# FREE THINKERS - How companies can foster creativity in the workplace *by Lindsey Townsend*

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GREATER METROPLEX - It's the stuff of cliché-laden CEO speeches: encouraging creativity among the troops. Fostering innovation. Building a better mousetrap. But can you really teach creativity - once described as "the realization that there is no particular virtue in doing things the way they have always been done" - in a corporate environment? And if so, how do you help it to flourish?

Experts agree that a creative workforce is the lifeblood that helps companies not only create new products and services but also solve everyday business challenges. Most believe that while creativity cannot be "taught" per se, it can and should be encouraged. "In today's technologically-driven world, we need the innovative and creative thinker more than ever before. They're the ones most able to adapt, thrive, and problem-solve in a rapidly changing environment, which exists in so many industries today," said Joy Perkins, corporate training consultant with Witz Training and Development, an interpersonal skills management training and consulting firm.

Perkins said that a dichotomy exists in today's business world in which many companies say they want innovation and creativity while still using the "command-and-control" management styles that curtail its expression. "One red flag that you're in an environment that resists creativity is when managers are always looking for someone to blame," she said. For creativity to thrive, employees need to be allowed to make

mistakes in a non-judgmental atmosphere. "And they should be encouraged to share those mistakes so that others can learn from them."

Encouraging creativity can be a bit of a double-edged sword, though, if you're not willing to except a few false starts and wrong turns along the way. "When employees are encouraged to color outside the lines, you're going to have people charging down the wrong path," warns Steve Timmons, a Ph.D. in organizational psychology and the national practice director of business promotion with Ajilon, a technology and organizational firm.

In order to avoid those situations, it's up to training managers to make sure creative energy is being used to benefit the organization. "The key issue is that you have to allow employees the freedom to be creative while making sure that their efforts are aligned with the strategic mission of the company," said Susan Abar, training manager with Dr Pepper/Seven UP Inc. "In order to accomplish that, they need to clearly understand the goals and objectives that senior management is trying to achieve."

Timmons believes that being creative is "something people either bring to the party or they don't. I don't think you can teach it, but you can foster an environment that encourages people to think outside the box." To do that, managers must be willing to let employees break out of old habits and outdated belief systems. " They need to be allowed to ask 'what if' and to question the absolutes of the organization," he said.

But it's not just those hard-nosed, bottom-line managers who inhibit creativity and quash potentially great ideas. As people grow older, they tend to place many creative barriers on themselves: fear of failure, fear of looking foolish, fear of sounding stupid. "My personal belief is that

everyone is creative in their own way. You don't necessarily teach creativity, but you can give people the opportunity to be creative by removing those barriers," said Joel Zeff, president of Joel Zeff Creative, which offers improvisational creativity workshops and presentations to corporations.

An important component of facilitating creativity is helping people take risks and chances while having fun: "because that's what creativity is all about. Creativity and fun are directly related," Zeff says. He suggests holding brainstorming sessions anywhere other than the usual boring conference room: "Go to an aquarium, a pizza place, the ballpark...When you change the environment, you change the stimuli coming into the mind."

There are other ways to encourage a creative workplace. Decorate the workplace with color and play inspiring music, which stimulates the right brain. Allow playful toys in the office. Give employees time to relax and daydream, radical as it sounds, and to journal. "Creativity comes out of the 'spontaneous child' ego state, which is often repressed in an office environment,"said Perkins. "We're at our most creative when our minds are relaxed," Managers should also learn to ask more questions of their employees instead of giving them directives, because "creativity comes from the point of view that there's more than one right answer" she said. Finally, remember that part of being creative in any field is having the courage and fortitude to communicate and sell your ideas, even if others initially dismiss them. "It's easier to say no than yes. There's work after yes, but there's not a lot of work after no...Like the old joke goes, if you're stranded on a desert island, come up with an idea, because someone will come along shortly to tell you how stupid it is," said Zeff.

"Not all of your ideas will be accepted in the workplace, but fighting for your ideas is part of the creative process, too."