

Creativity: A Key Link to Entrepreneurial Behavior

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Creativity is a trait of emerging importance in today's fast paced business world. Firms now understand that fostering employee creativity can lead to a wealth of new revenue opportunities, often through creation of new products all together. On top of this, creativity lays at the heart of entrepreneurial activity and the creation of new business, which in exceptional cases can lead to discovery of entirely new industries. This is of particular interest to firms in the developing world who are attempting to transition into high-technology industries. These industries are exceptionally valuable as they often have spillover effects which benefit not only the participant companies but also the nation at large.

However, before we can go forward, we must clarify what exactly it means to be creative. Arthur Koestler (1967) believed that at the root of creativity was something he called bisociation, or the ability of an individual to connect two unrelated pieces of information in a novel way. While Koestler did not use business examples when he spoke of bisociation, Tersa Amabile (1997) a Harvard Business School Professor noticed that a similar process is involved in business oriented creativity as well.

Yet entrepreneurial creativity does not evolve in a vacuum. There are a variety of factors that aid in creative association. In order to discover what these factors were, Stephen Ko and John E. Butler surveyed a variety of entrepreneurs. The first thing that this survey found was that a wide array of business knowledge aided entrepreneurs significantly in their creative pursuits. This knowledge could be attained through direct means of actual business experience or indirectly through the reading of a relevant publication. The director of Delta Video stated he "browse[s] more than 100 websites and observes everything around [him] everyday." Scholastic experience is also very important, as this formal education helps build an individuals overall base of knowledge.

Nonetheless, a large amount of relevant information is also accrued through interaction with other people. Mark Granovetter (1973) particularly noted the importance of weak ties, or those individuals whom we only see occasionally. Weak ties can provide business managers with information that they might otherwise not have come in contact with, something our closest associates, who share very similar experiences, cannot do. Supporting this most respondents felt that their entrepreneurial ideas usually came from casual acquaintances and rather than close contacts.

Alertness is also a key factor in making creative and novel associations. Entrepreneurs often indicated that they possessed the ability to remain focused, even while receiving disparate and, at first glance, unrelated pieces of information. Put simply, they were

always alert and constantly scanning for information related to their current problem. This skill allows them to notice information in places a less keen eye might overlook.

Still all the information in the world is worthless if one cannot connect the dots and find the connection. In the business world this connection is rarely obvious. The entrepreneurs surveyed tended to believe that their innovations were novel, discoveries that others easily could have missed. Many indicate a synergy between their subconscious and conscious mind. They found that while they might consciously search for relevant information, it was in the depths of their subconscious that associations came bubbling up.

Understanding these factors, there are many ways that firms can actively promote creativity. An organization could potentially encourage their managers to join professional associations and attend conventions in order to increase the breadth of their contacts. Further, firms may find it beneficial to rotate their managers around different departments in order to increase their base of information. In terms of hiring, firms may also find it beneficial to actively pursue individuals who appear to have the desire to satisfy their creative spark. Along these same lines, firms, by hiring people who are prone to questioning the status quo can increase the overall alertness of their company. Generally there should be an environment where new ideas can be brought to surface without undue ridicule.

Beyond these specific suggestions the message of this survey is clear; senior managers should need to go out of their way in order to create an environment conducive to creativity. In the end they can do this by fostering breadth of knowledge, breadth of contacts specifically weak ties, increasing employee alertness, and finally hiring employees who possess innate creative skills.