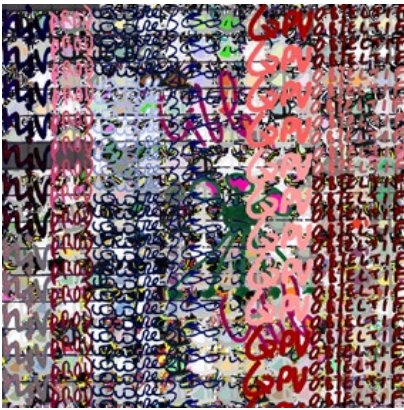


Stimulate creativity in the field

Key management practices to get people's creative juices flowing



Didier Avril, série Storytelling

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

Managing Creative People
Gordon Torr, John Wiley & Sons, 2008,
303 pages.

How to Kill Creativity
Teresa M. Amabile, Harvard Business

How to stimulate the creativity of a business? Many companies try to apply special techniques designed to stimulate creativity, or establish collective thinking initiatives to encourage people to look at problems from an original angle.

Although these approaches can be helpful in getting employees to think creatively, the real issue lies elsewhere. Indeed, the best technique in the world cannot replace one decisive factor in creative performance, namely, the burning desire to tackle a problem, examine it from all angles and explore as many options as necessary to find a new and original solution that represents a real breakthrough.

However, it is not easy to stimulate and maintain this desire. Many proven management practices even tend to create the opposite effect! Research on the phenomenon of creativity points to four specific ways to maximize the creativity of the people in an organization:

- **Recognize and value inventiveness in its own right, rather than the specific results people achieve.**
- **Give people autonomy in their work.**
- **Act in a way that encourages people to persevere in the face of adversity.**
- **Promote high quality standards by establishing feedback mechanisms and a culture of excellence; but do not interfere in the creative process itself.**

In this synopsis...

- 1 Creativity sacrificed in the name of efficiency
- 2 Where does creativity come from?
- 3 What key drivers do managers possess?

1 Creativity sacrificed in the name of efficiency

Most businesses want their employees to be creative. Of course, this expectation is more or less important depending on whether the business in question is advertising or accounting. The need for creative ideas is not restricted to R&D and marketing, however. Most employees today in all fields are expected to be inventive to improve processes, take initiatives in a changing context, or build effective performance metrics.

At the same time, and even more importantly, organizations must be efficient and productive. Indeed, this imperative is what essentially guides most recognized management practices.

When businesses focus purely on efficiency, however, they tend to undermine creativity. The impact of this undesired side effect is often underestimated, as exemplified in the following commonly observed practices:

Pressure people to improve performance

Good managers are often described as being able to get the most out of

people by keeping the right amount of pressure on them. And in fact, when asked, most people reply that they feel more creative when they are under pressure. When their backs are against the wall, they manage to find solutions of which they otherwise never would

Many recognized management practices can be creativity killers.

have dreamed, or so they believe. In reality, however, research shows that this impression is misleading. The study cited in the article *Creativity under the gun* shows that the number of original ideas tends to fall by half on days where people are tight for time. The reason for this is obvious; when the pressure is on, people tend to adopt the first solution that works, thus depriving themselves of the chance to explore riskier options and thereby potentially find more creative ideas.

Motivate people with performance-based bonuses

What could be more rational than to base compensation on performance? Certainly, most companies have established variable compensation practices

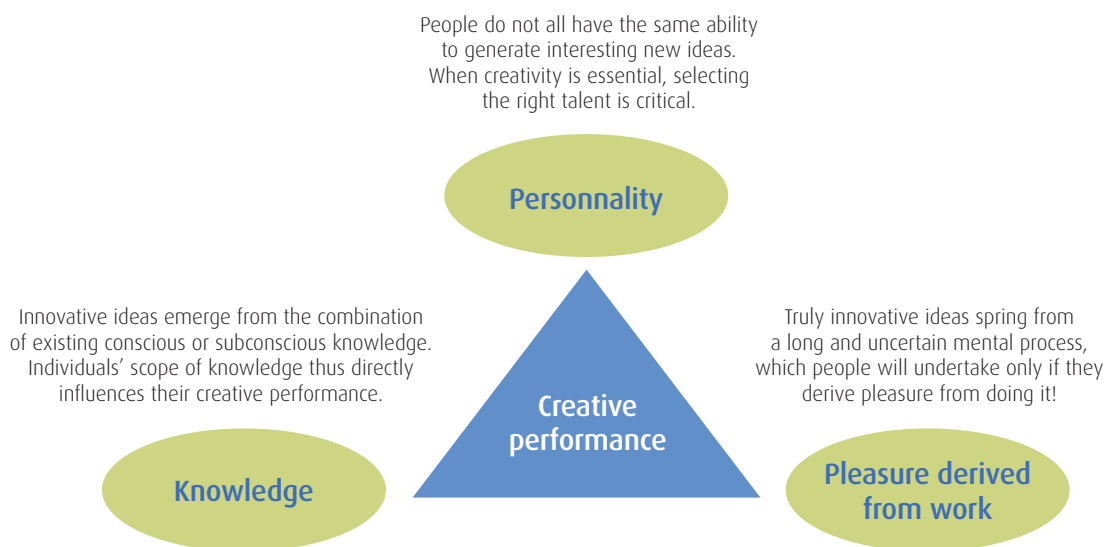
in the form of performance-based bonuses. However, when creativity is at stake, this approach is counterproductive. The author of *Managing Creative People* points out that the best way to destroy original thinking is to link the compensation of creative types to the sales generated as a result of their work. This is also confirmed by psychological studies, which show that people innovate best when they are motivated by the pleasure of creating, rather than a financial reward. For example, someone working for an advertising agency will produce less original work if the goal is to please the client than if he or she is motivated by the simple desire to find an interesting idea.

Use rigorous processes to organize creativity

As a core part of their performance improvement efforts, many businesses have established rigorous processes which they optimize continuously. The temptation is thus great to organize creativity in the same manner, that is, to establish formal processes using proven methods like lateral thinking, participative design or brainstorming. Yet, experience and research show that although formally organizing the generation of ideas may help a group

FIGURE A The decisive factors of creative performance

An individual's creative performance depends on three main factors:



Based on *How to kill creativity*, Teresa M. Amabile, Harvard Business Review, September 1998 and *Managing Creative People*, Gordon Torr, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

of people move away from the beaten path, nothing can replace the subconscious intellectual exploration that leads to most creative breakthroughs. In fact, formally organizing work methods removes the autonomy required for true creativity.

So under these circumstances, how to reconcile creativity and efficiency? The studied authors examine the phenomenon of creative thought and draw conclusions on the best way to facilitate this process.

2 Where does creativity come from?

How to generate ideas that are both original and relevant? Psychologists explain this phenomenon as a mental process in which conscious and subconscious knowledge is combined in

Creativity depends to a large extent on the pleasure derived from tackling a creative challenge.

an original manner to find completely new solutions—whether the “problem” under consideration is artistic, scientific or practical in nature.

In the article *How to kill creativity*, Teresa Amabile, researcher and teacher at the Harvard Business School, identifies three key factors that influence individual creativity (Figure A):

Personality

All human beings are endowed with creativity. However, different people possess it to different degrees, akin to logical intelligence. What is more, the level possessed by individuals is as difficult to change as their IQ. Psychologists explain creativity as a mental ability to consider several ideas simultaneously, and specifically to fluidly combine imagination with practical thinking. Now, all individuals do not possess this ability to the same degree. For instance, neurologists have discovered physiological reactions that are highly specific to creative challenges. In certain individuals, the cerebral

cortex becomes highly stimulated, narrowing the focus to a small number of thoughts. In others, however, the cortex becomes less excited, making it easier to combine different thoughts and thus generate original ideas.

That is why creativity techniques are useful, but secondary, tools. They can be helpful in tackling problems from original angles or facilitating group discussions, but are of marginal use to truly creative individuals. In short, if a company absolutely needs creative people, nothing beats selecting the right talent.

Scope of knowledge

The second differentiating factor is linked to the individual's scope of knowledge. Original ideas effectively emerge from the combination of existing knowledge. It follows then that the richer and more diversified the “library” of conscious or subconscious knowledge possessed by an individual, the more likely the latter is to generate interesting new ideas. Erudition, curiosity and experience are consequently great assets for creativity, so long as the person in question has not become locked into rigid thought patterns.

Pleasure in one's work

The third factor lies in the motivation of the individual. More precisely, it concerns the person's intrinsic motivation, that is, the inherent satisfaction derived from creative research, as opposed to extrinsic motivation, for which creativity is considered merely a means to attain another goal, e.g., financial security, renown, etc. An illustration of this can be seen in the difference between an engineer excited by the challenge of developing a pollution-free process, and another who sees the timely development of a process that meets standards as a way to get promoted. Several studies have pointed out that creative performance within an otherwise uniform group of artists or scientists is closely correlated to intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation effectively drives people to seize upon the first solution that works, whereas intrinsic motivation drives them to continue searching, just for the fun of it!

3 What key drivers do managers possess?

The key drivers available to managers are directly correlated to the three factors that determine individual creativity.

The first key driver, which concerns the personality of employees, is the most difficult to implement. Except in creative professions, recruitment criteria cannot focus primarily on the possession of a creative personality, not to mention the fact that this quality is quite difficult to assess. Even so, it is helpful to keep in mind that creative personalities are generally quite nonconformist.

A second key driver concerns employees' scope of knowledge, which naturally depends on their experience, open-mindedness and curiosity. It is possible to push people in the right direction by stimulating the variety and richness of experience with which they are confronted (Figure B).

The third essential driver is linked to management practices. The pleasure derived from work tends to have a decisive impact on creative performance in general, and even more so when an individual is creative. Now, studies show that people enjoy themselves primarily when they sense they can fully use their abilities to make progress on a task that is worth the effort. Creating this feeling requires a certain number of conditions over which leaders and managers have a decisive influence:

► Direct the right challenges to the right people

To capitalize fully upon their creativity, your employees must be internally driven to tackle a stimulating challenge. Managers can stimulate this feeling by doing the following:

Demand remarkable work, rather than results

Managers who want people to be creative should articulate their expectations in terms that not only encourage them to produce results, but also to do work that is intrinsically remarkable,

creatively speaking. For example, when laying out expectations in the field of advertising, it is best not to ask a creative individual to satisfy the client, but rather express the challenge as beating the best campaigns in the industry. Otherwise, the person will probably come up with ideas that will please the client because they look like what the

Creativity peaks when people feel internally driven to tackle a challenge.

latter has known and liked in the past, rather than breakthrough ideas that will set the client apart on the market. In general, try to focus creative types on the pleasure of doing “great work,” and encourage them not to settle for the first solution that is “good enough.”

Carefully articulate objectives to avoid having to amend them later

Objectives should be articulated in such a way that they do not need to be described more precisely or revised down the road. If objectives are reframed after the fact, intrinsic motivation can suffer. This is much like changing the configuration of a labyrinth while someone is exploring it. Such changes give creative individuals

the impression they are wasting their time, or do not have the autonomy they need to produce truly excellent work.

Select people motivated by creative challenges

The motivation to tackle a given challenge varies significantly depending on the individual, and motivation has a decisive influence on creative performance. So managers should take the time to get to know their employees well, and try to understand what they find stimulating or boring. They should also be aware of the reflex to “maximize efficiency” by entrusting new projects to the first available resources.

Carefully construct teams

Research on creativity has demonstrated that innovative ideas are generally the product of individual thinking, or a dialogue between two people, rather than a collective effort. Yet, in many fields, many forms of expertise must be combined to produce a useable result. The collective momentum of those involved thus plays a major role. The most effective teams are those that contain individuals with different profiles who truly respect and support one another. This team spirit is essential for Pixar studios, which has repeatedly produced extremely creative animated

features, such as Toy Story, Antz, Finding Nemo, Ratatouille, etc. Before launching production on a film, Pixar begins with an “incubation phase,” in which a small team organized around a director develops a draft project intended to serve as the basis for a go/no go decision on production. The key criterion used for this decision is not so much the quality of the draft project itself—which is too vague at this stage to be decisive—but specifically the quality of team momentum observed during the incubation phase.

► Let people take their time when innovating

Coming up with a good, original idea takes time in order to study the problem thoroughly and explore different options whose outcome is uncertain. Time is therefore needed to innovate.

Avoid rushing people

Researchers observe that rushing people does not stimulate creativity, except in rare cases when it is obvious that the stakes are high and the deadline is imperative. Outside these rare instances, excessive pressure kills creativity, because people who are in a hurry try to find a solution quickly. They consequently do not take the

FIGURE B Enrich individual knowledge repertory

Creative ideas arise from the combination of existing conscious or subconscious knowledge. Managers therefore benefit from enriching the reservoir of knowledge of their employees.

What direction?	How?
The repertory of knowledge can be expanded in three directions: • By refining knowledge in a specific field. The depth of expertise in one's field is a major asset. Studying “the masters” is critical for creative individuals. • By drawing comparisons with adjacent fields. Generated ideas are generally more relevant when they are based on a refined understanding of the repercussions beyond their immediate application. E.g.: Marketing impact of a technical choice. • By exploring fields with no connection to one's domain of expertise. Exploring ways of thinking or approaches very different from one's experience provides an opportunity to look at problems from a new and productive angle.	Many different approaches are possible: • Training • Professional conferences • Conferences given by people outside the person's domain of expertise (philosophers, artists, scientists, sports champions, etc.) • Periodic assignments outside the person's domain of expertise • Participation in multidisciplinary work groups • Circulation of information on projects or work in fields adjacent to the person's domain of expertise • Encouragement and support to take on extracurricular projects

time to explore different possibilities and come up with more original ideas. Companies that want their employees to be creative must therefore allow them to take their time to “toy” with the problem.

Grant real autonomy

Autonomy is essential for people to feel intrinsically motivated. In other words, to derive pleasure from creative research, people need to have the feeling they are advancing to the fullest of their abilities without superfluous constraints. When creative personalities

People must feel free to explore different options.

are involved, because they are generally quite independent, this becomes even more important!

Managers must thus resist the temptation to interfere in organizing the work, even with regard to aspects that seem as trivial as the time spent at the office. Some people feel much

more productive in the middle of the night! The resources needed for innovation must also be provided to keep people from spending more time on finding resources—such as the right equipment—than they do on creative research. (Figure C)

Protect people from destructive interference

A major obstacle to creative performance is constant interference that can disturb the flow of thinking. Many famous artists thus isolated themselves in order to concentrate on their work. In a business setting, people must be protected from the overload connected with secondary tasks, meetings or obligatory participation in committees. Kim Scott, director at Google, warns against counter-productive good intentions, such as committees to organize interdepartmental cooperation. SCPF, a Spanish advertising agency known for its high level of creativity, even physically separates its creative staff from the rest of the organization to keep them from being disturbed by the

commercial side of the business and to give them the peace and quiet they need to think.

Provide support and encouragement

Tackling a creative challenge is a long and demanding process, which can be achieved only through perseverance. Management has a critical role to play to maintain the motivation needed to persevere.

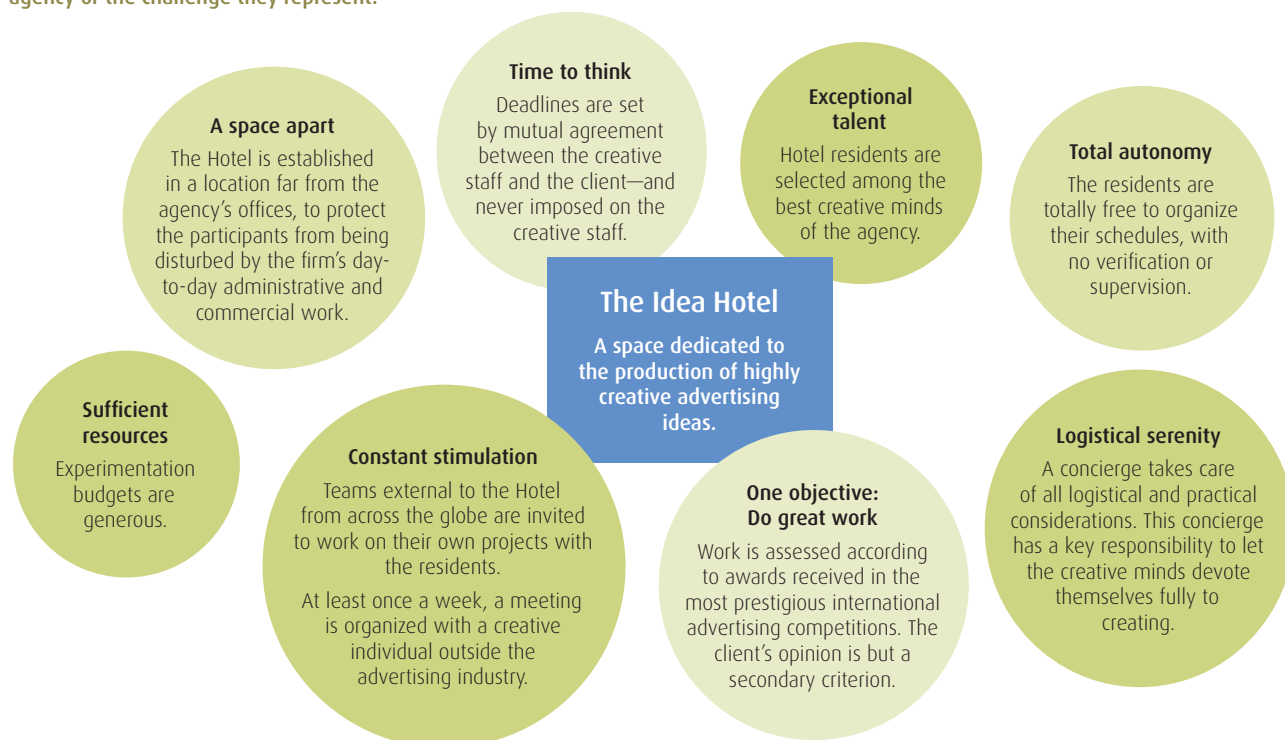
Show interest in the work

The creative process goes through ups and downs, and people can easily become discouraged. To keep them sufficiently motivated to continue exploring, creative individuals must have the feeling that their work is important to someone.

A critical asset in this task is availability and an appreciative ear. Managers must demonstrate their interest in conversations requested by the concerned individuals to talk about their progress.

FIGURE C A creativity lab: The Idea Hotel at J. Walter Thomson

The Idea Hotel, implemented at the J. Walter Thomson advertising agency, illustrates the application of management principles the most suited to creativity. This is a space gathering the best creative minds, to whom are entrusted projects selected for their importance to the agency or the challenge they represent.



Based on *Managing Creative People*, Gordon Torr, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

On these occasions, they should watch their reactions and any criticism they may want to share. In particular, it is important to realize that creative ideas are initially extremely fragile. New ideas are usually imperfectly formed at first.

Creativity needs encouragement.

They need to be developed and refined before they can stand up to serious criticism. Managers must therefore be careful not to make snap judgments, which may seem harmless, but which can easily be taken as hurtful, and sap the motivation to explore a path that might have been promising.

Liberate people from the fear of failure

The fear of failure is one of the surest ways to block creativity. Not only does it take away the pleasure derived from the exploratory process, but also makes people afraid to venture off the beaten path. Management must thus make failure acceptable, while maintaining high quality expectations. To do this, the quality of work and the results

obtained must be clearly distinguished. Quality must be the only criterion upon which success is judged and recognition granted. Otherwise, people will rapidly start to focus on obtaining acceptable results at the expense of creativity. Failure must also be visibly seen as a valuable learning opportunity. Ed Catmull, CEO of Pixar, asserts that conducting systematic and balanced post-project analyses – for example, identifying five things that should be generalized as good practices and five things never to do again – forces people to tackle failure constructively.

Recognize quality work

The danger of indexing bonuses on the results obtained from creative efforts has already been evoked. Indeed, such systems tend to replace intrinsic motivation—the desire to do good work—with extrinsic motivation, i.e., the desire to meet someone else's expectations. What concretely happens is that creative performance plummets.

Companies can still reward creative individuals occasionally to recognize the quality of remarkable work. Two conditions are required, however, to keep extrinsic motivation from

taking priority. First, the individuals in question must not expect to receive such bonuses as a normal part of their compensation. Second, the reward must clearly be linked to the intrinsic quality of their creative work and not commercial results.

Rely on “patrons”

Many famous artists have had “patrons,” not only for financial support, which was sometimes secondary, but especially for moral support. The patrons believed in them and were able to encourage them at critical moments.

The author of *Managing Creative People* suggests trying to duplicate this phenomenon in fields where creativity is essential—advertising, R&D, etc. He underlines that relatively rare personal qualities are required to play the role of the patron effectively (Figure D). Good patrons must be able to serve as an interface between creative individuals and the rest of the business. He suggests putting patrons into a functional role to both facilitate regular exchanges with creative individuals and offer them direct access to top management whenever they must plead a cause.

FIGURE D A precious supporter: the patron

The works of many artists owe a lot to the support of patrons, who provided the moral support needed to take their work to fruition. Organizations that depend on creative minds should take inspiration from this model to optimize their performance.

The role of patrons

Patrons are individuals who play a particularly beneficial role thanks to a rare combination of faculties:

- They understand creative people better than the latter understand themselves;
- They know how to inspire creative individuals to give their best;
- They are excellent intermediaries between “creative” and “business” interests.

Who are patrons?

Gordon Torr suggests using the following litmus test: “Patrons are the rare non-creative types for whom creative people will buy a beer.” More seriously, patrons possess the following characteristics:

- They are sincerely interested in what creative people produce, and not just in attracting their friendship or favors;
- They are very independent-minded;
- They have the courage of their opinions;
- They know when to be silent and reserve their judgment out of respect for the creative work;
- They are impassioned by what creative people produce, more than by their own career.

Based on *Managing Creative People*, Gordon Torr, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

► Push people to give their personal best without interfering

Granting people full autonomy can seem risky. How to keep people from goofing off and gradually becoming disconnected from the needs of their clients, when they are exclusively focused on the pleasure of their work? If left to their own devices, won't these creative geniuses end up producing unusable advertising, or sophisticated software features that users don't need, etc.? There are several ways to prevent this from happening:

Promote a culture of excellence

A key driver of performance consists in instilling a culture of excellence. Whereas creative individuals may be indifferent to the opinion of customers or superiors, they are more sensitive to their peers' scientific, technical, or artistic assessment of their work and the resulting impact on their professional reputation. Management can leverage this sensitivity by instilling a culture of excellence and high quality standards that maximize the quality of work produced. For example, in the

Idea Hotel established at the J. Walter Thomson advertising agency, the sole standard for judging creative work is derived from the awards received at renowned international advertising contests. Similarly, one of the acts defining the acceptable level of quality at Pixar was the last-minute change in

A culture of excellence pushes people to give their best while giving them the autonomy to be creative.

the team working on *Toy Story 2*. This radical decision, made on a project with an extremely tight timeline, clearly underlined the fact that it was simply unacceptable to launch a mediocre film.

Instill feedback mechanisms

A second approach consists in allowing creative individuals to receive feedback from sources they recognize as legitimate. For instance, the SAS software house provides developers with a regular compilation of feedback from users and asks them to address the main complaints during the following year. At the Idea Hotel, J. Walter Thomson creative staff can have their ongoing work critiqued by qualified

colleagues. Pixar established the "Brain Trust" (Figure E), a high-level team that can be consulted by film directors for comments and reactions on the challenges they face. These non-intrusive mechanisms help to guide efforts without challenging the autonomy of those involved.

• • • •

Creativity demands a specific context, in which people truly want to accomplish something new and unusual, just for the fun of it! Depending on the issues involved, it may be necessary to adapt normal management practices, which are often focused on efficiency at the expense of creative performance.

FIGURE E Supporting creative performance: Pixar's "Brain Trust"

A golden rule is to avoid interfering with creative minds, and let them do their work in peace. Under these conditions, how to give input and feedback to promote high quality?

The "Brain Trust" established by Pixar studios is an enlightening response to this dilemma.

How it works

The "Brain Trust" is a group of the top nine creative talents at Pixar. Whenever the director of a film feels the need, he or she can meet with this group to present his or her project in its current state. This presentation is followed by two hours of frank discussion, focused on how to make the project as successful as possible.

Keys to success

- The director of the film calls the group to meet when he or she feels the need. This is not a review imposed by someone else.
- The director has complete freedom to decide whether or not to follow the group's advice, and thus keeps the independence required to do the job. This also makes it easier for the group members to express themselves freely, as they do not have to assume the role of decision maker.
- The group is composed of individuals who respect and appreciate one another professionally; discussions can thus be simple, direct, and to the point.

Based on *How Pixar Fosters Collective Creativity*, Ed Catmull, Harvard Business Review, septembre 2008.

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

Managing Creative People

Gordon Torr, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.



Gordon Torr was creative director for the Middle East and Asia for J. Walter Thomson, one of the world's largest advertising agencies. In a very personal and lively style, he shares his often passionate convictions on how to organize the production of creative ideas. Although the book is about purely creative businesses, mainly in the fields of advertising and entertainment, it offers enlightening insights on managing creativity in general.

The way the book is written may initially be confusing to readers used to rigorously structured management books; locating the key messages takes some effort. The author's depth of knowledge and wry style will make this search enjoyable, however.

The first half of the book is dedicated to understanding the creative personality. The main messages are found in chapters 5 to 7. Here you will find not only the findings of psychological and neurological research, but also the perspective of the author, who helps put a finger on the mindset of truly creative individuals, as well as a fairly biting critique of those who assert that anyone can become a creative genius with the help of a few techniques.

The second half concerns the management of creative organizations, and this topic is explored at length from different angles. In particular, chapter 13 examines the most creative cities and civilizations; and chapter 15 underlines the importance of intrinsic motivation, as well as includes a deep criticism of the direction taken by the BBC. Chapters 16 and 17 summarize the essential lessons, and are well complemented by chapter 18 on the role of patrons.

And also...

We also relied on the following publications:

- **How to kill creativity**, Teresa M. Amabile, Harvard Business Review, September 1998.
The critical importance of intrinsic motivation, and its impact on getting employees to give their creative best.
- **Inner work life**, Teresa Amabile, Steven J. Kramer, Harvard Business Review, May 2007.
The critical importance of enjoyment of work for creative performance.
- **How Pixar fosters collective creativity**, Ed Catmull, Harvard Business Review, September 2008.
Management practices underlying the repeated creative success of Pixar studios.
- **Creativity and the role of the leader**, Teresa Amabile, Mukti Khaire, Harvard Business Review, October 2008.
A report on a colloquium of business leaders whose success depends on creativity.
- **Creativity under the gun**, Teresa Amabile, Constance N. Hadley, Steven J. Kramer, Harvard Business Review, August 2002.
A study of the relationship between time pressure and creativity.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- **The Creative Company**, Sam Stern, Alan G. Robinson, Les Éditions d'Organisation, 2000. (Book and Manageris synopsis 92b)
Create the right conditions to generate new ideas in a business.
- **New Ideas about New Ideas**, Shira P. White, G. Patton Wright, Perseus, 2002. (Book and Manageris synopsis 106b)
The point of view of leaders of companies known for their creativity.
- **When Sparks Fly**, Dorothy A. Leonard, Harvard Business School Press, 1999. (Book and Manageris synopsis 80b)
Organize the creativity of a work group.
- **Serious Creativity**, Edward de Bono, Harper Collins, 1994. (Book and Manageris synopsis 27b)
Creativity techniques inspired by the concept of "lateral thinking."
- **Lateral Marketing**, Philip Kotler, Fernando Trias de Bes, Jossey-Bass, 2003. (Book and Manageris synopsis 121b)
Application of lateral thinking techniques to creativity in marketing.

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