

To Get More Creative, Become Less Productive

Author : Art Markman

Date : December 9, 2015



There is a fundamental tension between productivity and creativity, and managers won't get more of the latter until they recognize it.

Productive people move through the tasks they have to accomplish in a systematic way. They make steady and measurable progress toward their goals. They make effective and efficient use of their time.

Creativity... doesn't.

Creativity needs time and space to grow. Although we can systematically engage in activities that are related to creativity, it is hard to systematize creativity itself. In particular, creativity is fundamentally about knowledge. Nearly all creative ideas involve people finding new uses for existing knowledge – some novel configuration of old insights. **James Dyson** developed his vacuum by drawing a parallel to sawmills. **Fiona Fairhurst** designed a faster swimsuit by understanding shark skin. **George de Mestral** invented Velcro by understanding cockleburs.

That means people need to have the time to learn things that are not obviously relevant to their jobs, so that they will have a broad and deep knowledge base to draw from when they need to be creative.

Moreover, creative enterprises rarely involve steady and measurable progress. Instead, being creative involves trying lots of different possibilities, struggling down several blind alleys before finding the right solution.

But these activities — building up a knowledge base and exploring it — take time. It is hard to simply schedule a few hours here and there to engage in creative pursuits. Instead, there are times when it's necessary to spend hours learning about a new area of knowledge, or to have a rambling conversation with a colleague to pull the thread of a new idea. And so a lot of creative activity may look suspiciously like loafing around until the breakthrough comes.

This difference between productivity and creativity is a central reason why many companies want more creativity from their employees than they get.

Companies typically evaluate employees based on measures of productivity. More importantly, they set up their hiring plans based on the assumption that they are going to hire productive people. They want the people in the organization to make clear progress. And they focus on developing conscientious individuals who finish tasks.

If an organization truly wants creativity, it has to start by hiring more people than it needs just to complete the tasks required for the company to stay afloat. Much has been made of [Google's 20% time](#), in which employees were encouraged to spend 20% of their time on new ideas. While there has been some discussion about how this policy has actually been implemented in the company, I think it is correct that you need to hire 10-20% more people than you actually need to complete jobs if you are going to give everyone an opportunity to develop their creative skills.

Managers also need to provide some flexibility for employees to alter their schedules when an interesting new idea begins to develop. Giving someone the freedom to use 10-20% of their time to develop their creativity does not necessarily mean that they will spend 4-8 hours each week on creative pursuits. Instead, there may be weeks in which someone focuses exclusively on tasks they need to complete and has other weeks in which several days involve pursuing an idea down a rabbit hole.

But it's not enough just to give employees the time and flexibility they need to be creative. Managers have to reward employees for engaging in tasks that may ultimately lead to creative solutions, like learning new things, developing new skills, having wide-ranging conversations with colleagues, and trying out ideas that don't work.

It is possible to manage in a way that promotes creativity, but it will require productivity-obsessed managers to loosen their grip on the way people spend their time at work.

//