Managing for creativity: Lessons from Kindergarten

Experts from Thomas Friedman to Economics Professor Richard Florida are warning it’s imperative American business undergo a creative revival to meet the challenge of overseas competition.

Most U.S. companies still manage and reward their teams for efficiency and incrementalism, not for creating bold or exciting value propositions that can drive growth, margin – even entirely new revenue streams.

Companies that want to generate pre-emptive ideas need to first commit to a management style that encourages innovation instead of squelching it. In place of the risk-averse rules learned in MBA courses, innovative managers would do better to recall the lessons of kindergarten where creativity is nurtured.

Most kindergartens are managed with “best practices” ironically similar to those now proven to drive creativity in businesses:

1. Teach people how to think, not what to think; how to think visually and how to come up with metaphors. Teach them improv comedy skills because it makes their thinking nimble. Teach them how to be silly because it spawns creative thought in an individual and those around them.
2. Teach methods for asking productive questions. Asking different questions than you or your competitors usually ask can take one’s imagination to places it’s never been before.
3. Tell stories, share myths and legends. Stories about past company innovations or breakthroughs that happened despite the odds can be powerful ways to inspire courage and new ideas that do more than gain share of market.
4. Take field trips to get firsthand insight into customer needs. Great creators are famous for the inspiration they get from their trips out into the real world.
5. Play purposeful games designed to provoke and stimulate. Encourage play that forces people to inhabit circumstances outside their own experience.
6. Have a cool “playground” and stock it well with raw materials to do rapid prototypes, to draw, paint, and craft. Boring environments breed boring ideas.
7. Embrace chaos. Creative people specialize in fidgeting, spontaneity, giggling, speaking out of turn and being messy. The path to breakthroughs is never linear.
8. Turn performance reviews into non-judgmental skill inventories. Have you ever taken an inventory of your team’s creative aptitudes that are needed in the creative workplace?
9. Don’t try to make everyone the same. Nearly every business takes misfits and tries to mold them into being just like everyone else – sanding off the very idiosyncrasies that make them exactly what we need in the war of ideas.
10. Don’t punish failure: the only way to get more good ideas is to give people the freedom to also have bad ideas. The most creative people in the world say their biggest ideas come when they don’t pursue success – that success is won by not seeking it and failure is managed not by avoiding it, but by being indifferent to it.
11. If you must judge and “punish” anything, make it the failure to act. Research shows that creative geniuses aren’t smarter than anyone else, just more prone to
action. If you want to foster a culture that takes big, game-changing actions, reward success and failure equally. (Both are a necessary part of the search for big ideas.) But scold inaction.

The paradox of creativity is that to succeed in today’s hyper-creative marketplace, you have to un-learn many of the habits that brought success in the non-creative world. Cultivating a kindergarten-like culture, with its nurturing of self expression is a great beginning.

Another is unleashing your own inner “Dennis the Menace.” Research confirms that we all have creativity within us. You can jumpstart the power of creativity in your organization by setting your inner child free and allowing others to do the same.