

Creativity – The Other Side of Management

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Creativity may be one of the most misunderstood topics in management.

Change is the one constant in every aspect of our work and relationships.

Dare to take a creative approach to ordinary decisions.

The subject of creativity may be one of the most misunderstood topics in management. We tend to equate creativity with pure artists, with those who are seemingly endowed with a mystical ability to make aesthetic sense out of color, shape and form. In the manager's world, creativity is typically viewed as limited to picking out the art for the walls of a new office or selecting a designer to develop a new logo.

Some managers even find the topic of creativity to be threatening. When our world consists of logical decisions based on statistical and financial data, how can those who work without clear rules or guidelines *not* threaten us? If the artist doesn't use familiar methods, how can we measure their outcomes or judge their work? Likewise, how can the creative geniuses appreciate our logic and business acumen? We just don't talk the same language.

But here we are in the post-Information Age, careening toward the next epoch before we've even had time to get comfortable with the last one. Futurists tell us that knowledge is increasing at exponential rates, and that we might as well get used to the idea of change with increasing speed. One of the hottest new magazines says it all with their title: **Fast Company**. In a single generation, we've seen the development of personal computers, faxes, email and the internet, with each creation bringing us closer to real-time transactions unimagined by our parents. Change is the one constant in every aspect of our work and relationships.

Medical care delivery seems to be at the apex of change like a magnet for chaos. Health care inflation continues to rage like a wildfire despite decades of economic experiments. Technology and science continue to push the envelope in both the medical office and in the surgical suite. Society ebbs and flows around healthcare, leaving no one the luxury of being an idle observer. With every voice wanting to be heard, no wonder chaos reigns.

So what can medical managers do to keep up – to anticipate change and prepare for it?

Two things, at least. First, get your professional house in order. Take a time-management course and use what you learn. Adopt the same kind of self-discipline that got you through school and re-deploy it to clean your desk, your schedule and your mind of the low-priority "noise" that steals your best energy. Second, dare to take a creative approach to ordinary decisions. Take a lesson from Nobel Prize winner, Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, who said, "Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and seeing something different."

For the medical manager, that might mean looking at the pressure of competition and seeing a niche that others have overlooked. A creative administrator might view patient complaints as opportunities for service improvements or look at compliance challenges for their marketing potential. Discovery can be a simple thing like experimenting with telephone scripts to minimize no-shows, playing with scheduling options to improve throughput, or being open to fresh ideas from employees to reduce turnover. In short, the creative manager looks beyond traditional problems to "see something different."

Creativity appears to be a learned behavior.

An innovative approach can yield surprising results!

If that kind of ingenuity doesn't come naturally, you're not alone; but the good news is that creativity appears to be a learned behavior. Roger von Oech, author of "A Whack on the Side of the Head" describes an extraordinary insight from the experience of a major oil company. The management team was concerned about why some of their research and development people seemed to have more productive and better ideas than others. They brought in psychologists to study educational backgrounds, where people grew up, favorite colors and other issues. After three months of study, the psychologists concluded that the chief factor that separated the two groups was that *the creative people **thought** of themselves as creative, and the less creative people didn't*. Those who held a creative self-concept allowed themselves to get into an innovative frame of mind and to play with their knowledge. Those who didn't embrace their creativity were either too practical or were caught in routines in their thinking.

The bottom line is that medical group managers can learn how to be creative as well. Approaching problems with an innovative frame of mind can yield surprising results and restore a fresh sense of discovery.