

An old lesson in the leadership of creativity in organizations is playing out in the wake of Google's success. It's not a lesson that derives from any privileged insight into the management or leadership practices of Google itself, but rather from what any of us can learn by appreciating the similarity between the information systems that define the web and the organizational systems of a business enterprise. In the case of the current creativity surfacing on the internet, the example is one where the speed of change and the flurry of information have not inhibited creative collaboration, but have been embraced as a means to create something fresh. Google's contribution to the current movement was to offer the most obvious demonstration that each one of those millions of posts, websites and files is an individual system sitting open to any technology that can offer connection and a comprehensible interface.

The lesson on creativity is offered not by any company that may emerge out of the froth of new interest in web, but from the way that the ideas for those enterprises were generated. Contrast the current environment on the web with what occurs repeatedly within organizations that depend on sustaining creativity for their competitive edge. A consistent number of chief executives who lead knowledge-based enterprises continue to react to the pace of change in market and customer demand by tightening control, promoting a risk-averse culture by punishing mistakes, hoarding information and binding authority so tightly at the top of the organization that the individual initiative below leadership gives way to passivity and torpor.

By not fully appreciating the systems that carry influence from the top of the organization through its middle to the bottom, the chief executive will not recognize the way in which he is shaping the divisions, frictions, resentments and lack of collaboration that breed beneath him. He mistakes control for responsibility and in doing so fails to push authority down to levels where it will breed vitality among individuals who are not afraid to explore and make decisions. Sometimes audacious decisions.

The silos, walls, blocked information and restricted authority that breed bureaucracy within an organizational system are the predictable result of a business being driven by a leadership that overreaches its own authority. In contrast, the new breed of tools on the web have gained their popularity and power by providing any of us the authority to move among the billions of otherwise siloed points of data and discover not only what we were looking for, but also to click into unsuspected interests along the way. By participating in a culture of search, connection and participation, some of the more formal and financially exciting entities like Google, Myspace, Flickr and Delicious provide a means for connecting, feeding and absorbing content in a way that allows the host site itself to be continually changed. The explosion of participation in the web through blogs, technology upgrades and collaborative software has fostered a culture in which new open virtual communities can be created and begin networking. Rather than the growth of data leading to a paralysis of ideas and action, nodes of information are connected in a viral manner and from these “infections” come all manner of creative results.

To offer an illustration of the way in which a leader can, with all the best intentions, misunderstand the impact that his actions have on an entire organization, consider the following case. The CEO of a national design firm hired an enviable team of seasoned creative, marketing and strategy people and, with all the best intentions, proceeded to crush the potential of his team by incessant micromanagement. In an attempt to contain his own sense of unease with rapid changes in outside markets and customer needs, the chief executive of this organization made the mistake of controlling those who were most available to him: people within his own enterprise. As the culture of the organization implicitly promoted the need for control and mitigating risk, those in the middle ranks of the company moved toward operating in an isolated, passive manner that squelched creativity but provided a greater feeling of safety. The potential for spontaneous networking within the organization dimmed to the point where there was no genuinely original output. Rather than innovation flowing up from authorized employees collaborating in unexpected ways (nodes connecting in the organizational system), the leadership received ideas that were disappointingly drab. In response, control and micromanagement from the top was only exacerbated.

Most contemporary businesses in any industry are now sustained in large part by their potential for creative response. And yet, the case cited is a scenario that replicates itself time and again. When an enterprise desperately needs to marshal its ingenuity to meet a challenge, a well intentioned leader drives for creativity as if by wrapping his arms more tightly around the organization, he will squeeze from it something vital and new. When this squeeze does not in fact produce the desired results, you will hear the complaint from

the frustrated chief executive that the organization has betrayed its original entrepreneurial spirit, that size, bloat and bureaucracy have swamped the creative potential of the enterprise.

In response to such complaints, take a fresh look at what is happening under our noses on the web. The period of relative neglect that befell the internet following the furious land-rush that went on during the 90s has given way to a new form of activity and commerce. Where not long ago entrepreneurs fought one another as they wrangled internet content and access into protected silos, now, vastly bigger, more complex and unimaginably loaded with greater amounts of information, the web is reorganizing in a culture born of openness, collaboration and participation. No central power wrested this rebirth. The current flowering on the web was sown by curious young hackers and nerds self-authorized by their ability to find one another through blogs, to build communities of participation through ingenious sites crafted on open-source software and to begin spinning together a universe of digital information into mashups that none of us was even looking for. Another cycle of an old lesson: to lead creativity, have an idea interesting enough to attract the most talented, give them the authority and resources that they need to communicate, to make decisions and to act and then, let go.

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