

BY PATRICK IBARRA

# CULTIVATING CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

Realize extraordinary results

“THE BEST OPPORTUNITIES ARE VISIBLE, BUT NOT SEEN.” —PETER DRUCKER, AUTHOR

**A**t the ICMA Annual Conference this past September in Kansas City, Missouri, I was speaking with several ICMA members and a recurring theme we kept exploring was the role of creativity in the workplace, techniques available to develop creative muscles, and what leaders can do to foster a creative culture.

Creativity is often regarded as an extravagance that we no longer have time to explore, because we want the issue resolved today, if not yesterday, and permanently, too, please! We want our solutions pre-packaged and ready to implement, as though adding water will do it.

Leaders in government often suffer from bureaucratic inertia, where past solutions are resynthesized to fix today’s problems. An aversion to risk, unfortunately, can unwittingly reduce the opportunity for the role of creativity in exploring new solutions to both old and new issues.

Moreover, many times people arrive at the solution often defined as a resource—people, money, time, equipment, and materials—before critical thinking is applied to the issue or the problem.

Indeed, playing it safe is no longer playing it smart, especially with creativity, and its sibling, innovation, in such high demand as a skill set. Here are three steps to use in your fitness plan to tone your creativity muscles and realize your potential:

**Cultivate an appetite.** Adopt a mindset of exploration and discovery. Open

yourself to new possibilities by being curious, by playing around, by focusing on what you don’t know, and by asking questions. Above all, give yourself permission to be creative and see yourself as a creative person.

**Take your vitamins.** Travel in the discomfort zone to challenge your assumptions continually and enlarge your perspective. Being creative means you are staying up-to-date on government trends and fresh ideas.

Taking existing strategies and infusing them with renewed vision can go a long way toward bringing new life to current approaches and to increasing your capacity as a leader.

**Engage in physical exercise.** Besides just being downright good for you, exercise helps create new neurons that refresh your mind, and consequently, you think differently. Some of your best ideas reveal themselves when you allow your mind to wander and wonder.

To build your creativity skills, engage in divergent thinking in which there are several ways to address an issue, not simply one. Doing the same old thing doesn’t build success, but being able to see a way to change and break out as a leader definitely takes creative thinking and vision.

A workplace that encourages creativity does not have to be crazy with video games and free food. What is a prerequisite, however, is an environment in which people can experiment, take risks, and explore the full range of their own capabilities.

Leaders can pursue these four actions to transition the workplace culture from one that values conformity to one that values creativity and innovative ideas:

**Adjust the thermostat.** Creative leaders think differently about the business of getting better all the time and consistently talk about it differently as well. Conversations are the oxygen of priorities, and if organizations truly want to adopt and *practice* more creative approaches, they begin by injecting new words into everyday discussions and steering people into original ways of thinking.

**Raise the speed limit.** Leaders facilitate a workplace culture that makes sure the penalty for making mistakes is not greater than the penalty for doing nothing. These leaders realize that growth and comfort don’t co-exist, but that creativity and discipline do, in their efforts to nurture and cultivate the production of potential solutions.

**Fuel up.** To move toward better government, leaders must be catalysts for change, recognizing that “doing things differently and doing different things” are basics for creating a climate that can penetrate a risk-averse culture that limits creativity thinking.

Since ideas are the currency of creativity leaders, inspire an idea-friendly workplace. Book clubs, field trips, and guest speakers are just a few of the techniques leaders use in their role as a flame starter.

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**Experiment.** A safe way to avoid making mistakes is to never try anything new. Moving from task-centric to results-centric requires a modification from the phrase “lather, rinse, repeat” to one that supports an “experiment, rinse, repeat” mindset.

Like farmers who make soil fertile for seeds to take root and grow, leaders cultivate a workplace open to growth. They emphasize smart risk-taking in their pursuit of disrupting the status-quo mindset of: “We’ve always done it that way.”

They recognize that the absence of mistakes does not constitute success and not only tolerate mistakes, but also encourage them as a means to generate creative solutions. Their focus is on asking mission questions as opposed to solely relying on their agency’s mission statement.

If you keep doing what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got and today, that’s not good enough. The question to ask yourself is: Are we changing as fast as the world around us? Remember, people who don’t rock the boat get tossed overboard.

My mission in this quarterly department is to help calm the instability of disruptive change and translate the headwinds of change into a tailwind. This can enable individuals to accelerate their career progress and organizational leaders to build an even stronger workforce, all resulting in improved performance. **E-mail your questions or your ideas on how to cultivate a creative workplace**, so I can share them, to [patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com](mailto:patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com). **PM**



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