

## *Creativity in the Organization*

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*If recommendations contained in A People and a Spirit: A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee<sup>1</sup> were to be implemented to any degree, relationship, programming, staffing, and other organizational innovations would be necessary. The Joint Study Committee concludes that Cooperative Extension is capable of significant participation in national efforts, "provided it has the resources and the willingness to move aggressively into the arena of social and economic development on both a group and an individual basis." Even if additional resources do not become available, the Committee judges that "Extension must still change and adapt its programs."*

*Perhaps of equal importance to considerations of resources are those related to the posture of the organization itself—the climate that exists for seeking out and inaugurating programming, staffing, relationship, and organizational arrangements that depart from established and standardized procedures and policy. The anticipation of substantial change (whether by expansion or reallocation of existing resources) may require as much consideration as to what is to happen within the organization itself as to the amount of resources presently available or to be made available. In other words, implementing changes of the order suggested in the report may require organizational creativity on many fronts. As implied in this paper, saying that the organization must be creative may be much less demanding than actually organizing and functioning so creativity can exist and thrive. An orientation to creativity within the organization may be a big part of the "willingness" aspect of the organization to "move." Consequently, as consideration is given by Cooperative Extension Services to the recommendations of the Committee Report, it may be advantageous to be acutely aware of what is involved in being*

<sup>1</sup> *A People and a Spirit*, A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968). See Lowell H. Watts, "Extension's Future—A National Report," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, VI (Winter, 1968), 199-206, for an outline of the major thrusts of the recommendations of this report.

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*creative in an organization. This paper is designed to provide such awareness.—The editor.*

THE ADMINISTRATOR who believes that he wants to promote creativity in his organization should first consider the story of Sam Smith (a fictitious name). Sam is a truly creative faculty member. Last year when the 4-H conference was built around the theme of conformity and dissent, he distributed an unusual document to young people attending the conference. It was a condensation of a series of tape recordings from a workshop attended by a group of campus protest leaders. Editing consisted in reducing the recordings to a manageable transcript while preserving the flavor of the conference. To those familiar with today's student protest movement it comes as no surprise that the sentiments expressed were strongly and sometimes even profanely anti-establishment. Sam's idea was that the most effective way to prepare youth to cope with protest and dissent in its most modern form was to expose them to its phenomena in an educational setting.

The backwash of his experiment caught Sam unprepared. Irate objections were raised by elected state officials, by parents, and even by some of his own colleagues. The reasoning seemed to be that by providing a public forum for these voices of protest the university was sanctioning them. A further objection was that at least some of the 4-H members were too young to cope with such things.

Who knows what the consequences of this controversy may have been. In a close vote in the legislature, this affair may have cost the university a hundred thousand dollars in its Extension budget, or a building. It is difficult to assess the effect of such an incident but it does seem clear that in the short run the university is more likely to suffer harm than benefit.

It is not the purpose here to consider the merits of his action. The purpose is to question whether everyone who talks about creativity is really willing and able to stand the consequences. The issue boiled down to its simple terms is: Do you really want a creative organization? Can you afford it?

### **Solid Working Organization**

Contrast the creative organization with another and more familiar type: the solid working organization. The solid working organization is not a straw man set up for purposes of demolition. It is a very desirable kind of organization—an ideal type that is only occa-

sionally approximated in the real world. It is, first of all, a highly productive, well regulated organization. It has developed standard operating procedures, well defined administrative policies, and a well designed set of rules and regulations. It is, in short, the ideal bureaucracy described by the literature of sociology and management a generation ago.

Closely related to the emphasis on productivity is the accompanying requirement of efficiency. There is a minimum of waste motion in the solid working organization. Failure tends to be penalized severely, scrap is at a minimum, and little time is wasted; there is even an efficiency rationale for scheduled periods of inactivity such as coffee breaks and vacations. They are designed, according to this concept, in order to increase the efficiency of the individual and his output at the work place.

It follows from the characteristics already described that the solid working organization puts a premium on predictability. People are where they are supposed to be at the time they are supposed to be there. Behavior of individuals in any given setting is something that can be anticipated. There is a high degree of interchangeability of personnel so that, in the absence of a key individual, the office continues to function. There are few surprises in the solid working organization and no indispensable men.

This type of organization possesses a high degree of integration. The parts, human and physical, mesh well toward a common purpose. It is a cohesive working whole. In a service organization this characteristic is especially notable in what may be described as campaigns. A campaign, for example, to reduce mastitis requires a high degree of synchronization of effort, close supervision, and a highly effective communications system. The solid working organization has these.

The solid working organization does not preclude creativity but creativity in this type of organization must be highly concentrated at the top. The military organization of an Alexander or a Napoleon is creative but the creativity is that of a single individual or a small central core. Such organizations may attempt to institutionalize creativity through research and development units or suggestion systems, but both the institutionalization and the decentralization of creativity in such an organization requires some central clearing-house which approves or disapproves innovations that originate elsewhere in the organization.

However, institutionalized creativity tends to concentrate almost entirely on procedural matters and not on the grand design. Staff on the operating front who are tempted to tamper with the grand de-

sign are strongly encouraged by the implicit values of the organization to dismiss innovative impulses because they interfere with ongoing productive activities.

### **Creative Organization**

The creative organization contrasts sharply with the ideal bureaucracy described above. It is lower on productivity. In industrial terms, it has a higher scrap rate and more failures, because innovation is always risky. It is less productive also because, again to borrow from an industrial model, new undertakings involve a learning curve and, typically, even a successful innovation will not achieve maximum output until a considerable period of learning has elapsed.

A high degree of randomness also characterizes the creative organization. Management is less "scientific." There is less emphasis on using such systematic techniques as time and motion study to determine the "one best way" and a great deal more reliance on trial and error learning. Trial and error learning, as its critics have often pointed out, is inefficient and its outcome frequently unpredictable; but trial and error learning emphasizes discovery whereas scientific management emphasizes standardization.

In the creative organization individuality is not only tolerated, it is encouraged. Thus the creative organization tends to become a loose aggregation of independent *prima donnas*. Dissent is widespread and frequently and vehemently expressed. Boat rockers are numerous. Consensus is difficult to obtain. Uniformity is not arrived at by decree and decision making is a time consuming process.

The problem is compounded by the personality characteristics of creative individuals—not only their capacity for dissent and low tolerance for routine, but also because many are weak on implementation skills. There is a low correlation between the ability to articulate innovative ideas and the ability to translate them into action. Often, therefore, the creative individual is better at conceiving than at nurturing ideas. Carried to an extreme, some creative organizations may border on impotence and in the long run be self-destroying.

The foregoing analysis is designed to make clear that creativity in organizations may be a mixed blessing. Many successful and effective extension operations are highly routinized; massive injections of creativity are likely to lead to trauma. At the other extreme, some highly creative organizations at the conceptual level are characterized by their inability to translate innovative concepts into effective

action. Thus the question "Do you really want a creative organization" is most emphatically not rhetorical.

Extension more than most organizations tends to be torn between creativity and productivity pressures. Because of strong ties to clientele groups, decisions to divert resources to new areas of activity at the expense of old are likely to encounter strong resistance. This pressure to stay with the tried and true is further reinforced by the complex pattern of Extension support. Decisions to deemphasize fairs in 4-H or to program more for small business and less for big in the industrial extension area can jeopardize support—county board support in the first instance and fee support in the second.

During periods (like the present) when Federal and State support are difficult to come by, the innovative urges in Extension are apt to be stifled; and what innovation takes place is likely to be in response to indications, real or fancied, that outside support will be forthcoming. The tendency, therefore, is for Extension to surrender the initiative to outside agencies or to assume a defensive posture.

Under these circumstances, particularly, it is important for Extension to engage in a conscious examination of the creative process and to seek actively to promote it.

The strongest argument in favor of creativity is its survival value. Archaic organizations, like species of animals, respond to periods of rapid environmental change either by extinction or by finding some sheltered ecological niche. Only organizations with a well developed capacity to change can remain in the mainstream and survive.

Furthermore, the organization that retreats to a position of maintaining the status quo will inevitably surrender leadership in its field to other, more aggressive organizations. Leadership, to a great extent, consists in being ahead of the field and this requires a high level of innovative activity. This in turn is the kind of organizational climate that succeeds in attracting and keeping the best minds. It is difficult to identify strongly with an organization dedicated to maintenance of things as they are. It is only through an internalization of organizational goals by the membership that the contribution of individuals will approach maximum potential.

Some minimal level of creativity is, therefore, necessary in the long pull for organizational survival. Even more important, it is essential, even in the short run, for the vitality of organizations. With organizations as with individuals, staying alive is not enough; living up to one's potential is more important in spite of the additional risks it entails. This categorical imperative of organizations leads then to an examination of the characteristics required of the creative organization.

### *Need Quantity and Quality of Ideas*

One of the most obvious is that the creative organization is characterized by a large quantity and high quality of ideas. The vogue for brainstorming a few years ago put its emphasis on the production in quantity of novel ideas and the process of boiling these down to a certain number of usable ones. The finest manifestations of this approach generally showed up in advertising campaigns suggesting to the consumer a variety of new ways to eat his "Wheaties."

The importance of such an element in creative problem solving should not be underestimated. Ability to generate a wide variety of alternatives is essential to any high quality problem-solving activity. And the simple encouragement of new ideas, whether through suggestion systems or brainstorming sessions, is a valuable activity. Many problem-solving failures result from having generated too limited a set of alternative solutions. Other things being equal, the fewer possible solutions one considers the less likely that the best solution will be identified.

### *Need Program-Centered Planning*

The organization, however, that puts its primary emphasis on the production of ideas in quantity will achieve, at best, only a very low order of creativity. Of far greater importance is the ability of the organization to deal in complex patterns even though the elements may be lacking in novelty. This is the difference between the program and the project approach. The project approach puts its emphasis on short run goals of limited scope—a new format, a new topic, or a novel arrangement of topics. The program approach is concerned with long range goals with broader scope. Within this framework may be contained a number of innovative projects but the projects earn their right to existence from their place in a larger scheme. The highest form of creative organization puts its primary emphasis on innovative, long range planning—recognizing that project development should flow from program, not the other way around.

The project approach is a common weakness in program planning which overemphasizes the wishes of clientele. Too often the kinds of program needs delineated by lay advisory groups fall in the project area. The professional educator who puts all of his emphasis on responding to needs thus generated has abdicated one of his major responsibilities as a professional educator—that of forecasting broad, long range educational needs and developing responsive

programs. The truly innovative organization remains a year or two ahead of its clientele, anticipating needs which have not yet been enunciated. It profits from sensitivity to the expressed needs of clientele without becoming dependent upon them as the sole basis for program development. Innovation comes from anticipating future needs, not from meeting present ones.

Running ahead of the field in this manner implies a special kind of attitude toward risk and uncertainty. There are twin dangers in running ahead of the field. There is the danger on the one hand of running too far ahead and the danger on the other of running in the wrong direction. The failure rate of the creative organization over the short range is inevitably greater than that of the solid working organization; tolerance for failure must be high. The organization which penalizes failure severely quickly stifles creativity either by eliminating the creative person from its ranks or by silencing him.

#### *Need Unstructured Work Schedules*

There must also be a great deal of slack in any creative organization. The creative staff member cannot be fully programmed; the fully programmed staff member has no time to be creative. He must be left free to follow hunches and impulses. He must have time, in Madison Avenue terms, to ideate and incubate; and his activities must be, to a large degree, internally rather than externally determined. Thoreau's metaphor of marching to a different drummer is apt.

One danger in this reasoning, however, is that it provides a rationalization for being unproductive. Since creativity is an implicit process in its incipient stages, behavioral science as yet has no early warning technique for distinguishing between the young Einstein and the staff member who has simply retired on full pay at an early age. Nevertheless, the risk must be taken; although not so much by having a large number of totally unprogrammed staff but rather by selectively building a reasonable amount of time for creative activities into the schedules of staff members with creative promise. Too often the tendency is in the other direction. If a staff member has enjoyed a degree of success in developing innovative programs, he is overburdened with demands on his time, both in his primary workload and in collateral duties on committees and the like.

In addition to the danger that ideation may be confused with inactivity, the creative organization must deal with the question of how much trial and how many errors it can tolerate. Is the individual with a record of aborted ideas a Dr. Ehrlich whose six hundred and

sixth will provide a breakthrough, or is he an irresponsible bumbler who will go to his retirement still convinced that he stood on the brink of greatness?

There is no easy answer to these questions. The organization must set limits, limits as to how much free activity it can tolerate and how many strikes make an out. It must also make judgments about the quality of performance of its members, recognizing that there is an element of accident in both success and failure.

A balanced approach might be based on three assumptions: (1) that a person is not maximally creative if he is freed altogether from more routine responsibilities; (2) that slack should be built selectively into the schedules of those who have given some evidence of an ability to use it advantageously; and (3) that some per cent of failure should not merely be tolerated but rather encouraged.

#### *Need Flexible Budget*

Creative programming depends in part upon the ability to respond to targets of opportunity. In addition to personnel slack, there must be budgetary slack, even though slack means reduced productivity. Fully programmed dollars, like fully programmed people, are unable to respond to changing demands. There must be discretionary dollars and there must be administrative freedom to allocate those discretionary dollars on relatively short notice so that creative ideas can be translated into action before atrophy sets in. Administrators who are persuaded by their budget officers that budgets should be fully programmed (for control and the prevention of chicanery) will not be able to cope with targets of opportunity.

Traditional budgeting procedures reinforce an attitude of conservatism. The budget developed for administrative and legislative presentations is based upon cost increments with an accompanying narrative describing the workload increase. The narrative is used as a forensic technique for getting new money rather than as a basic tool in program development. The incremental cost can be a device for burying past mistakes. The emphasis in industrial circles on a managerial approach to accounting, which regards accounting mainly as a decision-making tool, and the approach in public budgeting of Program Planning Budgeting Systems are encouraging indications that at least some program people are engaging in meaningful dialogues with their finance people. In some enlightened circles *at least, budgeting is being treated increasingly as a tool for the implementation of programs rather than merely as a somewhat uninteresting addition to the archives.*

### Implementing Creativity

Any discussion of institutional arrangements for fostering creativity raises a question of the extent to which creative activity can be institutionalized. In many industrial organizations and in some foundation-sponsored activities, the "think-tank" approach has worked well. The creative group is segregated and isolated from the day-to-day pressures; the normal operating rules are suspended.

This approach is probably most effective in advanced technology industry where invention is a major part of the innovative process. It may have some merit in the early stages of program development in Extension, particularly where the anticipation of needs is a prominent element. However, since the essence of the extension job is to relate to the ongoing concerns of society, intellectual isolation is probably not a very promising way of promoting creativity. The strategic spotting of a few top-notch thinkers throughout an extension organization merits consideration but only if these professional thinkers have an extraordinary aptitude for extracting action implications from their intellectual insights. The overloading of an organization with a large corps of creative theorists could be a disaster.

Techniques for improving the quantity and quality of innovative activity entirely within the framework of a working organization are more appealing. The logical first step is recruitment and selection. Contrary to the belief in a creative mystique, it is possible, even at the common sense level, to identify some of the characteristics of a creative person. Through the review of resumes and through employment interviews, the breadth of an individual's interest, his ability to synthesize ideas from varied sources, and his drive to seek new and better ways to do things can be assessed with some success. Even the description of a job opportunity can serve as a selection device. The individual who is averse to risk and uncertainty is likely to avoid a job which emphasizes them; the individual who has a strong creative flair will be repelled by a job where the emphasis is on routine. By adding creativity as a criterion in the selection process, an organization can increase its creative capacity.

Once on the job, creative activity depends to a great degree upon the kind of supervision that is given—the organizational climate. Creative impulse thrives best on minimal supervision in a climate of decentralized decision making. Short range accountability (whether through the filing of numerous reports, close supervision, or constant checking) inevitably leads to a high degree of selective turnover wherein creative individuals move out and those with an affinity for routine and a high dependence need remain.

The organizational climate that is conducive to creativity depends upon the capacity to maintain a long-time perspective and a willingness to reward innovation. The long perspective is necessary because the payoff of innovation is seldom short run. The innovative program requires more time per unit of outcome, there will be more failures, the preplanning takes longer, and the initial production costs are higher. The organization that has to meet rigid and high support requirements with emphasis on short run payoff cannot afford the luxury. It will thus tend to reward the individual who quickly arrives at a pat success formula and stays with it. The creative individual quickly gets the message. Either he leaves or he reduces his job to a formula and seeks other outlets for his creative needs. The organization thus makes over its members into its own image, either by selective turnover or by indoctrination. No matter how great the lip service may be to creativity, individuals quickly perceive where the rewards lie and adjust accordingly.

The creative organization will be much less concerned with contacts made or hours spent with the increasing search for results. The complete process of creativity is a cycle that proceeds from a set of concepts, through the establishment of means, to the achievement of the envisioned ends. In an organizational setting, this may involve a complex of division of labor. Someone may be responsible for the blueprints, someone else for the specifications and procurement, and someone else for construction, but the end product is the ultimate test of effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

Finally, it should be emphasized that organizational success may be measured by either productivity or innovation or both. The optimum blend will vary. It depends to a degree on the organization's mission, the environment in which it operates, and the kind of administrative expectations it faces as a part of a larger system. A minimally creative organization may be a highly successful organization when its mission is predetermined and the climate in which it operates is static. A maximally creative organization may thrive in a very dynamic climate. The optimum blend for most organizations will fall somewhere in between. For Extension today, the need is for more emphasis on creativity rather than less. These are times of rapid change for Extension—times when both the knowledge explosion and the demand for universities to become more relevant offer a unique opportunity for Extension to assume the leadership in making universities more creatively responsive to their environment.