

How to CULTIVATE, not KILL

Creative Thinking

By Dr. Donna Goldstein

Recently I sat with fifteen South Florida business leaders at a civic association board meeting. A committee chair took the floor to present his committee's ideas.

The artillery fell into place. Not one minute after he opened his mouth, the shots rang out, led by the board chair:

Bamm! "That'll take too much work."

Pow! "That won't make enough money."

Kaboom! "No one's ever done that before."

Kerpow! "Someone's already tried that."

By the time this painful exercise was completed, the presenter, slumped and dejected, returned to his seat, attempting to save face after the onslaught.

In this brief interchange, one of the key deterrents to creative thinking in business was aptly demonstrated: the use of killer phrases. If you want your staff (or in this case committee members) to bring you effective and original ideas, don't make the same mistake.

People's ideas are like their children. Tell someone that their baby is ugly, and they probably won't bring it around to see you again. Later, we'll discuss more constructive ways to have handled this situation.

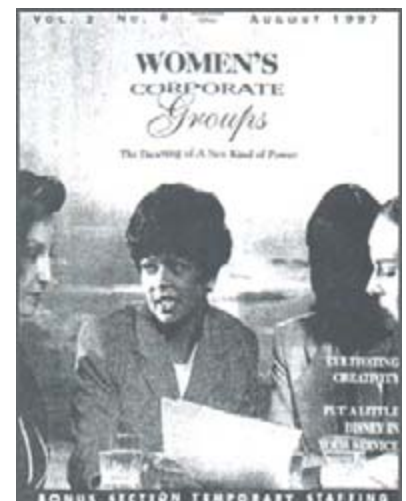
The research of Harvard's Teresa Amabile suggests that many factors can undermine motivation and kill creativity in the workplace. For instance, a lack of support, faith, or interest in a project; employees who are constantly watched as they work; employees that have come to expect negative critical judgment; too much competition, which can shut down communication.

To create a climate where innovation and effective problem solving will flourish, managers must create an environment where employees and their ideas are valued.

Keys to a creative environment

➔ **Provide challenging work, operational autonomy and freedom to try new ways of performing tasks.** This may be especially difficult for a manager who formerly held the employee's job.

In 'Team Creativity' (the excellent CRM training video) a cross-functional problem-solving team arrives in their training room to find the operational process chart mistakenly placed upside down. This sparks ideas and helps them propose a solution that would cut the stages of the complex process in half.



➡ **Wherever possible, allow for flexibility, fun, and individuality in the work environment.** Studies have shown that not all people do their best work at 8:00 am. Some would work better between noon and 8:00 pm — or even midnight!

Employees who are given the opportunity to personalize their work stations will express themselves more freely.

Companies like Ben and Jerry's place a high value on humor and camaraderie.

➡ **Create an atmosphere where innovation is prized, and there is room for failure.** These must go hand-in-hand for value to be learned from mistakes.

There's a story about a man who made an error, which cost his company \$100,000. Called into the CEO's office, he queried, "You're going to fire me, aren't you?" The CEO replied, "Fire you? I just spent \$100,000 to train you!"

Find ways to celebrate and make heroes out of people who propose new and different ways of solving problems and exceeding your customers' expectations.

➡ **Provide sufficient resources, including time, money, equipment, information, staff and budget.** Forward thinking companies consider every member of the organization part of the research and development team.

3M employees can spend up to \$100 cash on any idea or process related to their job, without further approval.

Stephen Covey advocates moving organizations from a continuous crisis mode to one where proactive thinking is valued

➡ **Defer judgment and encourage the free flow of ideas and possibilities.**

Imagine the response to the very first suggestion that instead of traditional framed eyeglasses, the corrective lens could be placed directly on the eye. Of course, now contact lenses are disposable and anyone can have Elizabeth Taylor's eyes.

These are examples of continuing to adapt and improve an already acceptable idea. Judgment and analysis are critical to problem solving. However, if they're applied too early in the process, as in the story of the committee report, the seeds of creative ideas are cut down before they can germinate.

➡ **Provide training for staff at all levels in creative thinking and problem solving and encourage all staff to continuously be on the lookout for ways to improve your product or service.**

Employees in Japan contribute an average of 64 improvement ideas per year, compared to about 1.5 per year for U.S. employees.

Make it an important part of every employee's job to help the organization find new and better ways of achieving your goals.

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solving problems and exceeding your customer's expectations.**

So, what else could the Board Chair have done during the committee report? Several of the ideas might have held promise. He could have looked for the value or opportunity in each of the ideas. He could have asked, "What's good about this idea?" "Could it be adapted or modified to work for us?" "How could we overcome ...(a challenge presented)?"

Sometimes combining two seemingly disparate ideas can create synergy, such as Hollywood's Sushi Blues Bar or Duds and Suds Laundry/Pubs.

Most importantly, he could have listened attentively, withheld critical comments until the speaker had finished his report, and responded, "I really appreciated the energy and thought your committee put into these ideas. Let's look at some ways we can make them work."

That would have ensured a committee, which would have enthusiastically presented and implemented even better suggestions in the months to come.

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