

Creating Conditions For Workplace Creativity



In the race for bigger, faster and better, innovation and creativity come at a price, demanding the brightest minds and hottest talent in the industry. As companies push to find a new angle, an edge in a (very) crowded marketplace, the competition is fierce and the clock is ticking faster than ever.

But while innovation and creativity may come naturally to startups and emerging businesses, large organizations have often struggled to remain nimble and support the quick pivots necessary to keep pace with their leaner counterparts. The corporate culture, norms and policies that once drove success and streamlined operations sometimes unintentionally thwart attempts at disruption and new invention. So what can leaders in large companies do to create conditions for creativity in the workplace?

TAKING CUES FROM EMERGING BUSINESSES

turnstone and Steelcase WorkSpace Futures have been studying the culture of startups and observing a new brand of innovative and entrepreneurial thinking in large organizations. We're finding that whether in design, finance, HR, IT, marketing or the C-suite, leaders are striving to activate a climate of "startup culture" with the mojo to fuel creativity. Designers beg for an innovation center, IT jockeys for a place to brainstorm and prototype, and HR chases after Millennials with the hope that an influx of hip, tech-savvy youth will propel invention and generate a creative halo.

According to a recent article in The Economist, this search for an innovative panacea has executives crisscrossing the country to visit innovation centers at some of the world's most highly-touted startups. They recognize that ping pong tables and unlimited food and drinks, though effective at infusing fun, do not—and cannot—single-handedly effuse creativity, so they're looking to emerging businesses for answers. Donna Flynn, vice president of Steelcase WorkSpace Futures and anthropologist by training, says the answer has to come from the top. More than beanbags and video games, Flynn says leadership holds the key to how teams pursue creativity and invention.

"Research in a variety of industries has shown that creativity and successful innovation can only flourish when senior leaders of organizations purposefully design an environment that allows teams to experiment, fail and explore new approaches. Many people imagine creativity as a mysterious and magical talent, but turning creativity into market value also requires structure and process. Leaders play a critical role in this by showing strong support for trying new things, providing resources to help them pursue their best ideas, and measuring emerging innovations by a different set of standards than might be used in their core business."

Entrepreneurs have long embraced this fluid approach to innovation, and founders have disrupted conventions from the moment their ideas married themselves to a lease and a payroll. Without the constraints of HR or the boundaries of corporate policies, these agile thinkers push ideas beyond traditional boundaries. What can we learn from them—and how can we scale those practices to fit large organizations?

David Kidder has been helping the world's biggest companies leverage space, tools and technology to enhance innovation for half a decade, and is perhaps best known for his best-selling books "The Intellectual Devotional" and "The Startup Playbook." But it's Kidder's role as co-founder and CEO of Bionic that keeps him in constant contact with CEOs of Fortune 500 companies looking to turn up the volume on organic growth and transformation. According to Kidder, leaders must first re-think the way they value space, from assets to growth capability.

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DAVID KIDDER, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO OF BIONIC

"Space is a sum of many parts, and it is more powerful than individual pieces," he noted in a recent conversation with turnstone. "But when you view space simply as a cost, you get stifled on its purpose, which often stops growth and creativity. You have to force yourself into a new mindset of looking at creating environments that unlock growth, innovation and creativity. Experience is revenue growth, not cost."

As Kidder emphasizes, there are powerful, existing organizational mindsets and historic approaches to innovation that either stop or slow progress to unlocking business model and productive innovation. Leaders, he says, need to view space and office design as an operating expense critical to growth—not as a capital expense tossed in with paper clips and insurance policies. By changing the way leaders view space and its impact on building a creative culture, it's possible to move the needle on real innovation.

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THE POWER OF AN INNOVATIVE LEADER

For startups and founders in emerging businesses, “breaking” the work environment starts by reframing the space conversation and recognizing the implications that come with innovation—namely, untethering people and giving them room to iterate, prototype, design and imagine. For entrepreneurs building their company from scratch, this often happens organically. There are no historical pressures or preconceived notions of what their space should look like or how they should operate. But intrapreneurs in established organizations seeking disruption must force a sense of agility to spur creativity. They’re tasked with hacking the office so that innovation can happen as a matter of course.

Jeff Schuetz is Staff VP of Global Technology for Consumer Packaging at Sonoco, a 116-year-old global packaging company in Hartsville, South Carolina. Two years ago after a change in leadership, Sonoco quickly pinpointed space as a key to disruption.

“We have a new CEO that came from within our organization, and he identified growth through innovation as a key component of his strategy. We have great technical abilities but not great spaces—it was beige and traditional. While we were already working on changing things, when the CEO said, ‘Go,’ we were able to present him with a much larger proposal.”

Schuetz explains how this support prompted Sonoco to tear down their former development center to the studs and completely start over. The resulting transformation pulled them out of the past and placed them decidedly in the future.

“We’ve provided a lot more space for collaboration: classic conference rooms, huddle areas, comfortable couches, a work café and outdoor spaces that we’re able to use nine months out of the year. We think of our space as a tool for attracting the talented Millennials we want. Now when you walk in, there’s a bit of a ‘wow.’”

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PASSIONATE LEADERS INSPIRE DISRUPTION

Leaders of innovation teams also exhibit a healthy disrespect for the status quo and often request complete autonomy in order to further their creative agenda. Executives who recognize the power of reinventing an industry are frequently willing to grant unusual levels of self-governance to these leaders and their teams. In the interest of achieving something potentially revolutionary, they also allocate a special budget, relinquish hiring decisions and let them work their magic without a specific agenda.

“When our innovation focus came to being in early 2014, our CEO didn’t give directives with specifics. Instead, he really left it to us to come to him with the details, and it was an easier sell because he was striving for both cultural and technological innovation. The work environment is one pillar to that new culture, and I’m convinced it never would’ve happened without CEO support,” says Schuetz.

Kidder’s experience in both entrepreneurial and intrapreneurial ecosystems highlights the crucial role leadership plays. “Half of it is the CEO. Bold, sleeves rolled up, building it. They’re empowering people to create productive failure with velocity. And if you have that, you’re halfway there.”

CREATIVITY STARTS HERE

We believe leaders of emerging businesses and of innovative teams in large organizations share the same DNA: their goal is to disrupt, question, test, and challenge the status quo. Their pursuit for fresh thinking packaged in unconventional wrappings depends on the level of freedom they experience in their environment.

Ready to build that kind of ecosystem for your team? Consider this:

IMPACT OF LEADERS

Much like the founders of emerging businesses, leaders of large, leading organizations must set the stage for innovation by modeling the cultural norms that allow for free thinking, exploration, creativity and freedom to fail. In short, they must empower their team to pursue ideas and unleash their creativity without fear.

- So leaders, trust your team, even amidst ambiguity
- Allow them to act with just enough information to responsibly move projects ahead
- Embrace analog ideation
- Welcome disagreements and divergent thinking to combat optimization
- Remove organizational red tape whenever possible
- Give innovators as much autonomy as you’re able
- Provide spaces that can stay messy while ideas take shape

Says Schuetz, “In the past, there has been a tendency to get into a group think, but this environment we’re creating now is one that welcomes divergent thoughts and disruption. Being able to encourage more creativity and risk- taking is something that our new environment is aiding.”

IMPACT OF PEOPLE

Because the implications of talent on creativity are immense, as are cultural fit, motivation, passion and authenticity, innovative leaders fight for the freedom to hire without oversight from HR. Tom Kelley, author of *The Ten Faces of Innovation*, identified how “Directors,” those in leadership roles with a firm grasp on the direction of their companies and able to bring out the best in others, value the freedom to hire.

“There’s an old adage in Hollywood that ‘directing is 90 percent casting.’ Great Directors [in business] build a team of people who need little direction and can lead by example themselves.”

Finding people who know when and where to speak up and will work to create their own break- through culture is necessary. These meaningful connections make people feel safe, opening the door to true collaboration and creativity.

- When hiring, consider individual personalities and how they’ll mesh
- If possible, involve several team members in the interview process to test for fit
- Use space to break down silos and create an environment conducive to collaboration
- Foster a vibrant, startup culture that promotes natural interactions between teams and departments

- Set the stage for relationships to bloom and trust to take root between coworkers

IMPACT OF SPACE

Steven Johnson, best-selling author and TED speaker, has said, “If you look at history, innovation doesn’t just come from giving people incentives; it comes from creating environments where their ideas can connect.” For creativity to bloom and innovation to flourish, innovators benefit from a true palette of places:

- Design respite areas where team members can find solace
- Create team spaces that boost culture and promote natural social interaction
- Provide collaborative spaces for group projects and meetings
- Use whiteboards to capture idea generation
- Make “dashboards” that track progress, quality measurements and goals visible to all

Allowing creatives to move freely throughout the day based on the task at hand helps them remain agile and maintain forward momentum to accelerate business results.

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