



## HOW TO BUILD A more creative business

Your firm can be just as innovative as any Silicon Valley unicorn, argues **Chris Griffiths**, CEO of OpenGenius and co-author of *The Creative Thinking Handbook*. He recommends practical steps to get the juices flowing at companies of all shapes and sizes

Illustration Blok Magnaye



AS A BUSINESS BUZZWORD, "creativity" continues to reign supreme, all too often bandied about without any substantial meaning attached to it. Creativity has become the quality on which many a leader will pin their hopes and dreams. It's hardly surprising that it has gained hallowed status when tech giants such as Amazon, Apple and Google are lauded for their core creative values.

Yet the way we think about creativity in the workplace is often flawed. Viewing it as elusive and/or transient can prevent us from achieving it at all. We don't approach other important qualities – for instance, leadership, teamwork and problem-solving – in this way. We know these are tangible skills that can be practised and refined. So why should creativity, which is key to growing a business, be any different?

To build a more creative enterprise, you must first blow away the fluff that usually surrounds it. Doing so enables the business to focus on the practical measures required to unlock its creative potential.

### 1 ELIMINATE THE FEAR FACTOR

Taking purely superficial measures in order to instil a creative culture won't work.

Too many business leaders have had their offices repainted in primary colours and furnished with beanbags in the vain hope that apeing Google's approach to workplace decor might somehow make them just as successful too.

To unleash your employees' creativity, you need to show them how to shift into a creative mindset. Do this by explicitly making an "anything is possible" ideology one of the firm's core values. In doing so, you may need to overhaul the way your organisation handles blame. Fear is the single greatest inhibitor of creativity. People think that failure and success are opposites when these are actually part of the same process. Mistakes facilitate success because of the lessons they teach us. The need to deal with problems is simply a side effect of progress.

### 2 LEARN HOW TO BRAINSTORM PROPERLY

Brainstorming is a key element of creativity because it's about carving out a block of time with the sole purpose of generating ideas. But many exponents of this method don't follow best practice. People must first be allowed to work on their ideas alone before the group session, so that they already know what they want to suggest when they come together. It's crucial that your thinking isn't initially influenced by others. This approach will also remove any temptation for people to simply "wing it" on the spot.

Brainstorming shouldn't be treated as a one-off event. Holding a series of short sessions is more likely to reap profitable ideas, because this gives time for everyone's thoughts to incubate between them. Stepping away is positive, because it lets your mind really get to work – ideas tend to form in the bathroom better than they do in the boardroom, after all.

### 3 BEWARE OF COGNITIVE BIAS

Common innate biases can impair our creative abilities, often without our knowledge. The three biggest culprits are: reactive thinking (responding to an idea or event without thoroughly considering the consequences); selective thinking (the tendency to favour our own ideas and pet projects); and assumptive thinking (accepting statements as true when there's no material evidence to back them up). Metacognition – or "thinking about thinking" – can radically improve how a business makes creative decisions.

Reporting on their landmark 11-year study in 1992, Harvard professors John Kotter and James Heskett noted that the average net income of companies they considered to have "performance-enhancing cultures" grew by 756 per cent over that period. That contrasted starkly with a one per cent increase for firms they deemed to have no such culture.



*The Creative Thinking Handbook: Your step-by-step guide to problem-solving in business*, by Chris Griffiths and Melina Costi, is out now, published by Kogan Page

Studies such as theirs really shed light on the bottom-line impact that reframing our thinking can have when it's done throughout an organisation.

### 4 PRACTISE KAIZEN

People in business often talk about "disruptive innovation". This is undeniably important to creative businesses, but firms often wrongly view disruption as something that

happens in short bursts. The application of creativity is an ongoing process. That's why kaizen – the act of continual improvement – is essential.

Non-creative companies are static; they simply keep doing what they've always done. The kaizen mindset is about constantly challenging the status quo and questioning why and how things are done. This can be especially hard for leaders, as employees are generally less likely to give them their honest opinion if the truth is unpalatable. Combat this by reframing your questions. Don't ask: "What do you think of this idea?" Instead, try: "What's wrong with this idea?" This should encourage people to say what they really think.

### 5 BECOME AN OPTIMISTIC INNOVATOR

While some people view optimists as naive, research by Barbara Fredrickson, professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina, has found that positive emotions enhance the attributes most closely associated with creativity. Inquisitiveness, awareness and playfulness all flourish when you're feeling optimistic.

Pessimism is linked with a "fixed mindset", which sees change as futile or impossible. Optimism is associated with the "growth mindset" that's necessary for seeing potential in ideas and people. While pessimists may brood over their mistakes, optimists are quick to recover and – armed with the lessons they've learnt – try again. Regardless of your natural inclination, you need to weave optimism into your leadership style if you want to build a truly creative business. **d.**