

## Rational Thoughts on Thinking Creatively (Part 2) Creativity in the Workplace

Last month's feature article offered some thoughts on the notion of creativity, its origins, potential advantages and hindrances. This month, we continue on the theme of creativity and its particular relevance to HR and management professionals.

Employee creativity should be desired in most employees regardless of their position. Not simply the domain of positions commonly thought of as artistic or inventive, such as designers or engineers, creativity is the most valuable resource that any employee can bring to their job. If we define creativity as an openness to and capacity for developing new ideas, then certainly any organization will benefit from nurturing and rewarding this ability amongst their staff.

One of the most frequently reported reasons people list as a cause of job dissatisfaction is boredom or a lack of challenge. In our own past, most of us can think of a job we left (perhaps even a high paying one) simply because it did not engage us or utilize our full potential.

Staff turnover is a major problem for many companies and to some degree an inevitable one. Rarely do we see generations of families, faithfully devoting their services to a single company or corporation. Our highly mobile society as well as changing attitudes and values often dictate that people will go wherever the best opportunity presents itself. Salary is of course a major determining factor in these decisions; however job satisfaction is often of equal if not greater importance.

It does not take a genius to see that retaining contented employees has benefits compared to simply rotating an unending series of discontented "new" hires. Yet many companies still opt to do just the opposite. Why devote valuable resources (be it time or money) to ensuring employee satisfaction when you know there is someone waiting in the wings to occupy any vacated position, often at a lower cost? If one is short-sighted, then this approach does seem to have value. Your bottom line salary expenses may remain low. Yet what impact does this have on a company's long-term profitability and position in the market place?

By way of example, let's suppose that hypothetical company, who we will call Faceless Inc., operates a twenty person customer service division to handle sales, complaints, support, etc. Employees are hired at the lowest wage the market will allow and after a brief training period are given the maximum workload they can handle and expected to follow a rigid pattern of procedures that have not been adapted since the company's inception. New ideas and concepts are not only discouraged, they are often met with disdain. Effective workers are rewarded with an increased workload and the less effective are terminated. Eventually the more effective employees, tired of the

overwhelming workload (that includes training the endless parade of new faces) and the unchanging day to day drudgery of the position either leaves in favor of a better position, or themselves become an ineffective employee. Sounds familiar?

What's the downside of all this you may ask? As long as I can easily find replacements, what have I lost? Consider what might happen to Faceless Inc.'s reputation. We've all had the experience of calling for customer support, only to encounter unqualified or surly support staff that is anything but supportive. The result in most cases is that we decide to never purchase that company's product or services again. In all likelihood, the company in question employed practices similar to our fictional one.

And what does all this have to do with creativity, you might further ask yourself? Well think of how easily this situation could be turned around. Among human resource professionals, the term "creative management" has become synonymous with the phrase "enlightened leadership". Often by investing little except their time, management can significantly increase job satisfaction amongst employees simply by encouraging their input and ideas and implementing a reward system for those ideas that benefit the company. While there are no guarantees, common sense alone tells us that employees who feel their contributions are welcome and valued are more likely to feel sense of loyalty that will influence their performance favorably. This process can be facilitated by including creativity as a sought-after trait for all positions during the hiring process and implementing practices that further encourage the same.

In his enlightening essay, "Revealed at Last! What Killed the Dinosaurs! And You Don't Look So Terrific Yourself" , writer Harlan Ellison speculates that the demise of the great prehistoric beasts was not due to an ice age or a collision with a large asteroid, but simply due to a lack of imagination on their part. Mr. Ellison further speculates that our growing tendency to ignore our own creativity is contributing to the death of our imagination which will ensure that we soon become an extinct species as well, unless this process is thwarted.

The same can be said of any business venture. After all, it was the creativity of one person (or persons) that initially gave the company its life. The creativity of many is essential to sustaining that existence.