

How to Foster a Creative Culture in a Hybrid Work Environment

Creativity is created by stimulating a culture, not physically being together

- Create channels and forums for on-going creative downloads.
 - The assumptions that impromptu discussions lead to big ideas or that the convenience of pulling Bob and Jenny into a huddle room to “hash out a challenge” in person somehow leads to breakthrough solutions quicker is unproven. In fact, many will claim such interactions to be distractions and at times people aren't in a space to be creative.
 - The counter to this is to create channels and forums for people to download creative ideas when they are in the space to be creative and when people are in the space to receive them.
 - The underlying truth for making this happen is that the culture supports divergent thinking, the challenging of ideas, “what if...” scenarios. If your culture isn't like this, being in person doesn't change anything. And on the flip side, if your culture is like this, virtual connection shouldn't impede it.
 - Specific channels and forums we have seen work:
 - Set-up a Slack “what's on your mind” channel where ideas/thoughts are shared. Make sure the channel is moderated to facilitate conversation, idea generation and most importantly action.
 - If you want something a little more one way, have an email or phone number people can submit ideas. Collect these, filter them and feed them back to the group for discussion.
 - Set-up regular connects for the sole purpose of sharing “what's on your mind”. These don't need to be in the office, they can be outside the office in spaces that stimulate thinking. Hybrid doesn't have to be either home or office. These also don't have to be long meetings.
 - Use virtual collaboration tools. Zoom now has white boards which can be leveraged to co-create. And if that is too simplistic, there are other add-on tools that can be used for the purposes of co-creation.
- Solicit creative insights and ideas
 - This means giving people stimulus for pondering and actually asking for ideas. This usually comes in the form of business challenges, opposing or contradictory criteria (how do we do this without compromising this), or “what if... scenarios” (visionary). Be specific in order to get the most actionable ideas.
 - Studies show that when people have time to think independently first, more original details are generated. Hybrid environments can give people freedom to ponder in a space and at a time when they can be the most creative... and free from distraction.
 - Then when you pull people together in the forums discussed previously, the conversations are richer and more productive.
 - This time needs to be incorporated into people's day jobs. And it needs to be incentivized and rewarded...but not on “who has the most creative ideas” but who is committed to the practice of creative idea generation. You don't want to pit people against each other (creativity isn't a competition) but instead encourage the on-going generation of creativity.
 - Trends are a great way to do this as are competitive audits and category learnings. Anything that gets people outside of their day-to-day job and the “walls” of the company. We spend so much time at our jobs that this can be hard. It also helps people become more strategic, big picture thinkers.
- Form creativity pods.
 - Assign people into 2-3 people pods to work on a creative challenge. But don't do this arbitrarily. Carefully select the pods by putting together people that may create a bit of friction. You don't want group think. You want to foster creative debate. (IB example of account, strategy, creative.)
 - Some may argue that by creating the teams you are not naturally letting the creativity evolve like what could happen in a physical environment (just by happenstance at the water cooler). But when have you seen creativity just naturally evolve? When in a work environment, people will naturally gravitate towards those who think like them and reinforce their ideas. Rarely do people seek out people who will challenge them.
 - By establishing these groups and giving them a challenge to ponder, you set an expectation that they will work together...even virtually...on the task. It becomes their choice on whether they meet in person or facilitate the creative process purely virtually. But the group creates a bit of structure that forces connection versus leaving it up to happenstance.
 - We have found 2-3 work best. Anymore and you run the risk of people not contributing at equal levels. The introverts sit back and the extroverts take over. Or, people start teaming up and it becomes more about being right. And, if you have split locations (in office versus other location), it is easier to keep everyone engaged.
- Management needs to be accountable for actioning the creative process.
 - This is CRITICAL. If everything we have talked about is just met with silence or ambivalence, people will lose motivation to be creative. People need to know that their ideas are being heard, considered, and recognized. Which means, as mentioned earlier, channels need to be moderated, follow-ups from sessions need to be time-lined and reported back, people need to be recognized for their contributions.
 - Nobody expects every idea to come to fruition, but everyone needs to feel appreciated for their effort in generating creative ideas. And if management doesn't do this, who will? Nobody. People will just feel it isn't important because it wasn't prioritized.
 - This means management needs to engage in the process and hold themselves accountable for following the process. This is especially true in respecting the contributions of those who are in the office and those who are not. Though it could feel easier to tap Michelle because she is in the office, Alex who is working-from-home is just as easily accessible thanks to instant messaging, texting and the phone.
 - Management is also responsible for creating a culture of trust so people feel safe in sharing. This doesn't mean that everyone needs to like each other, but they do need to respect each other which comes from getting to know people...who they are, what motivates them, how they think, what they know...etc.

