trust. Industrial designer Bill Stumpf, one of the most creative persons I know, wrote me that a leader's expression of trust creates the grace necessary for him to operate. He also admitted that a leader's trust gave him an added sense of responsibility and pressure. He wanted to see *his* project done right.

The work of creative persons is only a part of a whole; it cannot be taken in isolation. Again Bill Stumpf: When a company works with creative persons, it works with their "theories, philosophy, reputation, and talent." I also believe we work with their families, failures, travels, and troubles. Ten years ago, geography would have been on this list; technology is making that increasingly irrelevant.

Creative persons need to work with others of equal competence. Tennis can be played at many levels of ability. We improve only when we are challenged and stretched. This is also the way at work. Things surely

go better when we have the chance to work with real competence.

Truly creative persons do not set out to win prizes. They flourish in the process of solving problems. Good work is the goal; recognition is a consequence. Steve Frykholm, an enormously talented graphic designer largely responsible for the Herman Miller image and graphic identity, once won the company's highest award, the Frost Award. He was surprised and pleased when he was named the recipient and told us that his goal had always been to do good design. The prize followed.

Creative persons—like the rest of us—like to be thanked. People who through their unusual gifts bring change and innovation and renewal to organizations need to be identified. Organizations need to know the sources of their vitality; leaders acknowledge these sources with fidelity. A friend of mine noticed buried among the stems in an arrangement of flowers a small tag that read "Created by number 59." This does not qualify as credit; creativity does not come from anonymous sources.

Both personally and organizationally, the results of becoming a good leader for creative persons are surely worth the effort. Leaders may expect a legacy going well beyond quarterly results. Organi-

zations can expect new windows into territory—both physical and philosophical—that would not open without the gifts of creative persons. Products and services that deliver a truly competitive edge will appear—innovations in the form of beneficial surprises, not merely predictable solutions or designs by committee. Change and renewal and hope will accrue. Higher levels of civility and robust institutional health are possible. Making the effort to be a leader to creative people and learning to follow such people signal both real leadership competence and the understanding that creative work comes from the heart and not from management handbooks.

Creative persons come in all shapes and sizes and fields, from graphic design and architecture to software design and human resources. The best are volunteers. They can find work almost anywhere, and they gauge the quality of their leaders as a way of deciding where they will contribute. Leaders make it possible for creative persons to make something out of nothing—nothing, that is, but expressions of themselves.

Several years ago, the Herman Miller board of directors met in Phoenix. Among other things, we visited an exhibit by the artist Allan Houser, several of whose sculptures the company had purchased. Allan

was a marvelous person and had shown us through the exhibit, talking quietly one on one with board members. In my best managerial fashion, I asked Allan to speak at dinner that night and tell us something about himself. He replied, "I won't give a speech, but I'll do something." As good as his word, when the time came for him to say something at dinner that night in the Heard Museum, he got up, silently pulled out a flute, and began to play beautiful and haunting melodies from his Chiricahua Apache heritage. None of us even knew that he played the flute. In his creative wisdom, Allan told us who he was. We listened. When he finished, he sat down without a word, and we had learned an important lesson in leadership.

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