

## Strengthening Creativity, Innovation, and Imagination in the Company

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Much has been said about the importance of innovation: innovative ideas, directions, and products. We tend to expect innovative ideas to come from our most senior, seasoned contributors and their inner circles. This is, of course, far from the only source available to us. Useful ideas—sometimes breakthrough ideas—can come from production workers, junior engineers, managers, sales people whose customers talk to them—indeed from people anywhere in the company. Often people in such positions assume that their ideas are of no interest to the company, and will not be heard. This assumption can get in the way of people's wish to innovate. We should, instead, create an atmosphere in which innovative thought about all aspects of the company is known by every member to be valuable, and recognized by the company, and people feel safe enough to play with ideas, and take some risks. Some companies to whom scientific or engineering innovation is particularly important, for example, have established two separate promotion tracks: technical, and management. The existence of these tracks indicates to employees that their company values technical innovation, and it contributes to the perception that innovation is attended to and recognized.

The problem of enhancing innovation in an organization is often approached at the individual person level, and only occasionally at the team level and the systemic level. We at GLS believe that we have to pay attention to all three, *with emphasis on the team and organizational levels*. We are somewhat skeptical about the effectiveness of training approaches at the individual level—and we know that such approaches are very costly. Nevertheless, any useful approach to innovation has to take into account the conditions under which people are more innovative. So we will begin there.

### *The individual level:*

People are more likely to be innovative and creative when they:

- feel encouraged to invent
- feel valued by their peers and superiors
- experience relatively low stress (when the perceived personal costs of making the “wrong” choice is not high, and/or the likelihood of making a poor decision is low)
- feel safe enough to try out new approaches to problems and new ways of thinking about them
- feel safe enough to make mistakes, can ask questions that will reveal their uncertainty or ignorance, and are not apprehensive about being criticized or devalued
- are encouraged to “back up” and re-define the problem at hand
- witness others wrestling with and trying out new approaches
- have time and space to “play” with ideas, alone or with others, and are not overwhelmed by routine work and deadlines

- can ask others for help

*The group/team level:*

Teams and project groups are more likely to be innovative and creative when they:

- Are aware of their interdependence
- Routinely share information about what is going on in their projects
- Share a clear understanding of the problems to be solved, and do periodic re-evaluations of the problems
- Value dialogue, and make ample room and safety for diverse views
- Value and respect one another, and feel supported by peers and superiors—and the customer
- Make time to analyze problems anew
- Have learned the value of collaboration on difficult problems (two or more heads can be much better than one)
- Feel supported, encouraged, and *recognized* by their peers and the people they work for
- Can easily and comfortably get help from people in other parts of the organization

*The organizational or systemic level*

Clearly, the organization should be working to create the conditions mentioned above. This has to be reflected at the executive level as well as the levels below. Innovation and creativity should be widely recognized as an essential part of the quality of work people do, and managers should be rewarded and recognized for maintaining conditions that support creativity.

Along the same lines, company projects should be reviewed, maybe twice a year, with an eye to getting a fresh look at problems, approaches, future challenges, etc. Such reviews should not be exercises in unearthing problems or criticizing people, but opportunities for self-examination, suggesting new ideas and approaches, etc. Thus the reviews might include people from other projects and others who might bring interesting perspectives and ask useful questions.

The organization should also routinely attend to—and loudly recognize and reward—creative approaches to problems, and new and interesting research or other accomplishments. This kind of recognition should not be reserved for the elite few. Leaders at all levels, therefore, should bring to the attention of their superiors the creative work of teams and team members, even in cases in which the innovation does not seem spectacular.