

LEADERSHIP Excellence

DECEMBER 2006

THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

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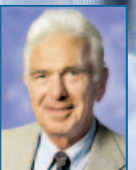
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—WARREN BENNIS, AUTHOR AND
USC PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT



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PUFFED-UP LEADER

Self-deluded, this leader is puffed up with pride and self-importance, as evidenced by his colorful clothing and accumulated baggage. He is fortunate, indeed, to be kept on a short leash by a responsible woman; otherwise, he might spin off into space and pop!

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Leading Innovation

It begins with your climate.



by Joseph Giordano and Candis Cook

WHETHER YOU ARE LOOKING FOR INGENUITY, creativity, innovation, or growth, the key is allowing people to experiment and surprise you with their results, solutions, options, and ideas. “Never tell people how to do things,” said George S. Patton, the great American General. “Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”

Many companies are embroiled in global battles and need to apply creativity and innovation cross-functionally and with a diverse people who cover many different thinking styles.

The tactical side of creativity and innovation—the *what* we are doing and *how* we are doing it—come as a result of how the leaders embrace and enable the climate, the thinking, and the actions or processes that are undertaken to activate the desired results.

1. Climate. The climate is a snapshot of how we treat ourselves, each other, and the ideas generated. Are we taking risks, remaining open-minded? Are we fostering a supportive environment? Leaders of innovation accommodate the emotional needs of communication. In many cultures, we engage in protectionist communication. We waste energy covering our tracks, making sure that we are seen as doing the right thing and heard when we feel we need to be heard. We waste energy on protecting ourselves when we are in a culture that we perceive as noncollaborative. Thus we have less time or energy to focus on work in the moment, to be available for new thoughts and ideas.

When the climate becomes more collaborative and supportive, most of our energy becomes available to focus on tasks, action, and growth. As we work in a collaborative and supportive climate, we trust ourselves more—we take chances and risk more, knowing that our colleagues will support us.

The leader’s role is to establish a climate of trust by understanding the subtleties that enable creativity and innovation—such as searching for meaning, paraphrasing, using language that supports beginning ideas, and applying developmental thinking rather than decision-making modes. As comfort grows among the team, more risk-taking will emerge—and it’s often the riskiest ideas that propel business forward. The trust increases, as does the opportunity to be creative and innovative.

2. Thinking. In innovation, the leaders’



role is to encourage and model a mindset to think differently about the problems, opportunities, and the solutions that are presented. At any given moment, we function in two distinct worlds: 1) an operational world where we are structured, precise, governed by rules and routine; 2) an experimental world where we allow ourselves to play with ideas, develop new thinking, and be approximate, speculative, and curious.

Often there is an ongoing tension within us and within teams between being safe and taking chances with our work. Leaders who encourage wishing, speculating, approximate thinking, and absurdity help people break out of ruts and old results. These thinking techniques help us cultivate newness and intrigue in our products. The aim is to make the unfamiliar familiar, the absurd have value, and to make connections from the seemingly irrelevant.

For example, during a problem-solving session, a senior executive said, “I wish we had our own country where we could make all the rules.” The ensuing work created one of the most successful advertising and mar-

keting campaigns, generating many times return on investment!

The ultimate solutions to problems are rational; the process for thinking of fresh solutions is not. Right-brain thinking processes allow the mind to diverge from the current point of understanding—the problem. Many great thinkers get as far away from the problem as possible to allow true breakthroughs to happen. Da Vinci, Einstein, Galileo, and Pinkerton would remove their task from their thoughts and playfully generate seemingly irrelevant material which they would connect back to their problem. This would allow them to experiment with fresh ideas and develop fresh solutions.

The visible use by leaders of methodologies for generating and capitalizing on innovative thinking ingrains them into the culture. Methods are systematic, but are far from rigid. They direct the creative and innovative process through phases and loopbacks to produce innovative and feasible conclusions and actions.

3. Actions. A leader’s work is about helping sustain a high-performing team. Acting as a guide and coach, strong leaders draw out the ability to be innovative, tap creative thinking, and help the team turn fresh ideas into practical, workable results. Creative leaders resist succumbing to daily work pressures. They know when to be patient and delay decisions rather than staying within the confines of yes-and-no decision-making. Great leaders focus on building and sustaining alignment around the goals to enable experimentation. They focus on the *what* rather than the *how*.

A good start is to identify two or three highly visible, real-time projects that require the creativity of your team. Get sponsorship above and skills development below to support the project. Ideally, the opportunities are cross-functional and multi-leveled.

Often, there is no greater thinking to address a problem or opportunity than from those who are not connected to the problem. In fact, most breakthroughs come from those who offer seemingly irrelevant ideas.

The leader’s role is facilitative, managing the interactions and stimulating fresh thinking to bring new power and perspectives into the mix. Innovation for innovation’s sake is not the answer, but innovation with a purpose will drive results. LE

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ACTION: Create the right climate.