

# How To Make Creativity A Reality At Work

<http://www.fastcompany.com/3035443/hit-the-ground-running/not-just-a-buzzword-how-to-make-creativity-a-reality-for-your-people>

With more tools than ever, how is it possible we're feeling less creative? As it turns out, there are a few reasons.

By Michael O. Cooper

Have you looked around at your company or work environment lately? We have more technology, tools, and processes to fuel creativity than at any other time in history, but are you actually being creative? Or are you feeling increasingly drained of creativity?

As an executive coach, I have the privilege of getting an inside peek into the workings of numerous companies. I observe patterns and trends that others don't have the luxury or the capability to see across multiple organizations and industries. What I've noticed lately is that many people are talking about creativity and innovation, but few are actually engaging in it in a healthy way. Here are some specific reasons why:

## People Are Overloaded

Business efficiency has undergone a transformation in the last few years such that these days most people find themselves saddled with a set of responsibilities that used to be shared by multiple people. Sure, we now have technology that helps streamline some of the work, but generally speaking staff seems to be overloaded with responsibilities. When we're so focused on efficiency and working long hours, we deprive ourselves of the brain space necessary to be creative.

When we're so focused on efficiency and working long hours, we deprive ourselves of the brain space necessary to be creative.

Creativity requires a base of clearly defined problems or customer needs that are then introduced into an environment of experimentation, strategic thinking, perspective, and the reflection that encourages seeing the connections between disparate ideas or concepts.

Does your company actually create time and space for all of these? If you're so busy being efficient, you can't be creative--they are opposing forces. Companies have focused so much on efficiency that they're killing creativity.

## Workers Feel Burnt Out

Creativity is in high demand, and creatives are under more strain than ever to innovate and deliver goods. But the pressure they experience is overwhelming, unsustainable, unrealistic, and damaging to employee health.

Quarterly earnings are always just around the corner, there's the challenge of extremely short product development cycles, and there's increasing competition and disruption in nearly every imaginable market--the methodology, systems, processes, and structure within most companies aren't fully honoring the creative process.

Creativity and great design require emotional responses from our target audience, and it's emotionally-driven people that create those best. These folks are particularly sensitive to stress. Add in the intense pressure of delivering some big project every few weeks or months and you've got a recipe for burnout.

# Creatives' Brains Are Drained

What I've noticed in the creative hub of Silicon Valley and San Francisco lately is the number of creatives leaving their companies to start their own gigs or combining forces to create businesses that allow them to truly create. These individuals feel trapped in an uninspiring environment.

I've had several creative directors--the leaders of creativity in their companies--hire me to help them understand their value because they had lost sight of it in their current firms. They knew they had skills and experience but the constant pressure of efficiency and tight deadlines mixed with overwhelming responsibilities caused them to question their ability to continue to be creative.

In fact, they were constantly wondering if they were actually doing anything worthwhile. Most of them wanted to make an impact on the world, but few companies focus on innovation of that scale. These companies would rather churn out products that mimic competitors for a "safe" bet of a small slice of some existing market rather than focus on creating something new, unique, impactful, useful, and helpful. The constant churn, pressure, and efficiency are creating a brain drain that is killing creativity.

## Cost-Cutting Trumps All

Since the crash of 2008, most companies have given more and more responsibility in decision-making to finance. While that's fiscally responsible, it may be threatening creativity. I have nothing against CFOs and finance people, but their job is to mitigate risk and to maximize yield, which is often counter to true innovation.

So many organizations are focused on cost-cutting or cost-control that they have lost sight of cost-leadership, which means investing in ideas and projects that move the company forward, rather than maintaining the status quo or focusing on incremental progress.

Here are five things you can do to nurture creativity in your company:

### 1. Honor The Creative Process

It can't be forced and it needs room to breathe. Allow your people the time to think, experiment, ponder, play, make connections, define problems properly, and make mistakes.

### 2. Focus On Results Rather Than Efficiency

Efficiency is important, but a hyper-efficient organization that isn't innovative is doomed sooner or later anyway--someone is already working on disrupting your industry, even if you just did it.

### 3. Value The Impact Creatives Have On Your Product Design

Respect the empathy they have with your customers because this is what allows them to create inspiring, relevant products that fly off the shelves. Recognize, reward, and incentivize them appropriately.

### 4. Carve Out A Piece Of The Budget

Require your finance people to set aside a percentage of the annual budget for research, development, and innovation. Set an expected return on this investment that exceeds your normal operational yields and include that as a requirement in your product development considerations.

## 5. Celebrate Creativity And Innovation

Celebrating these things fuels your company by allowing you to respond to core customers, stay competitive and relevant, and pivot the business. Short-term success will only get your company so far. Instead of constantly worrying about this, build an organization that strives for greatness and creates a sustainable process for long-term innovation.

*--Michael O. Cooper equips right-brain entrepreneurs, creative professionals and agencies with the business mindset, strategies and skills to thrive in a constantly changing environment. He is the founder of Innovators + Influencers and serves as executive coach, facilitator and trainer for design, software, public relations and communications firms, as well as TED Fellows. Follow him on Twitter at @InnovInfluencer.*