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Teamwork, Flexibility Are Key to Managing Creative Employees

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Managing creative people can be confounding to business leaders who prefer order and structure. But learning how to manage or lead “creatives” is critical to recruiting and retaining the natural nonconformists whose unconventional ideas can lead to transformative products and services.

The trick is to balance a business’s need for on-time, on-budget work with the nonlinear thinker’s need for challenge, risk and meaning.

Some companies have famously figured out how to foster a culture of creativity and profitability, whether they’re producing forward-thinking commodities (think Apple and Samsung), services (Google, Facebook), business models (Virgin Group), operational designs (Southwest Airlines) or manufacturing processes (Toyota).

All these industry leaders encourage exploration and experimentation to create products and processes that identify and solve pressing problems, thus rewarding the businesses financially for their investment and risk.

Even companies with more humble ambitions can learn to get the most from the creative thinkers in their workforce by hiring the right mix of people and emphasizing teamwork, objectivity, flexibility and passion.

Creatives as team members: While members of creative teams should take work goals seriously, the process of reaching the desired result should be open, flexible — even playful. Creative people need the freedom to be absurd without being judged; in this way, they can share ideas without becoming too attached to one proposal and remain open to the ideas of teammates.

Curbs on freeform creativity should be applied diplomatically and collectively. For example, rather than dismissing an unfeasible idea outright, the manager of a creative team challenges the group to work together to improve it — even if it means starting over. When the process fails, as it inevitably does from time to time, the manager doesn’t assign blame or make it personal; rather he asks the creative team to consider what the experience taught everyone and offers to help the group recalibrate and move forward.

A symbiotic blend: Creative people aren’t cut from a uniform cloth, even if they share a tendency for dynamic thinking. Personalities will differ, but each member of the team should



share a few characteristics: She should prioritize the best solution to the problem the team is working on, even if the best idea is not her own.

This sometimes means teaming creatives with co-workers who are a bit more conventional and willing to attend to details and bring order to chaos. Teammates who are too similar often trip over their own egos, to the detriment of a project. But a proper blend of freethinkers with people who are a bit more grounded produces a team of collaborators rather than competitors.

Make the work important and structure loose: Drudgery and predictability are intolerable to the born innovator, who seeks meaningful, inspiring work in a spontaneous setting. While external rewards, such as a respectable salary and benefits, are appreciated, they're no substitute for praise and unambiguous support, which run the internal combustion engine of the creative thinker.

Creative employees should be allowed to shape their own space and time for work as long as business goals are met. It might be as simple as letting them work off-site and off-hours if that's what produces the best results for a company that lets its people run on the fuel of change, ambiguity and complexity.

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