

A question I've noticed being asked more and more is, 'How do we go about creating an ongoing culture of innovation?' I suspect it's a concern in boardrooms across the world.

One of my great mentors was an old Greek fisherman who taught me many of the lessons of life from the back of his fishing boat in Moreton Bay off the Queensland coast here in Australia. One thing he always said was that a fish goes bad from the head and that corporate culture begins with the leader of an organisation. If the boss isn't prepared to challenge the status quo, accept some failure and continually search for a different way of doing things, then you can be pretty sure that nobody else in the organisation is going to take the risk.

A truly creative culture can occur only when the leader believes in innovation, imagination and creativity – like our fish, if the head of an organisation is starting to get a bit stale, you can guarantee the body of staff will soon follow.

But once an organisation has managed to get someone with verve and imagination in charge, the next step is to build a creative philosophy, which should run like a seam right through the business. This is different to a mission statement or corporate 'vision', in that it's a simple phrase that sets a tone of creativity and imagination. In the course of my work, I've collected a number of philosophies that illustrate what I mean: No sacred cows; Be pirates; Walk in stupid every day; Ever forward; Enemy of the ordinary; Creation without compromise.

These are all statements that the leaders of different organisations have adopted as an overarching philosophy for their staff. It challenges them to think differently, gives them permission to come up with new ideas and also lets them know that the whole organisation is working toward the same end. If nothing else, it provides everyone in the team with an

understanding of what is expected from them when it comes to problem solving, creativity and innovation.

Creative thinking also needs to be acknowledged and rewarded. It's amazing how often innovative problem solving goes unrewarded – bonuses are almost always awarded according to financial targets and employees are very rarely rewarded for coming up with a new way of doing things. Yet innovative ideas are the lifeblood of business – they're what sets an organisation apart from its competitors.

Recently, I worked with the organisation that supplies training to the Royal Navy. One of the senior executives told me a story about one of their young recruits who was uncommunicative and surly, but had quietly developed a computer programme to assist the Navy with its operations. The executive was completely blown away by the teenager's initiative and said to him, 'That's bloody brilliant!' With this, the young recruit turned around, stuck out his chest, and said, 'Well, if you think that's great, check this out,' and proceeded to show the executive some more of his ideas. The improvement in the recruit's attitude after that was remarkable – simply having his ideas acknowledged had shifted his performance to a whole new level.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

However, inspiring a creative environment is not all about back-slapping and thanking staff for coming up with new strategies. In order to inspire others, leaders must, at some point, take some risks themselves. It's all very well having a philosophy that acknowledges creative thinking, but if you simply keep repeating the same mantra, then people will see through it quickly. At some point a leader must be able to back their own ideas and take some risks – that way staff will be inspired to push themselves on to greater efforts.

There are two final points to bear in mind when attempting to foster a culture of creativity and imagination – first, what gets repeated gets

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rewarded. Never stop promoting the philosophy of your organisation; the only way to keep it at the forefront of employees' minds, particularly in the early days, is to broadcast it over and over again. It should be on the first page of the company 'bible' and be visible on posters and noticeboards in all areas of the business. Senior management must continually talk up the philosophy – it's no good doing it for the first two or three months and then letting it fade away.

My final point is that if a leader doesn't make creativity and innovation integral to a business, then it's just not going to flourish. By contrast, whenever you read press stories about Apple's Steve Jobs, who heads up the organisation, he talks about the importance of creativity and innovation to the company. He leads from the top, is passionate about the company and is comfortable enough with failure to keep pushing forward in order to develop the best products.

BREAKING THE RULES

Jobs' philosophy is that he aims to employ pirates. Why pirates? Because they break the rules. Right from the start, Jobs, Apple and everybody associated with the company are looking to break new ground constantly in order to come up with the next great idea.

Indeed, 'Think different' was the launch platform for Apple and to this day nothing has changed. If you want a high street example of a corporate culture based around creativity, then go into an Apple shop and watch a Jobs' podcast or talk to one of the staff – they will give you an endless list of examples of how Apple is living and breathing a culture of innovation.

So, the only way to nurture creativity in your company is to start with yourself. You can make it happen, but you must treasure innovation, be brave and take risks – just like the corporate pirates at Apple. ■



GARY BERTWISTLE is Australia's new pioneer in creative thinking and has developed Australia's first creative thinking venue called The Vault, in Sydney. For more information go to www.blumooncreative.com.au