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Taking the Risk Out of Creativity

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Great achievers and great organizations thrive in environments that allow and promote risk taking. The challenge for trainers is, then, how to create a risk-taking environment, and this is a difficult task to accomplish.

Risk is something that a sensible, prudent person seeks to reduce, or avoid, especially as it relates to their livelihood. It is a word that carries the connotation of danger and injury.

Webster defines risk as: **"The possibility of loss, injury, disadvantage, or destruction."**

Theoretically, I believe it would be useful to change the concept of risk to one of experimentalism and innovation. The connotation is then one of learning rather than one of danger and loss. Webster defines experimental as: "An act or operation carried out to discover some unknown principle or effect or to test, establish or illustrate some suggested or known truth."

This definition is easily related to learning, an activity most of us applaud (and some of us seek). Thus, an experiment is really no more than learning a new way to do something. Based on this theory, I would retitile the trainer's challenge from "how to create a risk-taking environment" to "how to create an experiment-oriented environment."

A desirable experiment-oriented environment is one where people believe they have the freedom, in fact, the mandate, from their employers to experiment and to discover ways to improve the operation.

Management Style Versus Experimentation

In helping the trainer develop an experiment-oriented environment, I believe it would be helpful first to look at the typical management style, which has a tendency to stifle experiments.

The present model of management is characterized by management's use of its power to judge and make decisions. When searching for a solution the manager (i.e., anyone of higher rank) first musters his / her experiences and prejudices and responds to proposals with a reaction, an opinion or decision based on those experiences and prejudices.

In this model the proposer is considered guilty or at least suspect until proven innocent (being subordinate is grounds for being guilty). By that I mean the judge (the manager) makes the assumption that the proposer has not thought through the proposal and needs to have shortcomings pointed out to her / him.

The manager focuses on the possible undesirable consequences of the proposed action, and raises these as obstacles that make the proposal unlikely to succeed. The manager, being human and unaware that this is a time for courage, is against anything that has an uncertain outcome. Proposals and ideas are judged.

The apparent reasonableness of this posture conceals the real issue. When it comes down to the proposer's courage versus the judge's prejudices, experiments are always avoided, and risk taking does not occur.

Our prejudices not only limit us to "sure things," they also blind us to the learning possibilities of unexpected outcomes. The denial of experiments makes dullards of bright, capable persons.

Creating an Experimental Environment

In order to create an experimental environment, it is helpful to think of any organization (one or more persons) as a living entity that evolves and develops on a continuing basis.

If we habitually think of organizations (and persons) as evolving and adapting, we can consciously create a corporate attitude that looks at each change in the organization or in a person as an experiment.

When the outcome of the change / experiment is a less effective operation, we learn from that experiment and change appropriately. On the other hand, if the outcome of the change / experiment is positive, we benefit and continue in the same vein.

If you think of experimentation as a natural mutation, you are getting in the right frame of mind to foster an experimental environment. You may find this concept hard to accept – that a "mutation" is good for your corporate culture. But look to Nature as an example.

When there is a mutation, or a "purposeful accident" in Nature, it either leads to improvement or to a disadvantage. If disadvantage occurs, Nature discontinues the mutation. If improvement occurs, Nature adopts the mutation as a continuing procedure. All the innovations in our species are the result of such "experiments."

I am suggesting that the same is true of innovation in an individual or in a company. When there is an environment that encourages continual experimentation there will be discoveries of improved ways of operating. It will also enliven the thinking of all concerned and increase the level of experimentation – a charmed circle.

Shared Responsibility

If an environment to encourage this healthy, generative behavior is to be created, it must embrace everyone – for if it is limited to a chosen few "knowledgeable" experimenters, the wrong message is transmitted: only those who know "how to be right" may experiment. In other words, we approve of experimenting, but we do not want mistakes, so we will select people who we believe will make no mistakes.

The emphasis is then on "successful" outcomes and unless an experiment "guarantees" success, it will not be tried. The fact is that in most adventurous experiments there is the promise of a rewarding outcome if it works – but the essence of an experiment is uncertainty.

If there is to be a genuine experimental environment, it must be for everyone, or it will not be for anyone. This seems an unacceptable black-and-white statement and of course there are exceptions – but they are few.

For example, it is essential to "go by the book" when operating a nuclear power plant. However, even in these cases, the operation would be more effective if the posture of everyone was "How can we improve on this step?"

Thus we find that in an experiment-oriented environment, the responsibility is clearly owned by the individuals and group involved. When something goes wrong, an experiment is telling them they need to invent a way to improve it. And because they are all tuned into the experimental mode, they get the signal.

They are not lulled into inattention or false complacency by a "this is not my problem" attitude. And in most cases, the wrong is corrected before much damage occurs due to the alertness of people in this environment.

The Key is Courage

There will probably be no experimental or innovative environment in a business without a widespread understanding of courage. Few of us think of courage as being involved with the accomplishment of everyday tasks, and that is why so little courage is demonstrated.

This is not due, however, to a lack of courage in individuals. Nearly every one of us has a full share of courage and we prove it in the way we stand up to the emergencies we face in our daily lives.

The problem in an organization is awareness of the need for courage. Most of us do not realize that in all our business relationships and in many business situations, we need to call on our courage to see and deal with discrepancies and bad feelings (which are frequently a signal that there is a problem).

Typical encounters that call for courage are: telling a boss we think that he or she is wrong; dealing with a colleague who is ignoring the consequences of his or her action; confronting a boss who is discounting your contributions; deciding that even though a procedure is right by the book it will not have the desired results; and being honest with a fellow worker.

Adler defined courage as the willingness to go forward in the face of consequences that are uncertain and / or painful. Webster lists an obsolete meaning that still captures the connotation of **courage**: "the heart as the seat of intelligence or feeling." More up-to-date: "mental or moral strength enabling one to venture, persevere and withstand danger, fear or difficulty firmly and resolutely."

We all have a good understanding of what courage is. The role of the trainer is to provide reminders to employees that to enjoy the remarkable benefits – both personal and professional – we must learn to summon our courage whenever we feel anxiety.

I have a powerful quotation. I do not know its source. ***"If this is my vision, what courage is required of me at this moment?"***

Judging Versus Entertaining an Idea

All of us as judges have a strong tendency to respond to almost any proposal, idea or opinion with a reaction – a counter opinion, a pointing out of a flaw, a criticism or merely the silence of disapproval.

This tendency is so pervasive in most companies that it creates an invisible barrier to experimentation and speculation. Whenever we surrender to the impulse to react, we cut ourselves off from open-minded consideration and *learning* – we are not available. The very heart of synergy depends upon one person being available to interact positively with others.

What I would propose is a simple and extremely difficult remedy which the trainer can develop and use to nurture an experiment-oriented corporate culture. The remedy is to make it a capital offense to sit in judgment without clarifying what one is really doing.

Each time an idea is brought before a manager (judge) the manager has two courses of action – to judge the idea or to entertain the idea, and the manager must clarify to the organization which course of action will be followed.

As a trainer, you will need to communicate the results of those two courses of action – one leads to a judgmental environment where little risk-taking takes place; and the other to an environment that promotes innovation.

The first course of action simply requires that the manager inform all parties that there is to be judgment as opposed to interaction. The judge is required to tell the proposer, "I do not have the courage right now to entertain your proposal, so I am going to judge it on the basis of my reactions, experiences and prejudices."

If the manager chooses to interact with the proposer and entertain the idea, the second course of action is appropriate.

The manager must:

- **Acknowledge the offering**, preferably by paraphrasing it to the satisfaction of the proposer, i.e., "Let me see if I understand..."
- **Invoke in himself or herself a procedure for open-mindedness**. This is a simple concept that is emotionally difficult to do: Temporarily hold initial negative reactions for later (assuring one's self that you will get to them); focus on the positive implications of the proposal, opinion or idea; entertain it; and prove it by enumerating all the positive implications. Only after using energy and ingenuity on this process does the manager then raise the initial negative reactions. And to demonstrate further that his or her heart is in the right place, supportive and not adversarial he or she words these concerns as problems, i.e., "How can we make that less expensive?"
- **The final response to a proposal, opinion or idea needs to be**, "How can we run an experiment to learn more about it?" In other words, "How can we begin the experimental process on your idea?"

Steps Trainers Need To Take

Looking back to our original charge, to create a risk-taking environment, we see there are several distinct steps which can be taken by the trainer to develop such an environment.

First, the connotation of risk: risk-taking brings about innovation, experimentation and learning – positive desirable outcomes.

Second, we need to think of an organization as an evolving and adapting entity. This opens the way for a corporate attitude that looks at each change in the organization as an experiment. When there is an environment which encourages continual experimentation there will be discoveries of improved ways of doing things.

