



Leadership NOTES

Supporting Innovation and Creativity

Innovation: in-uh-**vey**-shuh n – noun. the act of innovating; introduction of new things or methods. (Dictionary.com)

Creativity: kree-ey-**tiv**-i-tee – noun. the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, etc., and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, etc.; originality, progressiveness, or imagination. (Dictionary.com)

A good measure of school improvement can be attained through the careful application of known processes, procedures, and methods. This approach is undoubtedly a good starting place for school leaders. At some point in a school's improvement journey, however, it becomes necessary to break with convention and invent new approaches, methods, and practices that allow for continued growth toward excellence.

The benefits of an innovative, creative workplace are many. Success is available to more students, learning is more engaging, the work of teachers and staff is more meaningful, students and faculty become more adaptive, and talented faculty are attracted and retained.

Talented people are drawn to workplaces that are innovative, creative, and future driven. Is it that an innovative workplace attracts and retains innovative people? Or do the people in an innovative workplace become more innovative by working there? Perhaps both are true.

Creativity is not so much an individual trait as it is driven by context, culture, and environment. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Creativity, The Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, points to the spurt of artistic creativity that occurred in Florence, Italy between 1400 and 1425. He contends that this flourishing of artistic creativity could not have simply been a random concentration of creative individuals. Rather, he suggests it was fueled by a convergence of cultural and environmental factors (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Also, according to Csikszentmihalyi, it is important to be in the right place. Information and ideas are not, even in the online age, evenly distributed. They tend to clump (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). It is still the case that for one who aspires to creativity and innovation in theater, New York is the best place to live. For screenwriting, Los Angeles; for country music, Nashville; for politics, Washington, D.C.; for educational innovation and creativity... why not your school?

School leaders can design schools to support innovation and creativity. By so doing, they benefit their schools by attracting and retaining innovative staff and by releasing the latent creativity in all staff.

Design principles that support innovation and creativity.

Nurture curiosity. Ask questions. What if...? Why not? I wonder... In many schools the teachers ask most of the questions. Break this mold (Geurin, 2017). Model curious questioning from the top. *"The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity."* Dorothy Parker (from page 69 of Future Driven, by David Geurin).

Build Trust. Innovation and creativity flourish in a culture of trust. Trust is optimized when leaders practice the trust building behaviors of reliability, acceptance, openness, and congruence (See Emerging Level MLDS Facilitation Guide, Learning Experience 5, Treatment 5: *Building a Culture of Trust*).

Embrace risk and failure. In innovative companies, leaders embrace, even celebrate failure as a natural by-product of the creative process, according to Faisal Hoque and Drake Baer in *Everything Connects. How to Transform and Lead in the Age of Creativity, Innovation, and Sustainability* (2014). Leaders might institute a “Flop of the Month” award or another ritual that communicates the value of taking risks and learning from mistakes.

Flatten the organization. Shed layers of bureaucratic red tape that depress innovation. Promote fast to market implementation of new ideas, shorten the creative cycle, emphasize autonomy and self-management.

Collaborate. Regularly work with others both inside and outside the school walls. Seek input from health care professionals, law enforcement, the arts community, military personnel, small business owners, tech entrepreneurs, etc. Innovative ideas often cross professional boundaries.

Create innovative spaces for planning, teaching, and learning. The design of the physical environment affects thinking. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi points to the importance of the spatial environment to creative endeavors. *“The spatiotemporal context in which one lives has important consequences.”* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 127).

Create innovative work designs. Job-alike teams work well for implementing ideas that have already been developed. Mixed teams are best for creative work. Mix subjects, grade levels, home towns, gender, politics, age, experience, personality types, group size, meeting times, meeting locations, etc. Pro tip: Intergenerational collaboration (mixed ages) is a mark of a GPTW (Great Place to work).

Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose. Daniel Pink, in his 2009 book *Drive- The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, identifies these three attributes as crucial for an innovative workplace. **Autonomy** is the condition of empowerment and self-management. **Creativity** blossoms when faculty are respected as professional operators, not mere recipe followers. Perhaps it's more rewarding to be a chef than a cook. **Mastery** is the product of practice, feedback, and experience. One cannot innovate a practice or approach that has not first been mastered. **Purpose** represents the common vision at which all innovation and creativity is aimed. Tom Peters and Robert Waterman, in their 1982 business classic *In Search of Excellence- Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*, cite simultaneous loose-tight properties as one of the eight common principles observed in successful American companies. Loose-tight properties refers to a group of people who are consistent (tight) on the purpose and values of the company, but simultaneously flexible (loose) on the methods and approaches for accomplishing results.

Emphasize growth, learning, and feedback- not grades (for students) and evaluation (for adults). It is widely accepted that curiosity, growth, discovery, learning, and feedback are conditions that promote innovation and creativity; and that critique, judgement, assessment, compliance and evaluation are conditions that retard innovation and creativity (Shalley & Gilson, 2004).

Provide teams what they need and release them from the rest. Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman cite this as one of the common principles of success in the great groups they studied for their 1997 book *Organizing Genius- the Secrets of Creative Collaboration*. Bennis and Biederman studied how some of the world's most innovative developments came to be and the leadership moves that supported the innovations. Innovations studied included the Manhattan Project, Disney Animation Studios, Lockheed-Martin's development of the stealth bomber, and Apple's development of the Macintosh computer (Bennis and Biederman, 1997).

Publish and disseminate. Our thinking is clearer, our ideas are sharper, and our recommendations are more useful when we know they will be shared with colleagues and disseminated to a wider audience. This is true for both students and staff (Geurin, 2017).

Use innovation to improve schools. Supporting innovative and creative thinking in the workplace will increase the number and utility of ideas. A second leadership challenge is found in the organizational adoption of promising new ideas. In the scientific community, Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* introduced the idea of paradigms and paradigm shifts in how the scientific community responds to creativity and innovation (Kuhn, 1962). Likewise, Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan provide a compelling structure for supporting school change and innovation in their 2012 book *Professional Capital- Transforming Teaching in Every School* (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The MLDS Developing Level Guide offers guidance in how to move from promising ideas to improved outcomes in Learning Experience 7: *Designing and Leading Change*.

Bibliography

- Bennis, W. & Biederman, P. (1997). *Organizing genius- The secrets of creative collaboration*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity- The psychology of discovery and invention*. New York, NY: Harper-Collins Publishers.
- Geurin, D. (2017). *Future driven- Will your students thrive in an unpredictable world?* Bolivar, MO: David Geurin.
- Hargreaves, A. & Fullan, M. (2012). *Professional capital- Transforming teaching in every school*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kuhn, T.S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pink, D.H. (2009). *Drive- the surprising truth about what motivates us*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.
- Rutherford, et al (2015). *Missouri leadership development system, MLDS facilitation guide*. Jefferson City, MO: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- Shalley, C.E. & Gilson, L.L. (2004). What leaders need to know: a review of social and contextual factors than can foster or hinder creativity. *The Leadership Quarterly*: 15, 33-53.