



How can school leaders nurture creativity?

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continues his series on management.

This article is the ninth in a ten-part series that examines some of the key concepts that leaders of private language schools might find useful to be familiar with.

Introduction

One of the challenges that leaders of private language schools face is that of enabling employees to harness their creativity in order to come up with innovative solutions to problems within the organisation and the industry it forms a part of. Besides understanding why creativity plays a vital role in an organisation's performance, school

leaders must be able to identify the most effective ways of leveraging employee's creative behaviour.

Organisational performance

A number of studies highlight the relationship between creativity and organisational performance. Employee creativity is shown to partially mediate the relationship between firm performance and knowledge processes; a knowledge-intensive work culture strengthens the relationship between these processes and creativity (Imran *et al.*, 2018). Together with dynamic capability, creativity has been shown to significantly and positively

affect a firm's performance and contribute to its competitive advantage (Ferreira *et al.*, 2018). Likewise, Munizu and Hamid (2018) demonstrate that creativity positively affects innovation within a firm and its business performance.

The role of leadership

School leadership can stimulate employee creativity when it addresses people's need for achievement, their work engagement and psychological empowerment, and their need to thrive at work. In addition, employee creativity is facilitated by a higher level of leader-member exchange, an ethical disposition on the part of

leaders, and a leader's ability to promote employees' organisation-based self-esteem and to provide them with the resources they require.

Creativity can be enhanced by motivating employees, addressing their need for self-belief and cultivating their emotional intelligence, as well as catering for their need for meaning and purpose in life (Whitmore, 2002). When leaders conceive of creativity as something that can be developed in every single employee, a school can maximise its creative output. Achieving this entails building people's confidence in their own ability to be creative and training them to utilise new ways to perceive issues, come up with solutions and communicate (Goodman, 1995).

For these reasons, a person's chosen leadership style should be characterised by openness, respect and trust, since these qualities help to foster idea generation via the creative imagination (Burton, 2009). Transformational leadership, in particular, plays a pivotal role in fostering employee creativity. It does so through the mediating function of a number of variables, including team conflict and knowledge sharing, personal control and creative personality, and an innovation-supportive climate. Employee creativity is positively affected by a number of elements of transformational leadership, including idealised influence, individualised consideration, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation.

Creativity within organisational culture

Enabling talented people to work together to create something bigger than they could individually involves designing an organisational culture within a school that encourages them to support one another and to feel that it is safe to communicate with anyone when sharing new ideas (Kremer *et al.*, 2019). Since creative thinking is engendered by the interplay between individuals and organisations (Rickards *et al.*, 2009), it is important to introduce an element of flexibility within an organisation's structures (Bäcklander, 2019). This is because providing creative people with the space and freedom to grapple with challenges can spur them

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to maximise their productivity (Goffee & Jones, 2009).

Even though fostering creativity in an organisation is somewhat challenging, most private language schools increasingly recognise how vital it is to do so given the competitiveness and instability of the industry they operate in. One means by which employee creativity can be enhanced is through the use of a reward for creativity programme, which links creativity to extrinsic rewards like monetary incentives, promotion and recognition by management (Li *et al.*, 2018). Such programmes are effective in enhancing creative performance when they focus on developing employees' perceptions of potential for gain, growth or mastery (Li *et al.*, 2018). Correspondingly, firms that develop entrepreneurial corporate cultures, that encourage employees to create and exploit new ideas, are capable of generating a sustainable competitive advantage (Acebo & Viltard, 2018). This might entail boosting team cohesion and collective task engagement, both of which determine a team's creative performance (Rodríguez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2017). Lastly, it must be borne in mind that even though employee creativity and overall job performance are positively related, the former is negatively affected by supervisor undermining, which indirectly impinges on performance (Eissa *et al.*, 2017).

Creativity education

Since we started from the premise that creativity is essential for the success of any school and the performance of its employees, then it is vital to consider how creativity can be formally developed in the people that work within an organisation. Even though creativity education is a means of doing this and of

enhancing employees' creative thinking and motivational attributes (Dessie & Ademe, 2017), it is unlikely that many private language schools actually provide such support. In fact, research shows that 80% of companies rarely offer their employees structured education aimed at developing their innovation capacities (Michaelis & Markham, 2017). Similarly, Birdi (2016:298–312) shows that only 19% of organisations from a range of sectors provide some form of creativity or innovation education to their members.

An education programme that addresses employees' creativity can start by determining what their perceptions of creativity are and encouraging them to identify the factors and obstacles that influence it (Lau, 2016). This is important because self-perceived limitations, fear and negative personal judgement go counter to creative self-belief (Homayoun & Henriksen, 2018). Trainees can then be shown how to use creative thinking techniques systematically, focusing in particular on their ability to engage in divergent thinking, convergent thinking and creative problem-solving (Ritter & Mostert, 2017). A focus on cognitive approaches has been shown to lead to improvements in creativity via cognitive flexibility (Ritter & Mostert, 2017). Another important outcome of creativity education should be trainees' ability to demonstrate creative awareness. This is a metacognitive skill that enables them to understand which ideas work and which ones do not, which allows for strategic responses (Valgeirsdottir & Onarheim, 2017). Creativity education should be lengthy and relatively challenging; it should also enable trainees to practise the application of the abovementioned cognitive skills even with regards to their own real-life challenges (Birdi, 2016).



Conclusion

When leaders of private language schools appreciate the value of developing their employees' creativity, they are in a better position to use their power and influence to cultivate creative behaviour. By means of appropriate leadership practices, a supportive organisational culture and creativity education programmes, school leaders are able to nurture creativity for the purpose of enhancing organisational performance.

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