

Companies only have two competitive advantages: their people and innovation. And people are the ones who come up with innovative ways to do things. Without that push to evolve, a firm may cease to exist.

Companies such as Google, Apple, Zappos, and Cisco invest a lot of time and energy on two things: making sure that their people are engaged and excited about what they are doing and creating an atmosphere of innovation.

How do they do this? First, they pay attention to employees' needs and tell them how much they appreciate what they do. Managers walk around and get to know employees and their passions, likes, dislikes, and motivations.

Second, they create a climate where innovation is rewarded and there are no bad ideas. They don't negate new ideas. They embrace everything as a possibility and discuss the options. They are not afraid of failure. They foster an environment where people can come together formally and informally to share ideas and thoughts on how business is done and how to make it better. Employees are taught to silence their inner critic and managers are taught to say "yes" and "thank you" instead of "no, but" or "we tried that before and it didn't work." To be clear, "Yes, and . . ." doesn't mean agreeing with everything. "Yes, and . . ." creates a healthy dialogue and meaningful discussions.

For example, an engineering company tried to come up with ideas for creating more fun and engagement at work. In the

group exercise, everyone's ideas were responded to with "yes, but . . ." to raise awareness about old, limiting habits. Then, the group switched the exercise to "yes, and . . ." responses. The positive suggestions built upon each other until the group came up with a way to foster innovation in the company by gathering for 20 minutes per day to "play." For those 20 minutes, employees could do anything they wanted to do as long as it wasn't their day-to-day job (e.g., they could tackle a bigger issue or work on a new way of dM)

Framework for Innovation

What is the atmosphere at your company? Is it open to new ideas and innovation? Thinking differently is essential to surviving in this economy. Early designers of flying machines used movable wings because it emulated a bird in flight, but it wasn't until the paradigm was shifted with fixed wing aircraft that manned flight became possible. Artificial hearts emulate a real heart with chambers and a flow of blood that causes a heartbeat, but the latest innovation in that arena is an artificial heart with a simple pump that continuously flows the blood through the body. There is no heartbeat.

These paradigm shifts led to efficient and simple solutions, but it took someone to look at the way things were being done and say, "what if..."

Companies are starting to wake up to this fact about innovation. What if they started hiring MFAs (masters of fine

Innovation roundtables. Create diverse innovation roundtables that meet periodically. Use “Yes, and ...” and brainstorm. Ask the question: Why are we still doing this? How can we do it better? Is there a technological solution?

Play at least 20 minutes per day. For 20 minutes every day, make it a rule that everyone must play. Have games at the office and on the project. Let your brain take a break and just have fun. You will be amazed at what this creates.

Create a physical environment for innovation. Incorporate a lot of colors and textures things that excite your brain. Have common areas for collaboration and play areas to have fun.

Reward Innovation and take more risks. The risk-averse nature of the construction industry stifles creativity and innovation. Reward innovation, cultivate it, and revel in it. Don't condemn ideas that didn't work; just move on to the next one. Edison found 999 ways that a light bulb didn't work before he came up with one that did.

to the low bid mentality. The only ones making money are the lawyers. And according to Herb Kelleher, CEO of Southwest Airlines, “spirit” and intangibles are much harder for the competition to replicate.

These ideas may seem ridiculous. It may seem impossible to do any of these in the construction business, especially on projects. But the bottom line is that the companies that actually implement these kinds of radical changes and find new ways of working will dominate the industry. It may not be the ideas listed above; new strategies would have to be adapted and changed to fit company culture and industry standards. But the firms that continue to limp along with concepts that are hundreds or thousands of years old are doomed.

20 Ways to Enhance Your Personal Creativity

And what about you as an individual? How do you get your own creative juices flowing?

Become more of an observer. Observe people, situations, and places. Become more aware. If you have low emotional self-awareness, it will improve with this focus. Quick Exercise: Without looking, describe your phone home

Do something outside your comfort zone. Join a dance class,

