Stanford eCorner

Encourage a Culture of Inquiry

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February 08, 2017

Video URL: http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/5067/Encourage-a-Culture-of-Inquiry

Adam Grant, author of the 2016 bestseller "Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World," critiques the familiar manager's mantra, "Don't bring me problems. Bring me solutions." He explains how that suppresses an organization's toughest problems and discourages inquiry. The Wharton School professor also shares an exercise that businesses can do to uncover new opportunities — where, ironically, teams imagine all the ways competitors might kill the company.

Transcript

- I think that it's really sad that a lot of leaders have good intentions and they don't realize they're shutting people down when they say stuff like this. So think of a boss that you had at some point who uttered this phrase. I'm going to ask you all to shout it out loud. Ready? Don't bring me... - Problems. Bring me... - Solutions. - [Adam] That was pretty good. I get the idea behind this right, you want people to, you know, not just be complaining, you want them to be constructive. But if you can only bring problems, or 'scuse me, solutions to the table, then people never speak up about the hardest problems that they don't know how to solve yet. And when they do know how to solve them, you only then get a culture of advocacy instead of one of inquiry, where people figure out the solution and they're like my job is to ram that solution down everybody else's throat. As opposed to find out what everybody's ideas are and then bring those to the table.

So I actually love to see organizations just accept problems with no solutions. Warby Parker has gone so far as to create a Google Doc, where they literally have people submit all the problems they see whenever they catch them, managers review them weekly and vote on which ones are important and if you want to fix one of them you can just add that to your job description. It's a great way to maintain visibility into what's not working, but also what kinds of issues demand creativity. And I think we ought to have more of that, and one thing I'll recommend in closing is an exercise that I learned about at a pharma company a few years ago. So the CEO got really frustrated that everybody was sort of stuck in very bureaucratic thinking, and he said "I want you to spend the next hour," this is his whole executive team, "we're gonna spend the next hour trying to kill our company. Imagine that you're our biggest competitor and just try to put us out of business. How would you do it?" I have never seen a more energized group of executives in my life. (audience laughs) Right, like there was a scientist that said, "I have been waiting 27 years to destroy this company. Thank you for finally giving me the floor." But after that, they had to turn around and ask, you know, what would you do now? Some of these ideas are competitive threats, others are real opportunities. And I think this is a great exercise for two reasons.

One is that it really makes it safe for everyone to speak up because if your job is to kill the company there is nothing that you can't say. And two, it makes people much more likely to think creatively, because if you do this exercise as save the company, right, you come up with a bunch of very risk-averse, cautious ideas. Whereas when people are on offense, to try to destroy a company, they're much more willing to try some crazy possibilities. So if you haven't tried this out, Highly recommend it. So look, I have a simple goal. I want to create more organizations where originality thrives, and I hope you all will help me do that. Thank you.