

FEATURE

How to Be an Executive

Don't underestimate the power of creativity when trying to motivate your staff.

By Tevis Gale, founder of Balance Integration

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Part of being an executive is motivating your employees to get the best possible return. One often-overlooked aspect is how encouraging creativity plays a major role.

Recent studies by such esteemed organizations as Gallup and Towers Perrin have validated what many of us observe in our migrations from home to Starbucks to office: Engagement is at an all-time low. Gallup measured that less than 27 percent of U.S. employees are "Truly Engaged," and Towers Perrin reports that the situation is even worse globally. This is bad news, and not just for the folks experiencing such lackluster days. Further research has shown that companies with engaged employees outperform the disengaged at a whopping 17 percent.

For influential leaders within your organization, this information packs a punch. Even though your employees are spending more than half of their waking hours on the job—the U.S. Department of Labor has reported average workdays of 9.1 hours—most of those human hours are in a state we can hardly consider optimal. But before you quit your job and head to Bali to run a T-shirt shop, researchers aren't only focusing on what is wrong. A recent white paper published by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health indicated that the degree to which we use our creativity at work is a sure safeguard against disengagement, low morale, burnout and absenteeism.

The word "creativity" is often bandied about as something for graphic artists, marketers or non-corporate types. But creativity is much more than the ability to put paint to canvas, turn a great phrase or dance. Creativity is the ability and actionability within each of us to bring about something that did not exist before, be it an idea, possibility, strategy or insight. It encompasses problem resolution, visioning, paradigm shifting, and the courage to *not know* a solution the moment a problem or challenge arises, but rather to allow the field of possibilities to exist. Business programs at schools such as Stanford, NYU, Columbia, UCLA and Northwestern all offer creativity in business courses in one shape or another. And with good reason—no matter if your company provides a service, physical product or both, market leadership requires differentiation. Differentiation requires creative discipline.

Creative discipline sounds like an oxymoron, and for good reason. If the creative urge is to bring about the new, heretofore unimagined, what does discipline have to do with urges? Invest a little time with leaders in any field—it's fascinating to hear the stories of how they mastered skills in their given area. A chef begins by learning to cut and chop, an accountant by learning to add and a designer by using the color wheel. But there is another skill being cultivated for

anyone to truly rise to the top of any field: creative discipline. The development of personal creative discipline can help us to avoid replicating the work of those who have gone before us.

With that in mind:

- **Don't know.** Our thinking is dominated by what has been done, what we have seen work before and what we have seen fail. When Bill Gates began his journey to build the empire we now call Microsoft, he did not have certainty as to where he was going or what would happen next. In fact, at each incremental stage of growth, he consistently found himself surprised with what had been realized in revenues, demand and new possibilities. The next time you are confronted with an opportunity of any type, quiet the *knowing* inside of you. Allow yourself to observe the situation without drawing conclusions or applying assumptions. When others approach you looking for answers, instead ask them questions inviting them into the not knowing with you. This will engage *you* in the possibility that whatever you are confronting holds the potential for breakthrough, and it will prompt them to join you on the journey.
- **Acknowledge fear.** There is a voice in your head that says things like, "That will never work," "We don't do those things here," "That's a dumb idea" and "Are you crazy?" It says them liberally both of others and of yourself. This linear, authoritative, drill sergeant-like voice exists as a result of your fear of taking risks, standing out, looking bad, losing face or being somehow judged negatively by others. At its worst you might catch it saying things like "you'll never..." to discourage you from going for what you want, building what you imagine or engaging with others in true creative endeavor. Because creativity requires the unknown, it triggers fear. When you cultivate a discipline of hearing your judgmental, risk-averse voice in your head as purely and simply the voice of fear, you begin to know the true meaning of courage.
- **Look.** Missed creative or paradigm-shifting opportunities are the result of not having paid attention. UPS failed to see the market shift with the advent of overnight and express delivery. The big soft-drink manufacturers had years to figure out water and healthier drink categories and still find themselves scrambling to regain market share because even though the signs were all there, they failed to *look*. Go outside your own function, industry, market research and ways of operating and look at what you see happening in the world. If what you see conflicts with your way of doing business, functioning or processes, you have just identified the next big breakthrough for your organization—no matter how scary that may be.
- **Get dirty.** We all love the easy answer, the obvious choice, the no-brainer. The best practices of creative minds give no more than a nod to the easy answers and then look deeper. Ask endless questions that invite others' knowledge to unfold. Forgo the *yes or no*, and ask *how come*, *why*, *what if* and *how*. You'll be in good company: Einstein valued imagination over knowledge. Edison allowed his dream of the lightbulb the luxury of endless experiments and questions. If you want business as usual, go ahead—rush the process, take the easy answer. But if you want engaged, paradigm-shifting work realities, roll up your sleeves and be ready to get a little dirty with ideas, input and possibilities.

These practices are ideally adopted by entire organizations, not simply the research function or folks in strategy. With the breadth of factors that influence success so complex, both technologically and interactively, this thinking must be adopted from the CEO down to the newest customer service rep. But don't wait for it to happen around you. Don't wait for your company to do it for you. Start with these four disciplines in the midst of your own workday, in

your next team meeting, as you engage in your next friendly banter with a colleague. Like any discipline, creativity takes practice. When viewed in this way, all of life becomes an opportunity to improve your skill.

***Tevis Gale** is a pioneer in the field of work/life satisfaction. In 2001 she founded New York-based Balance Integration Corp., providing work/life balance and creativity tools to corporate America. A faculty member in advanced management studies at NYU's School for Continuing and Professional Studies, Gale has created mindfulness and creativity programs for numerous leading organizations including Google, AOL, Viacom, Yahoo! and Disney.*