

# How To Stimulate Creativity Among your People

By Ted Pollock, Management Columnist

**C**reativity was once considered the province of a chosen few—artists, sculptors, writers and the like. More recently, it's become clear that the creative urge can find expression in many lines of endeavor.

It has also become increasingly clear that, given the right circumstances, creativity can be encouraged and stimulated in people.

For the manager, this means an opportunity not only to increase his people's productivity, but also a chance to help them enjoy their work more. And when

people enjoy what they are doing, morale improves; when morale improves, in turn, people tend to work better and with more enthusiasm. Everyone gains.

What can you do to mobilize the dormant creativity in your department?

#### Identify your problem.

The more specific you can be, the better, for it isn't possible to come up with imaginative solutions to general difficulties. If you say, "This department's a mess," there isn't a clue as to what you are looking for. But say,

"We're wasting too much time" and your people have something to zero in on. It will be even more helpful if you can say:

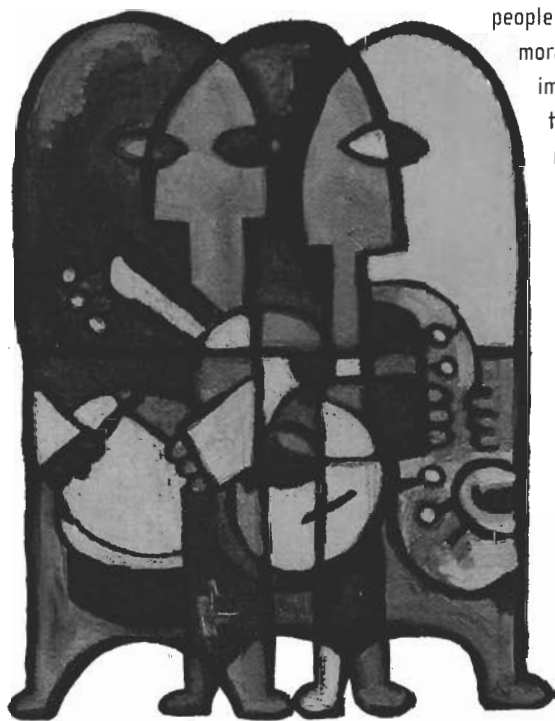
- "What we need are fewer interruptions."

- "There are too many shipping delays."
- "We're not meeting our deadlines."
- "You all spend too much time on the phone."

**Suggest approaches.** Help your people rev up their imaginations by suggesting lines of attack. First, make sure they fully understand how things are done now; otherwise, they won't be able to offer ideas for improvement. Second, isolate the trouble spot if you can: "This is where things start going wrong." Or, "If we could only get shipping to keep up with our output." If possible, point out promising areas for further investigation: "The people in our downtown facility don't seem to have this trouble."

**Keep in touch.** By doing so, you accomplish several important things. You underscore your interest in the progress of your people and keep the creative ball rolling. You create a subtle air of competition, pitting one individual against another. You give yourself a chance to help with any problems that your people may be running into. And you can spot discouragement and help dispel it by pointing out that it is part of the creative process. A little cheerleading can go a long way when it comes to problem solving.

**Give them time.** Creativity is a very personal process that varies with the individual. Some people can come up with ideas quickly; others require time. Some have to try out each idea, testing it in the field before they are willing to share it with anyone. Others can "rehearse it in their heads" and describe it easily and quickly. Neither is superior to the other.



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Both approaches work and it's a mistake to try to force the thoughtful worker into premature action or to grow impatient with the person who uses the trial-and-error method.

**When Your People Ask for Favors**  
At one time or another, every manager has been asked by an employee for special consideration. Sometimes, exceptions to the rules have to be made, as when there is a serious personal or family emergency. But occasionally, the favor sought represents a breach of company standards, fairness, or common sense. When, and how, should you turn down such a request?

**When it requires that you break a rule.** If the favor puts you in the awkward position of having to wink at the rule book without offering any reasonable extenuating

circumstances, you are justified in turning it down. "I couldn't do that for anyone in the department" will usually suffice.

**If it is against the interests of the department.** On short notice and during a busy period, an employee asks for time off. Unless it is for a bona fide emergency, you can explain that the needs of the business come first. In the future, requests for time off should be submitted well in advance so that suitable arrangements to cover the absent employee may be made.

**If it puts you in a position of having to do something unethical.** For example, someone asks for advance information about a promotion or similar confidential material. A simple explanation of why you cannot oblige is all that is required.

**If it puts you on the spot in some other way.** "Sorry, Harry, but if I let you park in the executive lot, I'd be letting myself in for a lot of complaints from my other people." Few employees will insist that you make trouble for yourself to oblige them.

**The Gentle Art of Motivation**  
You can get people to work harder in a number of ways. You can pay them premium wages. You can offer especially desirable rewards, such as extra vacation time.

There is another possibility: You can develop the personal qualities that make people want to do their best for you.

The best way to motivate a person is to show that you are aware of his ambitions, his fears and himself as an individual. Fortunately, there are certain specific

things you can do to demonstrate that you are sensitive to your people's needs. For example:

**Show that you care.** You must be sufficiently attuned to the fact that each of your people is individually concerned about his or her own future and everyone must feel that you too are concerned about them as individuals.

**Encourage independence.** A superior who cares seeks to loosen and ultimately drop the reins of supervision. He prefers that his people learn to think and act properly, independent of supervision. He encourages them to show initiative, to think critically, to ask questions about their own work.

**Demonstrate confidence.** If you entertain any doubts about your department, staff or

company, review them in private. Exhibiting doubt to subordinates disheartens them and tends to destroy their confidence in you. If the leader is hesitant, how can he inspire followers?

**Recognize the dignity of others.** This boils down to understanding that others have much the same desires as you—particularly for an appreciation of their worth as human beings. Rank on the economic or educational ladders has nothing to do with it. A shipping clerk is, in all the ways that count, just as important as the president of the company. And respect has a way of being reciprocated.

**Encourage ingenuity.** Encourage creativity and ingenuity by challenging your people to improve on your method of doing things. If, for example, your materials handling

system is not what you would like, don't change it yourself; have the people facing the problem recommend changes. You may be surprised by their wealth of ideas.

Most people will respond to some of the techniques described here. As a manager, it is up to you to use the right ones, at the right times, with the right people. \*

