

Cat-herding. The art of managing creative people

Much of the success of the Cambridge region comes from our ability to manage creativity and innovation. Everyone is creative, but like any human capability, some people are better endowed than others. We can all get better with coaching, and we all improve if we are in the right environment.

Any good leader should be able to name a few particularly creative people within their organisation. The company's future value may depend on what they do, but managing them is like herding cats.

If you try to force your creative mavericks to follow the official process or to work on a project that they're not interested in, at best they'll moan, at worst they'll refuse. Usually they will act like cats and get on with their own thing anyway, probably at 3am in breach of all the Health and Safety regulations.

On the other hand, cats do respond to things they are interested in: Wave a piece of paper on the end of some string in front of a kitten and watch its eyes light up.

The secret of managing creative people is just the same: Start by getting them interested in the question you want them to address. Whereas most people want to be reassured that they'll find the task easy and that there's a low risk of failure, for many creative people you need to emphasise just how difficult and important it is. Don't expect them to rigidly implement a 40 page requirement specification, but try to define the really fundamental questions and underlying user needs. Then encourage them to question it and explore for the best solutions. Often this will reveal elegant ideas that the 40 page specification would have precluded. In the process they will very often get so interested and motivated that pretty soon you'll find it difficult to tear them off your problem.

Professor Amabile of Harvard has shown that this self generated "intrinsic" motivation is much more effective at encouraging creativity than is external "extrinsic" motivation. It is also cheaper. One client of mine recently offered a quite substantial prize (ie "extrinsic motivation") to staff for innovative ideas. They are unlikely to repeat the experience because its most noticeable effect was to stimulate jealousy and secrecy.

Creative people tend to be task focussed, rather than process focussed. They get excited by a difficult challenge and get a real buzz from developing the vision of the way forward. They hate having to follow an imposed process unless it makes sense to them.

Creative people often ask for "freedom", but what they are really asking for is freedom within a clear, sensible framework. The framework should ideally be task focused and rational: for example "we'll double sales if we can launch at the next Trade Fair" rather than arbitrary procedural rules "You must wear a tie, even when working in the lab" This helps them focus their creativity and avoid going off at a tangent.

If you try for a management style based on command and control, you'll get scratched. Providing autonomy, support and guidance works much better.

Finally, just as most cats like being stroked, the most creative people tend to crave more recognition than the rest of us could believe possible. They are also unusually sensitive to rejection. This means that before providing constructive criticism of an idea, it's important to find something that you like about it. If the idea is truly dreadful, the best you may be able to think of is "I absolutely agree with you that this is a topic that we need to address". It's only once they

have been reassured that you like at least something about their precious creation that they will be able to listen properly to what you say.

As I pointed out at the beginning, we are all creative. We can probably all recognise elements of many of these characteristics in ourselves and our colleagues. Very few of us have been lucky enough to have had the environment and help to let us achieve our full potential, but we know what a difference it makes when we;

- feel we're working on something worthwhile and interesting
- feel free and secure, not controlled.
- feel praised, not punished.

Classical management orthodoxy tells us that we must follow the rules. Isn't it a pity that so often they are the wrong rules.

Anne Miller is Director of The Creativity Partnership. www.tcp-uk.co.uk 01763 261188

The Creativity Partnership, Melbourn Science Park, Melbourn, Royston, Herts, UK. SG8 6EE