5 Management Practices that Kill Creativity

Companies want to boost employees' creativity, but five common management practices can actually kill workplace creativity. Is your company guilty of any of the following?

Penalizing employees for making mistakes. Often, managers don't evaluate employees' mistakes effectively or consider what caused the mistake in the first place. “Employees rarely make deliberate or careless mistakes. More commonly, management didn't provide proper training or they put someone into a situation beyond their capabilities,” said Steve Wood, President/CEO of Work Opportunities Unlimited/Leddy Group, and author of the popular blog Steve on Leadership. “When employees make mistakes, sometimes employers penalize them, which squashes their creativity.”

For example, a new employee at a high-end wood cabinetry company noticed a machine was damaging the wood. He stopped production so the problem could be fixed. Although he saved the materials from being ruined, his supervisor admonished him for halting production, which was outside his authority, crushing the employee's desire to ever be helpful and pro-active again. According to Wood, when employees make mistakes, management should consider what part of the work system caused it, recognizing that mistakes are usually part of a bigger problem within the organization.

Focusing on fixing weaknesses. Managers spend significant time trying to fix people's weakness vs. leveraging their strengths. For example, if an employee is disorganized but tremendously creative, focus on the positive – his or her creativity.

Wood remembered a time when a disorganized but creative employee had a manager who tried (unsuccessfully) to make him more organized. When the manager finally looked past his disorganization and encouraged creativity instead, the employee came up with a variety of winning ideas. “Concentrate on employees' strengths and deploy them accordingly,” Wood advises.

Measuring and/or incenting the wrong things. Every successful organization measures its outcomes - profitability, units produced, etc. - but measuring and incenting the wrong things can negatively impact creativity.

Quint Studer, a nationally renowned healthcare expert and author of *Hardwiring Excellence*, has written that customer service/satisfaction and employee retention are the two most important things in healthcare. Yet most hospitals focus on lowering costs and improving technology, rather than focusing on the two elements that are most critical to their success. "Measure the things that make a difference in the long run rather than examining short-term metrics," Wood cautions.

Implementing too many policies and procedures. If organizations implement too many policies, they become arduous and overwhelming, causing employees to disengage. "One of the worst examples of this is when employees have to get permission to solve problems, rather than being empowered to find solutions on their own," Wood explained.

Author Rebecca Morgan wrote in her blog, Grow Your Key Talent, about the time she got a new mortgage and went online to set up electronic bill-paying, but couldn't get the system to work properly.

She called customer service and worked with a helpful representative, who also couldn't get it to work. A supervisor got involved and explained that customers need to make at least one offline payment before the system would accept their online payments, but that policy hadn't been explained at any point in the process, nor was it posted on the website. (And it was not common knowledge among the customer service department either.)

Later, the company sent a follow-up survey asking Morgan if the service rep had successfully solved her problem. And, technically, she hadn't. The rep worked diligently to help, but failed to solve the issue because of a ridiculous company policy. "For every new policy added, eliminate one that's outdated or ineffective," Wood recommends.

Earmarking inadequate resources. Organizations should improve the way they allocate resources that promote creativity – such as better time management, more training programs and streamlined internal processes. Inadequate or misappropriated resources diminish creativity, according to Wood.

For example, a major home improvement chain recently centralized their hiring system, investing tremendous resources into this new approach. Now, local stores can only hire people who have gone through their centralized screening process. Under the new system, if a candidate doesn't answer their phone when the screener calls the first time, their application automatically goes into an "unavailable" pile, likely eliminating their chances of being hired and greatly reducing the pool of good candidates. As a result, the number and quality of applicants is so small that local managers are finding it difficult to hire enough people to meet demand - yet they can't hire anyone who doesn't go through this process.

"This company invested in a process that is so rigid it will likely reduce their success. A better use of resources would significantly boost creativity and provide solutions for this recruiting challenge," Wood said.

Creativity is pivotal to an organization's success, so managers need to learn how to foster and encourage it in their employees – and should eliminate these "creativity killers" from their company.

Leddy Group, a division of Work Opportunities Unlimited, specializes in customized staffing and consulting services for administrative, accounting, and light industrial industries, and has been serving New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont since 1994.

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