CPSB

Developing creativity in a company whose business is creativity
By Andy Wilkins

Background and Purpose of this Article

The primary purpose of this article is to outline an intervention made in one of the world's largest advertising companies, noted Firm X. This intervention was to help Firm X further develop creativity - which, as we all know, is at the heart of successful companies in this field. The article will also briefly mention some of the follow up results as a consequence of the initial intervention.

Early in 1998, the Chief Executive of the Asia region of Firm X read an article I had written about the strategic importance of the climate for creativity in a UK publication called Strategy. As a result, he asked me to speak at a conference held in the Asia region.

In the words of my client, the Chief Executive, the need was this: "To succeed in the future, we need to improve not only how we craft our advertisements and campaigns, but also how we craft our business. Currently, we have a preference for the former and I wanted to stimulate discussion and thinking in the areas of the Climate for Ideas, the Styles of Creativity, and Creative Leadership."

The Intervention

I arrived at the nirvana they call the Sheraton Laguna Hotel in Phuket, Thailand to be greeted by a small elephant (only 2 tons), so many Thai smiles I had to massage my face back into position at the end of the day, and a personally signed note from my hosts - the Creative Director (CD) and the Managing Director (MD) for the local Thailand office. The note included:

Dear Andy,

Sawasdee Krab, Sawasdee Kah, (I'm still not sure what this means, but I assumed it was nice as they had put their names on the note).

I hope you had a pleasant flight.... request you forget all your worries....prepare to be energized and inspired... please enjoy your stay here..... should you need any help....feel free to let us know.

As an 'outsider' to Firm X, this note made me feel welcome in their community. Having a note put into everyone's room is not a major thing to do, but it told me that they were a thoughtful group.

One of the challenging points that I raised early in my talk was that much of what we have learned about creativity over the last 20 years is particularly relevant to industries, organizations, and functions that consider themselves to be especially 'creative' - such as advertising. However, much of this is being

ignored by their industry. The underlying view is that the creative process is somehow too 'clever' to be managed.

This underlying belief that creativity is somehow too 'clever' to be managed is particularly intriguing as we know that this is not the case. Also, it was the work of an advertising executive - Alex Osborn, the O in BBDO (Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, Inc.) - that started much of what we know today.

One of the major insights into creativity over the last 20 years was that all people are creative. Creativity, however, comes in different styles. People have a style for the type of creativity they prefer to use, ranging from Adaptive/Better to Innovative/Different.

Those people with a more adaptive preference create things by making them better, while those with a more innovative preference create things by making them different.   The secret for success is to value both styles and, ideally, to have a wide gap between the top people. I felt this was a potentially highly challenging insight for the advertising industry as they normally have a Creative Department.

Many of the 53 conference attendees were invited to complete the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI). The KAI measures a person's creative preference and, not surprisingly, the average score was very innovative.

For the MDs who run the Firm X country offices across Asia, the KAI results were as follows:

     N = 13
     Mean = 115
     Range = 86 - 139
     Standard Deviation = 14

There are a couple of interesting points to note on these scores. Firstly, there was only one score which was more adaptive than the general population mean of 95. That was the score of 86 - the next closest score on the continuum in this group was 102. Secondly, if we remove the highest and lowest scores from the group, the standard deviation drops to 10 - showing a very homogenous group.

For the CDs who run the Creative
Departments, the KAI results were as follows:

     N = 14
     Mean = 119
     Range = 100 - 147
     Standard Deviation = 13

Again, there are some interesting points to note. Firstly, there is no score that is adaptive compared to the general population mean of 95. Secondly, the mean

and standard deviation are very similar to those of the MDs - possibly suggesting the recruitment of people like themselves since the MDs select the CDs. Again, when the highest and lowest scores are removed, the standard deviation drops to 10.

I explained to the audience that, while this KAI profile might have advantages, it could potentially lead to some major challenges, as successful organizations and teams tend to have a wider spread than was evident here. Some of the implications of senior management in the advertising industry having a KAI profile such as this might include:

∑   poorly understanding client needs or only attracting innovative clients
∑   lack of attention to detail
∑   poor organization and planning
∑   very high levels of debate
∑   a sense of a lack of time leading to the urgent driving out the important thinking work

Interestingly, the country office in Firm X that I was told was the best performing in Asia had a very healthy gap of 23 between the CD (109) and MD (86) and the only person with an adaptive preference (compared to the general population mean of 95). Later, talking with the pair of them about their scores, there was clearly a great degree of respect and value seen in their very different styles. They were the only pair of MD and CD that organized a scheduled time with me after the presentation to understand in more detail what the implications of the results meant. Naturally, this was arranged by the MD.

The second half of my presentation focused on the 'climate for ideas'. As I explained to my audience, climate is a metaphor from the world of weather to describe the prevailing conditions.

Using a tool called the Situational Outlook Questionnaire (SOQ), developed by the Creative Problem Solving Group - Buffalo (CPS-B) based on the work of Göran Ekvall, it is possible to measure the climate in a team, department, or organization as a whole and to contrast it with normative data for High*, Average, and Stagnated organizations. The SOQ dimensions are: Challenge & Involvement, Freedom, Trust & Openness, Idea Time, Playfulness & Humor, Conflict, Idea Support, Debate, and Risk Taking. Aspects of all these dimensions are associated with a climate conducive to creativity.

In order to make this part of the presentation on climate more interesting and engaging for my audience, my client and I agreed that we could issue the SOQ to a number of the country offices in Asia and report the results at the conference. The sample size for each of the 5 offices invited to take part was only 4 or 5 people, but the purpose was not to suggest the results would be representative. The purpose was to show the audience how the results of the

SOQ look and can be used to help develop creativity. The quantitative results were as shown above.

When interpreting the results, note that all the dimensions except Conflict are positively correlated. For Conflict, the lower the score the better the implications. Coupled with the quantitative data, qualitative data was also collected and analyzed. Due to the sample size and the purpose of the survey, however, no significant conclusions were drawn. It is worth noting though, that the views of people at the conference as to the best and worst performing of the 5 offices was congruent with the climate results above.

In a wrap up presentation at the end of the conference, the client summarized the results of the survey and encouraged the individual offices present to make up their own minds about if and how they would like to use the SOQ. (We have subsequently run assessments for two of the 13 country offices and are discussing the possibilities and appropriateness with 2 other offices).

After the presentations on styles and climate, the conference split into two streams - one for the CDs and one for the MDs. The MDs attended a Leadership Workshop covering the subject: If climate has a big effect on individual creativity, what can we (the leadership) do to influence it? During this workshop, we covered the aspects that influence climate. The physical environment has some influence, as does organizational structure but most comes from people.

In particular, climate is driven by leadership behavior and the relationships between leaders and followers. If you want to change the climate, the best place to start is with leadership behavior. Work by Göran Ekvall shows that, on average, 65% of people's perceptions on climate are affected by leadership. In other words, if things are going well - people are engaged, motivated, creative and believe it is a great place to work - there is a 65% chance it can be traced to the leaders. On the other hand if people are not involved, loathe their jobs, are unmotivated, and think the place is intolerable, there is a 65% chance it is the leaders fault. It was emphasized, however, that SOQ results should not be used as a measure to promote or terminate employment. Instead, the SOQ is a tool that may suggest the need for leadership development.

Having made the connections between what aspects effect climate and the importance of leadership behavior, we went on to explore the leadership behaviors that help the climate. In summary, this showed that high performers have mastered a different style of leadership we call Creative Leadership. Creative Leadership is largely about establishing a climate and context open to change.

We finished the workshop by exploring some of the ways to improve the climate, based on the leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner and published in their book The Leadership Challenge. From their research, Kouzes and Posner identified 5 practices that were common to exemplary leadership. When performing at their best, leaders Challenge, Inspire, Enable, Model, and Encourage. Using an instrument developed by Kouzes and Posner called the

Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI), leaders can discover to what extent they have adopted these five practices. During the conference wrap-up, the client presented the interpretation of the 5 practices from the perspective of what helps and what hinders. These were as follows:

Inspiring a Shared Vision
Helps -   Has a sense of creative vision which is shared with the teams.
Hinders - Felt the whole world was fighting him.

Modeling the Way
Helps - Always gave clear and open-minded direction.
Hinders - Took the credit for work he didn't do.

Challenging the Process
Helps - Challenged everyone to give more of their best - briefs, ideas, executions.
Hinders - Agreed with whoever had a strong opinion or more power.

Enabling Others to Act
Helps - Created an environment of enthusiasn where people tried to do impressive work.
Hinders - Don't listen to anyone else.

Encouraging the Heart
Helps - Positive, rewarding, enlightening critique.
Hinders - Not getting outwardly excited about an idea.

During the conference, the client also expressed the importance of climate by quoting a director from a theater review he had come across in the UK. It provided a poignant insight to the conference (and me) of the importance of climate.

"If by all sorts of methods of work, you can create a climate of confidence, security, and trust, not only between the actors and the director, but the actor within himself, by his feeling that he can experiment and take risks, then a new process starts. The challenge of the role begins to open up what one actor once called 'a number of drawers' in himself that he has never opened."

While we know that considerable research into what leader and follower behaviors support a creative climate, I find some people naturally or intuitively know what is usually required is nothing more than human awareness and

thoughtfulness. My welcome note from my two hosts was a good and simple example of this.

* Note: The SOQ uses the terms Innovative, Average, and Stagnated to reflect the organizations' level of climate. However, in this article, the author chooses to use High, Average, and Stagnated to maintain consistency of the word 'Innovative'.