Creativity and Innovation for Organisations in Kurdistan Region, Iraq. An Integrated HR Approach

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ABSTRACT

Creativity and innovation are of fundamental importance in achieving a competitive edge in business, education or government. As a source of competitive advantage, creativity can provide organisations with all the weapons necessary to fight their rivals, particularly in rapidly globalised and changing markets. This paper will review the literature on the various approaches to creativity, discuss the barriers that obviate organisations from harnessing her employees' energies, and identify conditions needed for successful creativity and innovation in organisations. The paper will also provide a 3-phase approach in designing effective HR programmes in promoting creativity and innovation in organisations. The argument, therefore, is that there are no quick-fix approaches to the challenges of fostering creativity in organisations, instead what is required is integrated, multi-intervention strategies to enhance organisational creativity and innovation.

Keywords: creativity, innovation, organization, human resources, competitive advantage

INTRODUCTION

A survey by a good number of businesses the world over singled out managing continuous change as the most important factor influencing the future roles of managers. Intuitively, many managers believe that innovative organisations are better able to cope with changes. Thus, it is not surprising that creativity, and innovation are ranked as the most important skills, and qualities by Asian employees when recruiting Master of Business Administration (M.B.A) graduates. Unfortunately, these are the kind of skills and qualities that are most difficult to find (Syett, 1995). In view of the importance and scarcity of creativity and innovation skills, organizations must learn how to take appropriate measures to foster the development of this essential HR competency. More importantly, organizations must also learn how to exploit the creative and innovative energies of their employees as a source of competitive advantage against their rivals.

This paper provides an integrated HR framework to help managers KR develop, sustain, and exploit employee creativity and innovation for organizational success. Specifically, the paper will explore and discuss the following:

Common approaches in managing creativity and innovation;

Obstacles to creativity and innovation;

Conditions for organizational creativity and innovation; and

An integrated HR framework to foster employee creativity and innovation.

Approaches in Managing Creativity and Innovation: Some Relevant Literatures

There are three common approaches that managers could adopt in order to manage creativity and innovation in their organization: trait or dispositional approach; skills approach; and work environment or cultural approach.

Traits or dispositional approach. Theoretically, this approach is linked to the pioneering efforts of researchers to identify specific personality traits and characteristics associated with creativity (Barron, 1955; Rogers, 1959; Mackinnon, 1962). Over the years, researchers have found many characteristics linked to creative behaviours, and among these are: awareness and sensitivity to problems; openness to

experience; tolerance of ambiguity; fluency of ideas; flexibility of thoughts; self-discipline and persistence; sense of humour; non-conformity; intellectual "playfulness"; self-reliance; willingness to take risk.

Research on the trait approach is still very much alive. For instance, Raudsepp (1983) found that creative people are responsive to feelings, motivated, unafraid of failures, original, flexible, and have keen sense to spot problems, whereas Velthouse (1990) believes that creative people, when compared to those who are not so creative, tend to be more self-confident, optimistic, curious, visionary and humorous.

The trait or dispositional approach has a deterministic inclination towards managing creativity and innovation in organizations. Proponents of this approach believe that there are certain inherent traits or characteristics that predispose an individual to be creative. The logical recommendation is to devise ways to identify and measure these creative traits and characteristics so as to enable managers within Kurdistan Region to identify creative talents for their respective organizations. Thus, there has been much research work carried out on the development of tests to identify creative individuals (Guilford, 1971). In practice, the managers adopting the traits approach will emphasise stringent selection as a means to manage creativity and innovation.

Skills approach: Unlike the supporters of the traits approach, proponents of skills approach believe creativity can be taught and learnt. Hence, they advocate training as a means of developing creativity in organizations. Professor Torrance of the University of Georgia is perhaps one of the most prominent proponents of this approach. He designed a few programmes to teach children to think creatively (e.g., Meyers and Torrance, 1964; Torrance, 1965 a, b) and conducted research studies to evaluate the effectiveness of creativity training programmes for children (Torrance, 1972). Another leading advocate of this skills approach is Edward de Bono. In the educational settings, he reported that 106,000 teachers in Venezuela were trained to use his materials to teach be creativity to school children (deBono, 1978). Thus, there is also much evidence to support the effectiveness of this approach (Torrance, 1987; Basadur, Graen and Green, 1980).

In the business settings, there are many creativity programmes available in the market. Some of these programmes are techniques-driven, i.e., teaching specific techniques to stimulate individual creativity. Usually, trainers in these programmes will teach participants on idea-generating techniques such as, brainstorming, Osborn's Checklists, analogies, attribute-listing, to mention but few. In addition, there are also theory-driven programmes in the market, i.e., the programmes are based on some theoretical frameworks. Examples of the more theory-driven programmes are lateral thinking (deBono, 1977) and Osborn-Parnes Creative Problem-Solving Procedure (Isaken, 1989).

Work environment or cultural approach: The two aforementioned approaches focus their attention on the individuals in the organization. They are micro-approaches to organizational creativity and innovation. More recently, however, both researchers and practitioners realize that an over emphasis on the micro approaches leads to a serious neglect of another significant factor of organizational creativity, such as the work environment in which the individuals function. In the early 1980s, managers discover that the work environment has a significant impact on how employees feel, think and act in organisations. This leads to the work environment or cultural approach to managing creativity and innovation (Raudsepp, 1987). In essence, this approach involves measures taken by managers to foster a nurturing work environment to encourage creativity and innovation in organizations.

Research studies have found that Creative/Innovative organizations are more likely to possess the following characteristics:

Open communication (Cummings, 1965; Majaro, 1988)

Fair reward systems that emphasizes intrinsic satisfaction (Ashford and Cummings, 1965; Peters and waterman, 1982)

Absence of formal, hierarchical structures (Kimberly, 1981)

Inter-group/departmental support and collaborations (Amabile and Gryskiewicz, 1987)

Autonomy (Sapolsky, 1967; Abbey and Dickson, 1983).

Access to power support for innovative problem-solving (Kanter, 1983)

Optimum amount of work pressure (Evans, 1990)

Tolerance for diversity (Thompson, 1965; Siegel and Kaemmerer, 1978)

Risk-taking (abbey and Dickson, 1983).

Obstacles to Creativity and Innovation in the Context of Kurdistan Region: An Insider's Experience

There are many obstacles to creative thinking in organizations, and many of these are linked to organizational and behavioural factors. Organisational obstacles to creativity include:

Bureaucracy – red tapes, rigid rules and regulations, emphasis on managerial control, hierarchical structures;

Dysfunctional organizational culture – false assumptions, unable to see emerging environmental trends, too much emphasis on traditions;

Reward Systems – over emphasis on bottom-lines, short-term orientation, reliance on external rewards to motivate employees, little emphasis on the influence of intrinsic motivation.

There are many behavioural factors that block organizational creativity and innovation, and some of the common ones are as follows:

Leadership Practices – criticize ideas, do not trust employees, punish employees for making mistakes;

Resistance to Change – unwilling to change work habits, fear of making mistakes, not willing to learn new skills;

Tendency to Conform – fear of being ridiculed for new ideas, risk of failures, pressurized by peers not to outlandish in thinking and behaviour;

Dysfunctional conflicts – preoccupation with status, unwilling to share resources and information.

Further analysis suggests that the above mentioned barriers to creativity and innovation are associated with the various subsystems of the organization, namely, cultural subsystems, structural subsystems, leadership and people. For example, bureaucracy and reward systems barriers are linked to the structural subsystems, and dysfunctional culture are directly related to the cultural subsystems of the organization. Likewise resistance to change, tendency to conform and dysfunctional conflicts are associated with the people (individual and groups) in the oragnisation.

Conditions for Creativity and Innovation

Certain conditions must exist before an organization can be creative and innovative. At the individual level, the two essential conditions are positive belief systems and competencies. Under the *positive belief systems*, individuals in the organizations must have positive belief systems in order to contribute creatively in orgnisations. Employees must think positively of themselves and believe that they can be creative. Research studies have found that self esteem is a precursor to individual creativity (Korman, 1971). When employees have positive self esteem, they will be more willing to take risks, and experiment with new approaches of doing things. However, if they have low self esteem, they will not dare to rock the boat but maintain the status quo. Likewise, managers and supervisors must think positively of their subordinates, and believe that their subordinates are able to and want to contribute creatively in the organizations otherwise, they will not empower their subordinates to exercise their initiatives and engage in innovative behaviour.

To be creative, individuals need to acquire certain *competencies*, namely creativity, technical, and human relations skills. While the need for creativity is obvious, the need for technical skills emanates from the fact that in the organizational setting, creativity always function in a domain-specific context, be it product innovation or service quality. Human relations skills are needed because there is a behavioural dimension in promoting creativity and innovation in organizations. Individuals must know how to champion their ideas and garner support from others. Failure to do so will lead to premature killing of innovative ideas.

At the oragnisational level, the two essential conditions are *conducive organizational culture* and support for creativity. The organizational culture plays a pivotal role in organizational *creativity*. To nurture creativity and innovation, there must be trust, tolerance for diversity and open communication. When trust is lacking, people will not dare to take risk and will undoubtedly adopt a wait and see attitudes, which, in turn, hinders creativity. In contrast, tolerance for diversity provides opportunities for oragnisational members to share different perspectives and explore alternative ways of doing things thereby promoting creativity. Open communication is important because ideas and information are the life blood of creativity. When communication is blocked, creativity will be stifled.

Besides creating a conducive work environment to promote creativity, organization must provide support to promote creativity and innovation, meaning that organizations must be willing to commit resources – financial, physical, human resources, empower employees with authority to make decisions, invest time on projects to promote innovation, and share information with employees. A good example of how a company supports creativity is 3M, which allows employees to devote up to 15 percent of their time to any petty projects. It also stages celebrations to reward and give morale support to their creative employees (Leob, 1996).

An Integrated Human Resource Approach

Managing creativity and organisational innovation is a complex problem. However, often managers tend to rely on *ad hoc* approaches in solving this problem. In this paper, we argue for the need to have an integrated HR approach in fostering employee creativity and innovation. Our approach takes a holistic view of the organization, leading us to recommend the use of multiple HR interventions, such as training, reward system, leadership development, and team building. Each of the HR intervention is targeted at different subsystems of the organization and managers must coordinate the interventions in order to reinforce one another. Our specific approaches involve three fundamental phases: diagnostic, design and action.

Under the *diagnostic phase*, an organization may be plagued by a bureaucratic structure with many outdated rules and regulations even though it has young and creative managers and employees. For this organization, the immediate need is to see how to update the rigid rules and regulations and remove bureaucracy from the structure. The need for creativity training is not urgent, yet most managers tend to take a copy cat approach to creativity without identifying the real needs of their organisation. The most common approach is to install creativity training programmes in the organisation even though what it really need is to revamp its procedures and structure.

The phase involves assessing the readiness of the organization for creativity and innovation and identifying the factors that support and those that hinder creativity and innovation. Every organization has unique problems and potential, and it is for these reasons that it is important not to jump straight into any creativity interventions without proper diagnosis of the oragnisation. Managers should diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of the organization in terms of its alacrity to change and examine the nature of the barriers to creativity before designing the appropriate interventions to promote creativity in organization.

The *design phase* involves designing appropriate HR interventions to promote creativity and innovation. Some examples of interventions available to HR managers are team building, work redesign, restructuring of organization, employee empowerment programmes, training interventions (creativity training, leadership development, etc), compensation systems and incentive schemes, and culture change programmes.

An effective diagnosis will not enable the manager to know what kind of HR interventions to adopt but also give him/her suggestions on how to sequent these interventions. For example, if Company A is ready for creativity, its managers and employees perceive the need for creativity to excel, however, they do not know how to be creative. In this case, the company will get the most leverage by investing in creativity training first. Other HR interventions, such as revising the incentive schemes to reward creative behaviour can follow later. In contrast, Company Y is not ready for creativity as the management has little faith in its employees and in turn, the employees dare not voice out new ideas for fear of criticism. Perhaps, in this case, the most immediate need is to change the mindset of the people (including managers and employees) in the organisation through investing in training programmes.

During this phase, a detailed road map or action plan will be worked out to specify the types of interventions and when they will be implemented. In designing the appropriate interventions, managers should be guided by the following principles:

- Make use of data obtained during the diagnostic phase to design a multi-intervention programme to promote creativity

- Phase the interventions in ways that the subsequent ones are consistent with and reinforce the earlier interventions

- Choose interventions that are cost-effective and efficient

- Select interventions that are most relevant given the context and situation

- Be sensitive to organisational and psychological strains.

Action phase will involve implementing and evaluating the HR interventions as designed in the earlier stage. Implementation and evaluation are very much intertwined. Evaluation is a form of feedback to the effectiveness of the interventions. To ensure success, there is a need to closely monitor the implementation process and make necessary refinements based on the feedback from the evaluation. It is impossible to foresee to every detail during the design phase. The action plan as worked out in the previous phase is not meant to be rigidly applied. Managers should be flexible. Once they feel that the interventions are not working according to plan, they must be ready to make modifications. For example, when implementing the training interventions, if the participants reveal certain problems regarding outdated rules and regulations that have not been identified earlier, the management should then make an attempt to address these concerns immediately.

The author's own experiences of teaching Entrepreneurship and human Resource Management at University of Kurdistan in Iraq indicate that there are certain factors that contribute to successful implementation of creativity interventions in organistions, and some of these factors are top management support, realistic expectations, support systems for change agents, and sustained interest.

The top management sets the tone for the organisation. If the top management is seen to give lip services to the creativity interventions, no one in the organisation will take them seriously, commitment will not be as effective as what should be expected. As an indication of commitment and support, the top management must provide sufficient resources to push through the programme, invest their time in communicating with their employees about changes, and participate actively in the interventions. They cannot rely on the HR department or even on an external consultant to drive the programme.

On the issue of realistic expectations, different interventions will require different time frame to demonstrate their effectiveness. For example, the effectiveness of training interventions can be felt quite quickly at the individual-level as it is possible for an individual to derive immediate benefits after attending a creativity course from a good instructor. However, managers will be disappointed to find out that, most often than not, improvement on creativity skills at the individual level does not automatically lead to improvement in organisational creativity. Interventions directed at the individual level still need to be supported and reinforced by interventions directed at the other sub-systems of the organisations. Hence, managers must have realistic expectations and should expect to get instant results and quick fix solutions.

Changes are stressful and change agents can be vulnerable to burnt out. To help and convince others to change is an emotionally taxing task, and one way to resist change is to attack the change agent. The attack can manifest itself in various forms, from insults to attribution of bad motives and intentions, and to outright confrontation. To make matters worse, change agents are often trapped between supporters and opponents of the change. Both sides are making demands on the change agent's time and energy, and it will be a good practice to provide some avenues of support for the change agents. Management must be sensitive to the emotional needs of the change agents and be willing to lend a listening ear. Change agents themselves must also learn to take care of their emotional health, with some avenues to share and ventilate their problems to one another.

CONCLUSION

Above all, people are thrilled with the promises of creativity and innovation and they want to see some positive changes. However, when results take longer than expected, people begin to lose interests. Hence, it is important to define midpoint goals in the creativity programme. Once these goals are achieved, the organization should stage celebrations to energise the people and sustain their interest in the programme. Another way to sustain interests is to have effective employee communication programme to inform employees of the progress of the programme. In the case of organisations in Kurdistan Region, creativity and innovation are not sufficiently promoted among managers. The work culture is fraught with tight control and unamenable to constructive criticisms. Obedience and continuous compliance are expected from managers at all times. In order to enhance creativity, there should be some element of shift from the traditional concept to a more dynamic one.

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