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Managing Mad Hatters

Strategies to better manage creative people

Key Learnings:

- Managing creative people is certainly a demanding task
- However, a few simple, practical strategies can simplify the task

Creative people are not the easiest to manage. Since run-of-the-mill management strategies do not apply to this lot, a manager has to think on his feet to get the most out of his creative staff.

As passionate and prolific as they are at work, their creative flair is best nurtured under an umbrella of freedom. However, allowing too much freedom is an invitation for chaos and offering too little is like ringing creativity's death knell.

Striking the right balance is not every manager's cup of tea. Fortunately, there are strategies to help manage even the brattiest of creative people.

Handy strategies for the creative lot

Recruit right

"If creativity is all about seeing things differently, then assembling a group of people who have a mix of nationalities and cultures can spark ideas and generate energy," says Bob Brunner, the head of a creative team. An emphasis on diversity recruiting can take care of this aspect; however, the idea of bringing diverse, creative people together can backfire if "they are not on the same page philosophically," cautions Brunner.

In hiring creative people, it is important to identify what drives their work and assess whether the team's goals can be aligned with the creative flair of the individual.

Freedom within check

A creative process is not linear. Strait-jacketing creative people into pre-assigned roles and positions limits their resourcefulness. In short, creative people cannot be treated the same way as non-creative employees. This however does not imply that they need any special care - only different handling.

As the CEO of a brand strategy firm says, "Creativity is not like an assembly line. It is very stop-start. These are human machines and they break down, get annoyed and get angry."

An ideal way to address this issue is to allow creative people to make their own rules within parameters governed by the management. A chief scientist in a software company helps his team set their own deadlines, but in giving them that freedom he also ensures that they stick to their cut-off dates.



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The fun factor

Being creative on demand can be taxing. Creative employees often complain of emotional and intellectual exhaustion. Since it is not possible to ask them to take a break each time they complain, a way out is to ensure that they get rid of their nervous energy while at work. A great rejuvenator is indulging in fun-filled activities.

A manager once got his team to spend a whole afternoon bombarding each other with rubber rings! Equally important is to foster an environment "where fun is not viewed as goofing off" but as an essential to keeping creativity undamaged.

Getting to the finish line

Once creative people figure out a problem they are quick to get bored and want to move to something new. Keeping them focused on finishing the project at hand can be trying. This nevertheless has to be done or else the organization will find itself with a whole lot of unfinished projects.

Making individuals answerable for their projects from start to finish is an ideal way to ensure that they kick-start projects with creativity, but also go through the boring stuff that is a part of every project.

Shielding talent

Creative people are more vulnerable to criticism because their work is basically a form of personal expression. When criticized for their effort, they often feel let down or dejected and this severely affects their creative flair. Managers must thus justify why certain ideas do not make the grade.

They can also minimize disappointment by ensuring that individuals broadly stick to project objectives and do not get carried away. As an expert says, "Giving boundaries to creatives is not restrictive, it is directive."

In the loop

Creative people may live in a world of their own, but as members of corporate teams they need to know business basics. A manager must keep his creative workers informed about trends in the industry, latest technology and practices, economic developments and customer and market profiles.

Moreover, "the more we can connect them to the real world, the more they are likely to understand some of the decisions that clients make," says a top executive. Managers must get their 'creative recluses' to attend social events such as career fairs, exhibitions and conferences.

Time-off

It is essential to manage creative people such that they remain task-focused for good business. Equally beneficial is allowing them to go on 'creative' vacations, where they get to play around with their ideas without the worries of an objective or deadline.



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These vacations are key to keeping an individual's creative flair intact. The CEO of a software company introduced 'non-directional Fridays' at work to allow programmers to work on projects unrelated to their jobs. A voice-over-Internet server was the product of one such vacation.

"When pressed for time, you do things you know will work because you do not have the opportunity for trail and error," says the CEO. Situations like these breed inspiration and imagination. Therefore, a manager committed to nurturing creativity must ascertain that his team gets regular 'creative' breathers.

Aesthetically inspiring

If the idea for bringing in creative people is to break away from the mundane, then an excellent way to demonstrate support for creativity is to redesign work space.

A look into most offices confirms a fondness for rigid and standard arrangements. But as one executive comments, "This is the wrong place to enforce bureaucratic aesthetic tastes unless you want bureaucratic products and ideas!"

In addition to ergonomically-designed furniture, creative teams work well in bright, roomy and aesthetically designed offices. Back in the early nineties, the computer giant Apple, in an effort to boost creativity, rearranged standard-issue furniture in most of its offices. With partitions out of the way and furniture set at 45-degree angles, the ambience was just right for its design teams to unleash their potential.

Managing creative people, though challenging, can definitely be simplified with the aforementioned strategies. Companies need no longer complain about the eccentric lot!