



Stanford eCorner

Bringing Creativity into an Organization

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When trying to foster innovation within an organization, Sutton feels that sometimes the best management is no management at all. He also stresses that creativity means selling, not just inventing something.



Transcript

One of the things that gets very clear if you look at research on what it takes for creative work to happen, there's a lot of evidence that the things that managers typically do especially if they have MBA's, asking a lot of questions, asking what your deliverables are, asking what your value added is, all that classic sort of stuff. Those things tend to drive out creativity and what they do is they lean people to drift towards what they know is going to succeed. So in the case, especially when it comes to managing creative work, the question of first do no harm is a standard. It especially needs to be applied and I would like to see the evidence. We don't have it for start-ups but I wonder whether active boards actually really help. But I think active boards in the start-ups is that we place the CEO a lot and they bring the CEO to the same situation and we face the same set of problems. That's a personal opinion but I would bet the evidence on it. And to give you my favorite quote from somebody who's managed a lot of creative work that's in this spirit, Bill Coyne, "After you plant a seed in the ground, you dig it up every week to see how it's doing." And this is the guy who managed R&D for 3M for about 15 years. He said that much of his job was just leaving his folks alone and protecting them from the people in organizational strategy. He said that that was a lot of what his job was.

Then as a final point, especially since when engineering schools, engineering actually don't like to talk about marketing. They have the sort of notion that if I designed something brilliant, everybody's just going to buy it. It actually turns out, if you look at the history of famous creators, famous inventors, there's almost always somebody involved who can sell. Or he mentioned Steve Jobs. Clearly, he can sell. Or if you look at the case of the steamboat, one of the biggest misconceptions in history is this guy named Robert Fulton invented it. In fact, there were many steamboats around at that time that Robert Fulton had his steamboat, which was turn of the 19th century and a lot of them were technically superior to his. But, he was the guy who could sell. And it was no accident that we remember him as the inventor. Thomas Edison, my former doctoral, Andy Hagedanson, a lot of work on Thomas Edison, he can show you extensive quotes of people in Thomas Edison's lab complaining that he was a really inventor and he was more like a PT bar in anybody else.

He was great in tracking press attention for Edison products and also for bringing in money but he actually was not that great an inventor. And that's sort of one of those notions that I think is sometimes hard for engineers to accept. Although not hard for MBA's to accept, the notion that marketing actually matters.