

# Controlled Creativity in the Tech Industry

How leaders in technology companies can let innovation flourish without losing sight of their long-term strategic goals.



# Introduction

There's little doubt that creativity and the ability to innovate is a critical edge that organisations in the technology sector require to thrive in a fast-changing business landscape. That is especially true for the hypercompetitive technology space, where today's iPhone can very quickly become tomorrow's Blackberry.

Indeed, many once promising businesses have ended up on the tech scrap heap because they didn't have the creative juices required to generate game-changing ideas, or didn't foster an environment that brought out the best in these innovators.

As such, the need to encourage intrapreneurship - company employees that act and think like risk-taking entrepreneurs - is now a given across the entire business world - from logistics providers and restaurants to construction firms and, of course, technology companies.

These important employees work within a structured organisation, but are given the freedom to come up and execute ideas that upset the status quo. They don't reap the same rewards as a bona fide entrepreneur, but at the same time they also take on less risk. If a project they initiated fails, they most likely still get to keep their job.

Unsurprisingly, the companies that are more progressive in this area hail from Silicon Valley. Google famously allows its staff to work on their own projects for 20 per cent of their time. This part-time entrepreneurship has resulted in world-beating products such as Gmail, Google News and AdSense.

There have also been negative examples from the Valley. Adobe Systems, for instance, was set up by former Xerox employees felt that their ideas were being dismissed by their employer.

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## The Asian Way

Intrapreneurship has had a harder time flourishing in Asia due to the nature of their top-down, hierarchical structures. We've all experienced or heard stories of projects stalling because nothing gets done until the big bosses gives their stamp of approval. The fear of failure and losing face also means that Asian managers tend not to delegate or empower their subordinates sufficiently.

Yet, as a younger generation of leaders schooled in dot.com style management comes to the fore, the situation is slowly changing. Tan Min Liang, the Singaporean founder of San Francisco-based gaming company Razer, goes out of his way to recruit talent that do not fit the role of a traditional 'company person'. Rather, he

seeks out those that have a little something different to offer, even if he's not quite sure at times what it is.

"We have an eclectic bunch of people. I've hired someone from China after seeing an invention of his on the Internet. I also hired an English gentleman whom I haven't decided what to do with him yet, but I'm sure we'll figure something out," he said.

Mr Tan certainly knows a thing or two about creative minds. He was named as one of "The 25 Most Creative People in Tech" by Business Insider in 2013 together with industry heavyweights such as Apple's design guru Jonathan Ive.

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## Marching to the Same Beat

Yet, structure and control is still important within an organisation. While you can let semi-autonomous enclaves of creativity sprout throughout the workplace, everyone still needs to head in the same strategic direction set by the senior management.

Being able to communicate a company's vision throughout the organisation is key to achieving this. At Singapore-based MSC Consulting - a firm that provides enterprise resource planning solutions to small and medium enterprises - founder and CEO Alex Goh says that the first step is to ensure that all employees are clear about the company's vision and core values.

"Therefore everyone know their respective roles are playing important part in the organisation in order to drive the growth and sustainable in the market. No matter what we do, we keep the vision in our mind," he says.

At the same time, he adds that it is important to show his staff how creativity needs to be linked to achieving the MSC's goals, and not exist in a vacuum.

"Everyone in the organisation has to be able to see that innovation and creativity will lead them to the next level," he explains.

Loi Pok Yen, CEO of logistics services provider CWT Limited, uses a concept of boxes. Within certain parameters his key executives are given absolute freedom. If that person feels a need to move beyond those boundaries - such as when a new business opportunity arises - then consultation with the chief executive is required. Mr Loi does not interfere unless something goes terribly awry.

"I draw a box and let them run it the way they want. If they make mistakes, that's okay, as long as they learn from it, and communicate it. Make the same mistake, and then it becomes very serious," he said.

One of Singapore's most successful entrepreneur, Hyflux founder Olivia Lum, whose company's cutting edge water treatment technology has made it a leader in the global market, is well aware of the need for fresh ideas.

To ensure a pipeline of new talent able to inject a dose of innovation into the company, she implemented a management trainee scheme to bring in young executives that are groomed for senior positions. But while they are expected to be innovators within the company, she makes it clear that it is her vision that they have to follow ultimately.

"The company is like a millipede, one head, many legs. We are fighting the war outside but internally we are always aligned. There may be multiple ideas but once the direction is set we must work in tandem," said Ms Lum, who was the first Singaporean to win the Ernst & Young World Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2011.

Yet trying to put creative people - who are naturally more resistant to structure - in a box of any kind can be a challenge. Indeed, research by Sharon H. Kim of Johns Hopkins University, as well as Lynne C. Vincent and Jack A. Goncalo of Cornell University, showed that the more people feel excluded from a group, the more likely they are to do something creative.

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While this doesn't apply to everyone, it does mean that some of your most creative people may also be the ones that don't play well in a group. Give them too much freedom, however, and their creative efforts may not be aligned with organisational objectives; too much and they may feel stifled and ultimately leave.

In an article for INC magazine, Samuel B. Bacharach, the co-founder of the Bacharach Leadership Group (BLG), an organisation which specialises in leadership development programmes suggests three ways of finding this delicate balance when dealing with what he terms "creative geeks".

- Incorporate their creativity. Consciously reinforce the idea that creative geeks fit into a larger collective effort. Make it as clear as possible that their ideas are important in moving the agenda of the group.
- Engage them through dialogue. Ask creative geeks what they're doing. Ask how you can be of assistance. Coach them, and partner with them as much as possible.
- Establish parameters. Within your company, you need to set boundaries for your most creative people. Though you want to give them enough space outside of the group, you also need to monitor them to make sure that their agenda does not spin out of control, putting the interests of the larger collective in jeopardy.

"In leading creative team members, make sure they have enough space to operate as outsiders, but give them enough opportunity to be part of the team," said Mr Bacharach.

"While these people may be independent and creative, and even may relish the role of outsider, they also look for social recognition and a sense of belonging."

In the technology world where innovation is the key to survival, being able to juggle your creative geeks in a way that is aligned with your organisation's strategic goals is often the difference between failure and success.

## TIPS FOR DEALING WITH CREATIVE TALENT

In a recent article for the Harvard Business Review, Dr Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic, a Professor of Business Psychology at University College London (UCL), gave the following advice to get the best out of an organisation's creative employees.

- 1 Spoil them and let them fail: "Show your creatives unconditional support and encourage them to do the absurd and fail. Innovation comes from uncertainty, risk, and experimentation — if you know it will work, it isn't creative."
- 2 Surround them by semi-boring people: "Support your creatives with colleagues who are too conventional to challenge their ideas, but unconventional enough to collaborate with them. These colleagues will need to pay attention to details, mundane executional processes, and do the dirty work."
- 3 Only involve them in meaningful work: "**Everyone is more creative when driven by their genuine interests and a hungry mind.**"
- 4 Don't pressure them: Don't constrain your creative employees; don't force them to follow processes or structures. Let them work remotely and outside normal hours; don't ask where they are, what they are doing or how they do it."
- 5 Don't overpay them: "People with a talent for innovation are not driven by money. Data from our research archive, which includes over 50,000 managers from 20 different countries, indicates quite clearly that the more imaginative and inquisitive people are, the more they are driven by recognition and sheer scientific curiosity rather than commercial needs."
- 6 Surprise them: "Creatives love complexity and enjoy making simple things complex rather than vice-versa. It is therefore essential that you keep surprising your creative employees."
- 7 Make them feel important: "If you fail to recognise your employees' creative potential, they will go somewhere where they feel more valued."

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