

Building an Ideas Culture

Yvonne Adele is a director of Ideas Culture and one of Australia's most recognised creative thinking speakers. She has worked with many of Australia's leading organisations to help them become more creative. Her approach is to build an ideas culture by teaching people at all levels in an organisation to access their untapped creative thinking skills.

"In this current climate, fresh thinking is the most important tool we have," says Yvonne. "I believe everyone has unlimited ability to think creatively about everyday challenges, and I'm on a mission to show people how to unleash those hidden talents. I call it a 'friendly poke in the eye'".

Here Yvonne explains how to create a culture of ideas in the workplace.

Barriers:

Yvonne says the major barrier to creativity is "having the space for strategic play". Many organisations don't have an area where employees can get together to share creative ideas. Nor do they allocate time to this activity.

Setting aside a creative area in the business, or scheduling time outside the business where staff can gather in a creative space to apply their imagination to the business, is a great way to encourage creativity in the workplace.

Celebrate the submission of ideas, big and small:

Yvonne says fostering creativity is about "not just encouraging, but allowing staff at all levels to submit ideas for anything they see that could be useful for the business. Then it's about rewarding the submission of those ideas... not just rewarding those staff whose ideas make money".

This creates a culture where people are incentivised to offer up ideas, no matter how bizarre or 'out there' they may seem at the time. Often, the most bizarre ideas



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have merit and it's important for these ideas to be aired in the business, to give it access to choices about which direction to go in.

Invite ideas:

Yvonne says one of the key ways to embed creativity in the business is to “put an ideas box in the staff room and a raffle book. The idea is that staffs write their idea on one side of the raffle ticket, put it in the box and take the other side. If an idea gets up, staff can choose whether to ‘own’ it, or sit back and watch it in action”.

Another idea, says Yvonne, is to “encourage staff to decorate their workspace as they see fit. Or implement a two hour, once a week, DJ-for-a-day session, when staff take turns playing their favourite music for everyone else”.

Alternately, give one staff member \$50 a week to take someone out for lunch, the rules being that the luncheon guest has to be someone outside your business. “So go to another floor in the same building and ask a stranger. You both bring a business challenge with you and get 'fresh eyes' for a solution”, says Yvonne.

How to get ideas:

Brainstorming — the process whereby everyone in a team gets together to come up with solutions or ideas about a particular problem or opportunity — has long been used to generate creative ideas in the workplace. But, says Yvonne, “Traditional brainstorms are no longer effective”. It is common for participants to feel uncomfortable and under pressure when the group is taking turns saying ideas aloud, one by one, to the whole room.

According to Yvonne, “every brainstorm should start with a well-defined, one-sentence challenge, with a question mark at the end”. An example question might be, “How can we be smarter about staff retention in the next 6 months?”. Then, before every creative thinking technique, do a fun warm up. For example, get everyone to contribute to a story or proverb quickly, one word at a time — this is a great way to open up the brain.



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Then, says Yvonne, “Brainstorm solo first. You will get, on average, 80 percent more ideas – yes – 80%. Use a creative thinking technique like Random Word Association to get you started”.

This is a technique in which you write down a random word, then do a quick 30 second word association down a page, writing down anything that comes to mind when you think of that word or any other word that follows.

You then use those words, one at a time, and reflect back on your challenge, allowing your thinking to veer off in different directions. Write the ideas down. Then pair up, share them and build on them before presenting to the group.

The broad scope of ideas this technique produces is truly amazing, and will give the organisation a huge bucketful of ideas to consider.

Using the techniques to respond to competitive threats:

When it comes to responding to competitive threats, Yvonne advises using the steps above, but “put competitor name tags on individual team members to identify them as someone from one of your competitors”. Then, everyone brainstorms as usual, but from the perspective of your competitor.

For example, your company name is PostSwitch. One of your competitors is called EnergyBlaze.

One of your team members wears a name tag identifying them as ‘John, Business Development Manager, EnergyBlaze’. He writes the challenge as:

‘In what ways can we increase our market share against PostSwitch within the next six months?’ Then you complete the brainstorm activity as listed in the last step.

“The ideas you generate are the things you will need to watch out for from your competitor”, says Yvonne, who says this is a particularly powerful tool.





Ultimately, for a creative culture to flourish in the workplace there has to be support for creativity from top management. Without this support, it's almost impossible to develop a creative culture.

So, think about how you could use the techniques above in your own business to help inject creative excitement in the workplace and deliver new revenue streams. Doing this is one of the best ways to revitalise an enterprise and is lots of fun too.

"Even businesses who've slowed down their manufacturing or product cycles can take this time to reinvent themselves internally using creative thinking." Yvonne says.

"The benefits are felt all round. Staff feel invigorated and trusted by management, existing clients are pleased by fresh suggestions and new clients see the business as dynamic and current."

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