

# HOW TO MANAGE CREATIVE PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA

by  
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Creativity and innovation in business have been hot topics for over two decades. Ever since Peters and Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* defined excellent companies as those that are "continuously innovative," it seems as though innovation has become the most prominent management buzzword. The *In Search of Excellence* authors maintained that "innovative companies are especially adroit at continually responding to change of any sort in their environments."

Since most companies are faced with rapidly changing environments in today's business world, innovation, which is the result of creative thinking, is imperative. Over one-half of the Fortune 500 companies have adopted some sort program in creative thinking or problem solving in the last several years.

Few businesses have a more rapidly changing environment than the media industries do. Thus, few businesses need innovation and creative people more. This need requires brings up three questions: 1) How do you tell the difference between people that are creative and those that merely think they are, 2) how do you manage creative people, and 3) in what type of jobs will creative people be most effective.

## How to Recognize Creative People

The first question is particularly important in media because the business tends to attract scores of people who want to express themselves or to act "creative." However, there is a big difference between wanting to be thought of as creative and actually being creative. Creativity can be measured, and true creativity fulfills at least three conditions:

1. It involves a response or an idea that is novel or least statistically infrequent and must be adaptive to, or of, reality.
2. It must solve a problem, fit a situation, or accomplish some recognizable goal.
3. It must involve sustaining the original insight, an evaluation and elaboration of it, and a developing of it to the full.

Creativity from this point of view is a process extended in time and characterized by originality, adaptiveness, and realization. These conditions are the one's reported in Wolfle's book, *The Discovery of Talent*, which reports on a six-year study conducted at the University of California, Berkeley, on creativity.

Applying this definition to media industry context, it suggests that simply being new or different is not enough, an idea must also have a practical, problem-solving application. Too often people in the media want to try something just because it is new and different (creative, they think), but if it does not help accomplish the goals of an organization or solve a practical, reality-based problem, an idea is not only not creative, it is virtually useless. There is no virtue in being different; the only virtue an idea has is in being useful, in solving a problem.

In fact, many people, equate being different with being creative. Many people get in the media business because they have strong needs to be recognized, to be loved, to gain approval, and to be noticed, and they often attempt to satisfy these needs by trying to be different. But different does not necessarily mean creative.

In a book titled *Characteristics of the Creative Individual*, Raudsepp writes that truly creative people are intensely career oriented and devote enormous amounts of energy to their work. They pay particular attention to the intrinsic satisfactions in their work (they view their work as an end in itself); they look for interesting, stimulating, challenging, and creative projects. They need a variety of problems, professional and organizational recognition of their achievements (sound familiar, “my boss doesn't appreciate me”), ascending degrees of responsibilities and steady advancement and self-realization. They do not look for easy, comfortable situations, but want to utilize their talents, aptitudes and interests to the fullest.

Truly creative people tend to have the following characteristics:

1. They are self-confident, often to the point of arrogance (as opposed to many people who get in the media business, especially television, seeking love and approval to bolster low self-image).
2. They are enthusiastic.
3. They are optimistic.
4. They can examine things impartially and objectively.
5. They are constructively discontented.
6. They are dynamic.
7. They have diverse interests.
8. They are honest with themselves.
9. They are not self-satisfied and complacent.
10. They are not afraid to ask questions that show ignorance.
11. They are not afraid of making a mistake and are risk takers.
12. They do not seek approval from others or society.
13. They will not compromise on those things they hold dear.
14. They engage in hobbies which require concentration and exercise of problem-solving abilities.
15. They strive for perfection.
16. They have an uncommon capacity for self-instruction.
17. They are flexible and can tolerate a high degree of ambiguity.
18. They are highly motivated.
19. They are uncommonly persistent.
20. They have an unusual ability to concentrate.
21. They constantly expand knowledge.
22. They dislike being bossed or policed.
23. They are intensely absorbed in their work.
24. They have above-average intelligence.

The last point is interesting. Research has shown that in order to be creative a person has to have above-average intelligence, somewhere in the neighborhood of an IQ over 125, but after that threshold of intelligence has been reached, there is no correlation between higher creativity and higher intelligence. In other words, a person with above-average intelligence can be as creative as a genius.

Furthermore, the creative process involves the following elements:

1. Gaining a great deal of fundamental knowledge

2. A period of incubation in which this large store of knowledge ferments in the brain
3. An uncommonly large amount of time spent in analysis
4. An absorption in details

Creative activity typically comes in spurts and streaks and is rarely, if ever, continuous, and dry spells do not mean the creative juices have dried up; they are just resting and incubating. Creativity is subject to personal, internal blocking mechanisms that can be overcome at times by discussion and verbalization. Finally, creativity is grounded in expertise. In the book by Ettema and Whitney, *Individuals in Mass Media Organizations: Creativity and Constraints*, well-known television producer Quinn Martin is quoted as saying that producing successful entertainment is “75 percent craft and 25 percent creativity...you need to know the rules before you can break them.”

### **How to Manage Creative People**

In order to manage creative people effectively, the most important thing to keep in mind is that they are happiest when they get little or no supervision. They like to be independent and autonomous. Creative people intensely dislike doing routine, low-grade chores and paperwork. They work best in an atmosphere of freedom – freedom to experiment and to make mistakes. Thus, a favorable environment and the proper style of supervision are absolutely critical to creative people's success. It is impossible to separate creative people from the environment in which they operate. For managers to mold an environment that is maximally conducive to creativity, they must be extremely careful about giving criticism.

Criticism must be in the form of feedback that a creative person views as attempt to help, to teach, and not in the form of anything approaching personal criticism. Criticism must be done in an encouraging manner. Ed Catmull, an executive at Pixar, in September 2008 *Harvard Business Review* article, wrote: that at Pixar, “You get great creative people, you bet big on them, you give them enormous leeway and support, and you provide them with an environment in which they can get honest feedback from everyone.”

Teresa Amabile in *The Social Psychology of Creativity* writes that “Criticism and imparting feelings of failure will destroy creativity – avoiding them are the keys to fostering creativity.” The author states that the “...work environments most conducive to the fulfillment of creative potential may include a high level of worker responsibility for initiating new activities, a low level of interference from administrative superiors, and a high stability in employment.”

Thus, there are several don'ts in dealing with truly creative employees: Don't interfere, don't criticize (give specific feedback), don't compare them to others, and don't threaten them with the loss of their jobs (either love and support them to the hilt or fire them – there's virtually no room in between).

It means in the case of creative people who have a great deal of administrative work to do, that it is probably best to give them an assistant to help and to keep them away from routinized, repetitive work. Avoiding the cost of an assistant is usually penny wise and pound foolish with truly creative employees.

Managers who successfully deal with creative employees tend to show the following characteristics:

1. They respect individual differences.
2. They understand the creative process.
3. They have professional knowledge (expertise).
4. They know how to communicate sympathetically with creative people.
5. They give credit and recognition.
6. They take calculated risks.
7. They provide inspiration in the form of support and encouragement of ideas.
8. They bolster self-confidence.
9. They are flexible and have flexible organizations.
10. They welcome and encourage constructive nonconformity, individuality, and diversity.
11. They involve creative people in the planning and decision-making process at the earliest possible moment.
12. They allow creative people to try their pet projects and ideas without fear of criticism.

### **Nurturing Creative People**

In a June 1994 FORTUNE article, titled "How To Nurture Creative Sparks," author Alan Farnham gives several rules for nurturing creative people:

1. Accommodate: Creative people tend to be high maintenance. Managers must keep their doors open and let creative people have access to them. Creative people usually need constant stroking. So stroke. Also, creative people cannot choose when they create--ideas come to them at odd times. Accommodate to their schedules. Never, never, never punish failure. Managers must learn to celebrate failures as learning experiences for creatives.
2. Stimulate: Management must find ways to stimulate creative thinking: trips or green and purple offices if creatives want them. Creatives must be encouraged to gaze out the window. They do not always have to be doing something.
3. Recognize and reward--the right way: "Since creative people tend to be self-starters, giving them greater autonomy can be a powerful reward," writes Farnham. The worst type of incentive is for a manager to try to hog credit. Creatives want to be known for their work and ideas—that is where they get their powerful intrinsic rewards. Creatives care about what their peers think, so peer recognition is vitally important. Managers should enter the output of their creative people in awards. Money, an extrinsic reward, is not especially valued by creatives.
4. Direct (lightly) and give feedback: Creative people need deadlines, otherwise they will stay in an exploration mode too long. On the other hand, they hate specific directions. They need feedback on how they are progressing, but do not like to get feedback from managers. If they can see research, talk to audience members, or hear from their peers, they take feedback better than from managers, who they feel try to control them.
5. Protect them: Managers have to protect creative people from dullards who do not understand the creative process.

Managers also have to protect creatives from restrictive, corporate-mandated paperwork and rules.

### **Placing Creative People in Jobs**

Creative people are best suited for jobs where they can grow, learn, accomplish goals, avoid personal criticism and comparison, work independently and autonomously, and in which there is little or no repetitive, routinized work. In other words, if your employees are required to follow rules in an exact manner or if you allow little or no leeway in making decisions, then do not hire truly creative people – you’ll destroy their motivation. On the other hand, if you need new ideas and a new approach, hire creative people and give them plenty of leeway and support.

### **Summary**

If there were one word that summarizes what creative employees need from a manager, it would be encouragement. When feedback is necessary, it must be put in a context of “here's some suggestions on how you might be able to do it even better,” and certainly not in a context of “here's what you did wrong.” Two other concepts that are vitally important to remember in dealing with creative people are participation and autonomy – let them participate in decisions and then give them autonomy on how to carry out their assignments. And, finally, remember that your entire approach should be to make these rare, invaluable creative people feel like winners in order to build their confidence.

How do you treat associates that are not truly creative? Generally, the same way you treat creative people. If you treat everyone as though they were creative, and if you expect everyone to be creative, you might find that they will become, in the best case, truly creative and, in the worst case, at least happier and more engaged. Plus, you'll be astonished at the number of good ideas that bubble up.

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