Don’t rely on creative sparks: Creativity is a system

Creativity is the outcome of the right kind of leadership and organizational culture.



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When executives talk of creativity, they often picture the lone visionary: the engineer with the breakthrough idea, or the entrepreneur who sees a need that everyone else has missed.

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However, the innovations that reshape industries rarely emerge from a single flash of genius. More often, they are the product of years of accumulated knowledge, and originate in organizations that encourage creativity and innovation by design.

Research by IESE professors Bruno Cassiman, Christoph Loch, Nuria Chinchilla and Yih-Teen Lee approaches creativity from different angles. But the conclusions overlap in the idea that creativity is not an individual talent; rather, it is a system that organizations build deliberately.

Build on what you know

While creativity is often associated with fresh perspectives and outsiders who challenge conventional wisdom, Bruno Cassiman's research into technological innovation suggests that the most valuable breakthroughs frequently come from deep expertise.

His study of the development of lithium-ion batteries shows that revolutionary innovation was not the result of a single eureka moment. Scientists had spent decades advancing the underlying chemistry and building on one another's discoveries before Sony commercialized the first rechargeable lithium-ion battery in 1991. Each breakthrough depended on researchers who knew the field well enough to push beyond its existing boundaries.

Sometimes, we can believe that expertise constrains creativity. In fact, the more deeply people understand a problem, the better equipped they are to see opportunities.

For organizations, investing in learning, research and technical development is, therefore, the foundation of innovation.

Create the conditions for ideas to emerge

Knowledge alone, however, is not enough.

As Christoph Loch argues, managers cannot simply tell people to "be creative." Employees contribute their best ideas when they feel ownership and when collaboration is encouraged.

Loch distinguishes between two important contributors to innovation: those who generate ideas and those who transform ideas into practical outcomes. Organizations need both to create value and avoid stagnation.

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The manager's role becomes less about directing creativity than it is about cultivating the environment in which creativity can flourish. That means encouraging collaboration across functions, rewarding experimentation, breaking down silos and recognizing that innovation is a collective effort.

Choose adaptability over certainty

Even the most brilliant innovations can eventually face changing markets, as well as disruptive technologies and unexpected crises.

For this reason, Nuria Chinchilla suggests that invention is always an ongoing process. Organizations cannot rely on yesterday's solutions to solve tomorrow's problems. The challenge is to navigate uncertainty while maintaining a clear sense of purpose.

Adaptive leadership requires balancing stability with flexibility. Employees need enough confidence in the organization's direction to embrace change, but enough freedom to question established assumptions and experiment with new approaches.

Build something that outlasts you

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of collective creativity stands in the heart of Barcelona.

As Yih-Teen Lee observes, the Sagrada Familia is often celebrated as Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí's masterpiece. Yet it has been under construction for over a century and is finally nearing completion because generations of architects, engineers, artisans and project leaders have shared responsibility for bringing the vision to life.

Each generation respected Gaudí's intentions while embracing new technologies, materials and methods. Rather than abandoning the founder's vision, artisans have interpreted it anew, again and again, over time.

For business leaders, this is a reminder that lasting innovation is about building institutions, cultures and leadership systems that allow future generations to continue creating long after the original visionary has left.

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Creativity is a leadership capability

Taken together, these four perspectives point to an understanding of creativity that is different from the lone genius in his garage. Instead, creativity is knowledge-based, supported in organizations, continuously changing and, perhaps most important, sustained by shared purpose.

Creativity is the outcome of deliberate choices, whether they be investing in expertise or building collaborative cultures.

A version of this article was published first in the Alumni Lifelong Learning blog, a vibrant community space for Members of IESE's Alumni Association to connect, keep learning, and share insights and experiences with one another. If you're an IESE alum, find out how to become a Member and gain early access to premium content like this.



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