Unleashing Creativity in the Workplace:

Going beyond the operations manual.

by Robert Leber

As a leader in your organization, your ability to unleash and focus the power of creativity within yourself and your followers is an essential capability that is required to make the transition from an operational manager to a strategic and innovative leader. In addition, your ability, and that of your followers, to turn dreams into realistic visions and actionable strategies, leading to successful applications, will allow you and your organization to reap the benefits of a creative environment.

Most organizations have created volumes of planning documents and operating procedures that encompass all of the business opportunities and activities that a company has formally targeted and organized itself to manage. However, in today's more competitive and less predictable world, the most beneficial opportunities typically fall outside the scope of formal planning, budgeting and management. Maletz and Nohria (February, 2001) conducted research that focused on what they call the "whitespace," defined as the large, but mostly unoccupied territory where rules are vague, authority is fuzzy, budgets are nonexistent and strategy is unclear (as contrasted with the written words or "blackspace" on a typical page of operating procedure). Maletz and Nohria found that whitespace existed in every organization they researched, and that leaders who operated in the whitespace were often those who were most successful at driving innovation and creative problem solving, incubating new businesses and finding new markets.

There are no user manuals for operating in the whitespace—and it can be hazardous for the large number of leaders and followers who consider this to be unfamiliar territory. However, whitespace can be navigated by thinking differently about how work gets completed, measured and recognized (Maletz & Nohria, 2001). Ironically, most leaders develop their whitespace skills on the job.

So, what are these skills that help us to successfully operate within the whitespace and lead innovation and creative problem solving? Numerous seminars and hundreds of books advocate t rustworthy leaders who have a strong sense of integrity, adapt easily to change, show compassion for people, exhibit consideration for the personal effects of their actions on their followers and possess courage to make tough and fair decisions. But aren't these attributes the same type of expectations we have for our followers? Of course they are. Leadership and followership expectations and behaviors are not independent. Hollander (1992) suggests that rather than being separate, leaders and followers exist, unified in a reciprocal, interdependent system. Both leaders and followers should possess integrity and be trustworthy, adaptable and optimistic about the future, have insight to see beyond the obvious, have a compassion for people and possess the courage to make tough decisions. In addition, both leaders and followers expect to work in a shared environment that provides:

- An atmosphere of openness, cooperation and trust.

- A setting where co-workers demonstrate a consistent pattern of behavior that emphasizes respect for one another.

- A clear understanding of performance requirements and accountability.

- An investment in people so they have access to the right information, training, tools, equipment and support to do a good job.

- Situations where the people who do the work are involved in planning the work and are actively encouraged to try new ideas and methods.

- Acceptance of some amount of failure as a learning experience without affixing blame.

- Recognition and reward for good work and innovation.

- Encouragement for teamwork and recognition of good coaches and facilitators of teamwork.

- An ongoing process to eliminate the gaps between the organization's vision and current reality.

What this indicates is that leadership characteristics should not be viewed in isolation, but as a part of the total system. So the question becomes, "What requirements must I meet to be an innovative leader who promotes a more creative system?" Let's start with the unique and major requirements of any leader:

- Direct the activities of your followers by effectively communicating a shared sense of purpose with expected results and outcomes.

- Provide the support and resources necessary to permit your followers to have a reasonable chance to accomplish the expected results and outcomes including the training and experiential opportunities necessary to allow your followers to develop their skills.

- Establish and nurture a creative environment that encourages your followers to search continually for new ideas that are superior to the ones currently being used by your organization, enabling them to increase their chances of successfully accomplishing the expected results and outcomes.

Recently, it was my pleasure to lead a group of Regent University doctorial students in a discussion regarding creativity. One of the students' tasks was to define creativity so they could explore its many facets. Three definitions emerged from the exercise, which indicate that creativity involves the ability to:

- Break free of established ways of thought and organizational constraints in order to look at the world from an unsuppressed perspective and see beyond the obvious.

- Develop and explore options through imagination, then transform the new images into reality through exploration and "connecting the dots" in new patterns.

- See the unseen by seeking out the unknown, then turning that which is not yet reality into something new and visible.

The students noted that creativity, as defined above, was becoming an essential component in addressing the challenges confronting their organizations. However, as mentioned earlier and implied in the students' definitions, one of the major challenges to gaining the benefits of creativity is the ability of an organization and its employees to turn dreams into successful applications. This ability encompasses not only the maintenance of an environment that encourages experimentation and growth, but also the means to have in place the

processes and commitment of resources necessary to develop and apply new ideas and methods as they evolve.

Here's where you can make your greatest contribution to the creative process. As a leader, you must remove barriers that are in the way of advancing toward a more open and creative environment. This will allow your team to stay focused on transforming ideas into beneficial results. To successfully operate within the whitespace, you must understand the importance of the following:

✓ **Empower your followers.** By recognizing that teams offer advantages such as those identified by Dyer (1987), you can overcome whitespace challenges.

- A team has more information than what typically resides with one individual; therefore, teams can provide more diverse input into a decision. This expanded input tends to improve the accuracy of a decision and increases the degree to which the solution demonstrates creativity.

- Team decisions, because they have input from more individuals, are likely to develop solutions that will be more widely accepted. Likewise, if individuals who will be affected by a decision and who will be instrumental in implementing it are able to participate in the decision itself, they will be more likely to accept it and encourage others to accept it.

- The team decision-making process is consistent with democratic ideals and is generally perceived as more legitimate than decisions made by a single person. When an individual decision maker fails to consult with others, particularly those "doing the work," he or she can create the perception that his or her decisions are autocratic and arbitrary, which is a show-stopper for team-centered initiatives.

Of course, group decision making is not without drawbacks, including the following disadvantages:

- Time is required to assemble a team, and the interaction that takes place once the team is in place is frequently inefficient. The result is that teams take more time to reach a solution than an individual would.

- Teams contain social pressures that can reinforce established ways of thought, making it harder to look at a challenge or problem from an unsuppressed perspective. The desire by team members to be accepted and considered as an asset to the team can result in squashing any overt disagreements, thus encouraging conformity among viewpoints and limiting creative thought.

- Team members share responsibility—but who is actually responsible for the final outcome? One of the major challenges to successfully gaining the benefits of a creative environment is the ability of the organization and its members to turn new ideas into realistic visions and actionable strategies that lead to successful applications. In an individual decision, it is clear who is responsible. In a team decision, the responsibility of any single member is diminished and is less clearly defined.

✓ **Recognize the need to stay focused on desired outcomes and results**. By doing so, you will be able to maximize the advantages gained through the creative team decision making process and minimize the disadvantages mentioned previously. This requires an environment where team members accept responsibility for their situation, believe they have an underlying purpose and are committed to achieving that purpose now. To create that environment:

- Structure your team for success by keeping its size as small as possible relative to the size of the challenge.

- Populate your team with an eclectic group of competent individuals who will bring fresh perspectives to old problems.

- Reassign team members as the process moves from thinkers/inventors generating ideas to operators managing business adoption and benefit realization. This will ensure that your team is populated with the right people with the right skills at the right time.

- Appoint an experienced facilitator to keep your team moving along and focused and a recorder to document your team's successes, failures and decision making process.

- Establish goals that are clear and attainable.

- Ensure that your team members understand the goals by visiting the scene of the challenge and clearly identifying the desired changes.

In addition, you will need to mobilize resources to support this environment, which means begging, borrowing and otherwise appropriating what your team needs. You'll quickly learn that you can raise a fair amount of resources by asking a lot of people for a little at a time. Once people have contributed a little and have been embraced as co-owners, they are likely to give again. Maletz and Nohria (2001) observed that innovative leaders can obtain resources in many ways, but several characteristics are necessary regardless of one's approach. You must be persistent, creative and have a willingness to work with what you can get rather than what you think you need. The standard operating procedure becomes "If you need it, go get it." The team's commitment is based on "getting it done."

Recognize that the best nourishment for the creative process is for an individual to see one's ideas successfully applied and to witness the improvement and benefit as they are applied to new situations and conditions.

✓ **Understand the need for formal processes that support initiatives.** As noted previously , there are no user manuals for operating in the whitespace. However, as an innovative leader, you must understand the need for formal processes that support your team's initiatives and provide resources to develop and apply the new ideas as they evolve. In addition, work to eliminate organizational processes and modify behaviors that serve as barriers to more open and creative environments and revise procedures that tacitly maintain the status quo.

You'll typically face significant political barriers, particularly where your team's initiatives are different or separate from those of the main organization. Therefore, you'll need to:

- Manage the boundary between new initiatives and the core business.

- Have good communication skills to influence people within your organization.

- Use your networks to influence outcomes favorable to your team. This includes excellent awareness of other people's personalities, motivations, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, skills, likes and dislikes and strengths and weaknesses.

- Convince others of the importance and viability of your initiatives.

- Be able to compete internally for resources. Maletz and Nohria (2001) observed leaders using a variety of techniques to show others in the organization that they deserved support, such as trading in their technical skills and reputation as an expert to give them the clout they needed to lead in the whitespace.

- Most importantly, understand the challenge of keeping your team's informal structures and procedures aligned with the formal organization so you don't get in the way or outgrow the

organizational culture. Training in change management is a fundamentally important set of skills to facilitate this key success factor.

I have walked the path trying to find that single formula for unleashing the power of creativity. It doesn't exist. Creativity, by its very nature, is turning chaos into order and productive change. The precepts and tenets mentioned in this paper will hold you in good stead, regardless of the path you take. The compass that guides your journey should be your vision, fueled by your passion to turn ideas into beneficial realities.

About the Author

Robert (Bob) Leber has been a long-time employee at Northrop Grumman Corporation – Newport News Sector (NGNN) holding various leadership positions since 1982. In 2004, Bob was promoted to director of Education and Workforce Development and is responsible for The Apprentice School and the Sector's Training Services. In this role, he also serves as the Sector's point of contact for Workforce Development activities. Bob is the chairman of the Greater Peninsula Workforce Investment Board, is vice chairman of the Board for Junior Achievement of Greater Hampton Roads and serves in the Newport News Educational Foundation.

Bob received a Marine Engineering degree from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, a Liberal Arts degree from the University of Evansville, an MBA from the College of William and Mary, an M.A. in Education and Human Development from George Washington University and a Doctor of Strategic Leadership from Regent University's School of Leadership Studies. Bob may be contacted through e-mail at: Robert.Leber@ngc.com.

Reference:
Block, P. (1987). *The empowered leader: Positive political skills at work.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Dyer, W. G. (1987). *Team building: Issues and alternatives.* Reading, MA: Addison - Wesley Publishing Company.

Hender, J. (2004, April). *Innovation leadership: Roles and key imperatives.* Oxfordshire, UK: Henley-Incubator Strategic Planning Society.

Hollander, E. P. (1992). The essential interdependence of leadership and followership. *Current Directions in Psychological Science.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Maletz, M. C., & Nohria, N. (2001, February). Managing in the Whitespace. *Harvard Business Review.* Boston, MA.