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| **Creativity and Innovation** |
| **Creative Change isn’t as easy as you think** |
| **A person with blue eyes  Description automatically generated with low confidence** | Jeannine Carlisle |
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Creativity and innovation are popular buzz words in the business world today. Business leaders consider innovation one of the driving forces in the complex, uncertain environment that demands creativity to remain competitive. As promising as the idea of innovation sounds, successful implementation of creative ideas into innovative products, processes, systems, services, markets, or supplies is a different story. [Innovation managers](https://sifted.eu/articles/innovation-theatre-kills-managers/) and researchers have observed that organizations may claim creative change is important but found something quite the opposite, explaining why efforts to launch innovative ideas frequently falls short of the vision leaders have set for their organizations (Palmer, 2021). As the [Harvard Business review reports](https://hbr.org/2021/11/stop-sabotaging-your-ability-to-innovate) this is possibly through their own form of sabotage (Bouquet et al., 2021).

Leading change and creating an innovative culture is a challenge for most organizations to navigate successfully, Jennifer Mueller, Ph.D., addresses this issue in her book, *Creative Change: Why we resist it… how we can embrace it,* by answering the question of why people desire but reject creativity (Mueller, 2017). As a social scientist and researcher, the author explains that if organizations cannot successfully embrace creative change they run the risk of uncreative destruction when maintaining the status quo. This status quo bias that often results from risk aversion becomes a barrier to the innovation that leaders so ardently claim to seek. This aversion to ambiguity runs deep in our psyche creating a love-hate relationship with creativity. Mueller (2017) observes “doubts and what-ifs could cloud our judgment when choosing to embrace a creative idea” often guiding decisions based on the level of risk or uncertainty a decision maker is willing to assume (Mueller, 2017).

In order to embrace creative change, we must be willing to redefine an idea in a new way that may be incongruous to the previous way of doing things to overcome this status quo bias and remove this barrier to innovation. Mueller (2017) states, “we are simultaneously enraptured and terrified by creative ideas”. If a leader does not take these feelings into account, change efforts are futile when decision makers choose the familiar, safe ideas over the riskier innovative ideas when they resist change on a personal and organizational level. Mueller proceeds to explain that our way of thinking can be categorized as either a how/best or a why/potential mindset. Decision makers using how/best thinking focus on if an option is viable and appropriate now. Likely intolerant of uncertainty, how/best thinking tends to value practical ideas over creative ones. This rejection of new ideas to maintain the status quo often leads to failure of the creative idea to proceed any further when its value is not recognized. Conversely, the why/potential mindset explores the potential value of something and is considerably more tolerant of uncertainty (Mueller, 2017).

Someone’s level of expertise can inhibit the adoption of creative ideas when potential ideas are evaluated based on existing models and standards as a reference point which makes it difficult to interpret the quality of new ideas. Helping people to see the familiar in conjunction with the new allows us to redefine how we think of something as creative and more willing to accept the novelty of the idea. Mueller’s research found that people worship creativity, except when it creates those feelings of uncertainty which leads to rejection of innovative ideas.. In order to reduce our reluctance to creative ideas she advocates that we learn to self-disrupt to overcome our own bias against creativity by establishing a balance between how/best thinking and why/potential thinking. This balance can be achieved through a series of steps to shift how you evaluate an idea including someone to play devil’s advocate using the opposite mindset (Mueller, 2017).

Promoting the use of strategies to gain acceptance from others, Mueller provides tools to improve receptiveness to new ideas by key decision makers leading to change in the organizational culture. By identifying the assumptions or beliefs that inhibit the organization from achieving a creative climate, how creativity itself is defined, and what that means for the organization’s goals through effective communication can shift the culture away from resisting change. Developing a system of checks and balances by giving joint decision making authority to both managers and creatives creates two balanced, powerful, roles that prevents either how/best or why/potential thinking from running rampant in the process. This increases the likelihood that innovative ideas will be seen as less risky when potential pitfalls are addressed throughout the process (Mueller, 2017).

Finally, Dr. Mueller illustrates the importance of overcoming bias not just within the individual and the organization but also the bias towards creative leadership. Stereotypes of leaders as confident, decisive, authoritative individuals who have all the answers are unrealistic. We need to redefine our idea of what it means to be a leader and appreciate the strength in a leader who acknowledges he or she doesn’t know the answer but is willing to solve a problem and find one. Concluding the book, Dr. Mueller advises that leaders cultivate proactive, creative change not reactive creativity rejection. By coupling the generation of ideas with creative change guidelines, organizations can avoid pitfalls that sabotage creative efforts. By creating “change circles” that include cross-functional members and involve the CEO in the ideation process, resistance to creativity won’t be eliminated but the barriers are now surmountable (Mueller, 2017).

This book is useful to students of creativity, managers of innovation, and change leaders as a guide that provides strategies to overcome barriers to innovation. Through a series of prescribed steps, her suggestions help us address the gap between our desire for creativity and our aversion to uncertainty and risk. Additionally, this book addresses one of the primary arguments that creativity initiatives are prone to failure. As Dr. Mueller contends, it’s not just our own biases against creativity that cause us to resist change but also how we make decisions and whom we put in key decision making roles that causes problems. A useful piece of advice she provides is not just how and when to approach decision makers but also include them in the process to increase receptiveness to new ideas and create a system of checks and balances. Particularly useful is the advice to find and put someone on your team that has an opposite mindset to troubleshoot a potential idea in its earlier stages to prevent extensive work that is ultimately rejected. Most importantly, to have and give equal power to a manager and a creative who both have responsibility for promoting innovative ideas. There are many factors that contribute to a creative environment, this book is instrumental in illustrating how wide and deep the problem of resistance to creative change really runs. This resistance affects all aspects of creativity: the person, process, product, and environment. How this relates to my profession of leadership coaching is to better realize the many layers and levels of resistance that occur related to creative change. Further, to recognize the shift that needs to happen within leaders, the people they lead, and the organization to overcome their aversion to uncertainty and reduce their resistance to change.

References

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