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The best managers also inspire others

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Chances are you know something about Walt Disney and his cartoons, characters and the fabulous amusement parks he and his imaginary friends inspired. But did you also know that after 1926 he didn't do any of the drawing for the pictures coming from his studio?

He was a genius at generating ideas for characters, such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy. He also excelled at developing plots and masterminded technological film innovations. One day, a little boy asked him, "Do you draw Mickey Mouse?" Disney admitted he didn't draw anymore.

"Then you think up all the jokes and ideas?" questioned the boy.

"No," said Disney. "I don't do that."

"Mr. Disney," asked the boy, "just what do you do?"

Disney told the boy, "Sometimes I think of myself as a little bee. I go from one area of the studio to another and gather pollen and sort of stimulate everybody."

This story, as described in the book "Hollywood Anecdotes" by Paul Boller Jr. and Ronald Davis, shows the importance of being able to coach creativity. Put that skill toward the top of management requirements. After all, creative employees tend to solve problems and carry companies through difficult times. Good managers know that encouraging and nurturing creativity doesn't threaten their reputations. Rather, it makes them look even smarter. Everyone wins in that scenario.

Richard Florida, author of the best-selling book "The Rise of the Creative Class" and the more recently published "Flight of the Creative Class," says creative workers constitute 30 percent of the American workforce and earn 50 percent of the salaries. That's a significant chunk of people and payroll to manage.

Further, he says, evaluating creativity is tough because companies give their hardest problems to the most creative people. It makes comparison to other workers difficult. He offers this advice for working with your creative staff:

Everyone needs the opportunity to contribute their creativity.

Make sure every worker feels challenged and motivated.

Make sure creative people have time to apply themselves creatively. (Don't put them on silly jobs that others can handle.)

Make sure workers have a chance to gain peer respect.

Evaluate creative workers by what they deliver, not by how many hours they put in.

Keep hassles away from creative workers. Don't feel like it's their responsibility as workers to do this. Decide whether you want them to spend time filling out paperwork -- or being creative.

Finally, Florida says, understanding the individual psychology of workers is key. You figure out what the needs are and what rewards will work -- and it will be different for every worker. The manager who understands this will be able to create a structure that allows creativity to occur.

I would add a few things to Florida's advice. An employee who isn't in a job that is identified as "creative" may have plenty to offer to the discussion. I try to solicit the opinions of everyone who might be involved in a

project. Include senior members of your team, as well as the person who answers the phone. The folks in the factory and the office offer valuable insights as to how a project might get accomplished.

Take their suggestions and input seriously. You might be surprised who comes up with the best ideas. In this business climate, and perhaps with fewer workers on the payroll, many of your employees have likely assumed additional responsibilities.

Managers should seize the opportunity to encourage all employees to share their opinions and solutions. Years ago, I shared the story of the famed El Cortez Hotel in San Diego, where architects and engineers struggled with the question of how to install a second elevator in the historic structure.

They decided to cut holes in every floor, necessitating closing the hotel during construction and causing a huge financial loss as well as a big mess. But a maintenance worker came up with a different answer: Build the elevator outside the hotel, which would allow the hotel to stay open. It had never been done before, but the "creative" types decided to try it -- with stunning results.

I hope the maintenance worker was well rewarded!

Mackay's Moral: Great managers encourage a healthy dose of vitamin C -- Creativity.

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