

THINKING ABOUT INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

Words matter.

After all, that's why we have language, right? If we're talking about something, we both understand what we're talking about.

As a business focuses more on innovation and creativity it's important to know the difference between the two. Very often these words are used interchangeably, but they really are different things, they're critical complements of each other, and they're both important for your organization.

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Let's be clear, though, that these are OUR definitions, based on readings we've done, conversations we've had, experiences we've experienced. If you want to define them differently, that's up to you, just so long as you have a common understanding within your discussion. The concepts we've considered, though, seem to be the key ones.

Creativity involves coming up with new ideas. It includes exploration and thinking and discarding and trying again. Your creative employees will come up with something that didn't exist before, and that's really the heart of creativity. It's about figuring out what we want to accomplish.

Innovation, on the other hand, is the follow through. It's figuring out how to take this new idea and put it into practice, to implement it, so it can have the effect it was designed to have. Fitting a new idea into an existing reality, or adjusting reality to accept the new idea, is what makes creativity worthwhile.

Without creativity, there's nothing to innovate. Without innovation, creative ideas never see the light of day. There's some overlap between the two, but there are differences that are important to understand, because each may require a different means of kickstarting it and keeping it going.

Lots of people are creative, but we often find it easier to come up with ideas than to put them into practice. A colleague told me she's probably had 40 (small but new) ideas in the last week. She may have implemented 3 of them so far. As for

the rest, if she didn't write them down when she thought of them they're probably gone for good, and even if she did write them down, there's no guarantee she'll follow through.

Big ideas may be even harder to innovate. At first glance the task might seem overwhelming, and lead you to discard it. Another possibility, especially for very creative people, is that before they move forward on one idea they have another great one, and shift their attention to that.

As a leader, part of your job is managing the creative and innovative aspects of your company's work. You need to build an environment where the creativity can happen, but you also need to guide people into innovation so the good ideas don't get lost. These require different approaches, and you need to be able to do both of them. Your employees might not be that great at both, but if YOU are, then you can help guide them.

Understanding the differences between creativity and innovation helps you identify the steps necessary to make sure both happen. Simply leaving it to chance and hoping your creative employees follow through on their ideas doesn't guarantee failure, but it sure pushes it up near the top of the list of possibilities.