

Creativity & Leadership: Some Reflections

*Dr A Jagan Mohan Reddy**

“Art, freedom and creativity will change society faster than politics.”

–Victor Pinchuk

Introduction

Creativity, innovation and adaptability are the hallmarks of today’s best leaders. Creativity has long been a focus of academics in fields ranging from anthropology to neuroscience and has enticed management scholars as well. What used to be an intellectual interest for some thoughtful executives has now become an urgent concern for many. The shift to a more innovation-driven economy has been abrupt. And today, execution capabilities are widely shared and the life cycles of new offerings are short. As competition became severe with survival of the fittest being the reigning mantra, pressure is mounting into a game of who can generate the best and greatest number of ideas.

Why Creativity is Important for Leaders?

IBM’s 2010 Global CEO Study, which surveyed more than 1,500 chief executive officers from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide, concluded that creativity is the most important leadership quality for success in business, outweighing competencies such as integrity and global thinking. Given the fact that today’s business environment is volatile, uncertain and increasingly

complex, the ability to create something that’s both novel and appropriate is of paramount importance. The experience of Blockbuster, Nokia and Motorola bear testimony to this. So how does an organization survive in such tumultuous times, the way humans have survived throughout history? According to Gerard J. Puccio, Department Chair and Professor at the International Center for Studies in Creativity, Buffalo State, organizations can use collective imagination to develop solutions to the evolving challenges posed by the environment. Because imaginative responses are much more likely to sustain innovation and without creative thinking, organizations miss out on breakthrough ideas that can become innovations.

According to Chris Grivas, an organizational and leadership development consultant and lead author of the book “The Innovative Team,” the best way learning leaders can teach creativity is to model it. Grivas and Puccio believe that like evolution, creativity can happen by chance, but also like evolution, creativity can be deliberately guided. Just as scientists selectively develop particular genetic lines of animals and plants, leaders are able to take control of their own creativity and deliberately bring about breakthrough outcomes and products when they understand the universal creative process.

* *Dr Jagan Mohan Reddy is a Gold Medalist in Economics with an M.Phil Degree from JNU, New Delhi. He was a faculty at IMT-Ghaziabad before moving to Hyderabad and has more than 2 decades of Industry experience. For the last 15 years he is in the teaching-cum-research line. Presently he is working as Professor(HR) at Symbiosis Institute of Business Management, Symbiosis International University, Hyderabad Campus. E-mail : drjaganmohanreddy@gmail.com*

It goes without saying that if we do not employ creativity as a core cultural imperative in business, in the VUCA environment of today, businesses will be stuck in yesterday's success. And the most efficient framework for chief learning offers to promote innovation is to create a culture that rewards creative thinking. Build a professional platform that engages and ignites new ideas.

Leadership Imperatives?

Teresa Amabile & Mukti Khaire in their article "Creativity and the Role of the Leader" (HBR, 2008) share, inter alia, the following leadership imperatives, based on the two-day colloquium of business leaders which reflected the viewpoint many of us hold in common: *One doesn't manage creativity. One manages for creativity.*

- Drawing on the Right Minds: The first priority of leadership is to engage the right people, at the right times, to the right degree in creative work.
- Tap ideas from all ranks: Research by Israel Drori, a Professor at the College of Management in Israel, and Benson Honig, a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada, highlights the hazards of not distributing creative responsibilities across the organization. They observed an internet start-up offering a new, sophisticated form of computer graphics from its inception in 1996 until its collapse, seven years later. While the venture enjoyed initial success, it was ultimately unsustainable because it depended too much on the genius of its award-winning artist-founder—and took organizational creativity for granted.
- Encourage and enable collaboration: Look at Wikipedia, which gets lots of contributions. And the fundamental structure of such networked organizations is not centralized and top-down. A study by Victor Seidel of the University of Oxford's Saïd Business School identified one practice that leaders would do well to promote: the use of "coordination totems" in the conceptualization of new products.
- Open the organization to diverse perspectives: Frans Johansson, author of *The Medici Effect*, found that innovation is more likely when people of different disciplines, backgrounds, and areas of expertise share their thinking.
- Map the phases of creative work: The leader's job is to map out the stages of innovation and recognize the different processes, skill sets, and technology support that each requires.
- Manage the commercialization handoff: An innovation reaches a point where it will be best served by people who know how to take it to market. But, since the passion for an idea is highest among its originators, projects often lose steam at the handoff. So management's job is to limit the loss of momentum with adroit timing and handling of the transition.
- Provide paths through the bureaucracy: As we all know, bureaucracy stifles creativity. Leaders & managers must protect those doing creative work from a hostile environment and clear paths for them around obstacles. The need is to create a culture in which creativity can thrive, like a gardener who prepares the creative soil and nurtures the seedlings of ideas.
- Create a filtering mechanism: For every idea with real commercial promise, there are dozens that aren't worth pursuing. Hence suitable filtering mechanism needs to be created.
- Fanning the Flames of Motivation: Motivating people to perform at their peak is especially vital in creative work. An employee uninspired to wrap her mind around a problem is unlikely to come up with a novel solution.

What Qualities Leaders Need?

We have to accept the fact that the old model of leadership is dead and now anyone in any organization can show leadership. Work is changing and we all can provoke impact and influence if we lead *Without a Title*. But the pertinent point to note here is that not only does each of us have the potential to be leaders, we also have the potential to be creative. *When we look at the most creative people around, we notice the following qualities in them:*

- *Perfectionism:* Perfectionism may not be the healthiest attribute in the world but almost every creative leader stood for nothing less than ideal work. Because, why work on a project if not to get it as close to perfect as possible?
- *Devotion:* Great creatives don't do what they do just for the applause and accolades. They do it because they love it.
- *Creating Space:* Creating space for the creative talent to flow. We don't get our best ideas at work.
- *Discipline:* It's pure myth that the best artists achieved what they did without structure and organization.
- *Have Fun:* Creativity often occurs in the heat of play. When you have fun it will open up that part of your brain that drives your best ideas.
- *Numbers Game:* Thomas Edison failed 10,000 times before he got the light bulb right. People like him succeeded because they out failed everyone around them.
- *Simplicity:* The best inventions were the simplest inventions. Because breathtakingly beautiful ideas can't flow when your energy's being taken up by the messes around you.

- *Self belief:* Self-belief is a powerful leadership quality. Nearly everyone laughed at Ford's concept for a car. His reply: "If I'd listened to the people around me, I would have built a faster horse carriage."

Conclusion

A century ago, the most respected outcomes of creative thinking and problem-solving took the form of order and process. The giants of the age were Henry Ford, whose automobile assembly line had revolutionized manufacturing production by changing and regimenting human behaviors, and Thomas Edison, a tireless inventor who sought constantly to make his process of experimentation and invention more systematic. And the evolution since has been fitful, swinging between the exigencies of commerce, with its demands for planning and predictability, and the realities of art, or creative production, with its requisite freedom and openness to exploration.

The last two decades have seen nearly all businesses embrace innovation and creativity as central missions, with leaders expected to serve as imaginative guides. Further, more and more, creative production and excellence have become collective affairs with attention to the effectiveness of collaboration throughout businesses. Creative leadership today is not simply about technological wizardry. The emergent approach to creative leadership often combines the Silicon Valley start-up ethos, traditional creative industry openness to expressiveness and exploration, design thinking, and the sheer need of all businesses to become more innovative to remain competitive and serve customers better."

