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Creative Leadership: Effective Problem Solving in Ambiguity

In today's corporate world, innovation is often listed as a top corporate value, yet only a small percentage of employees feel they can take risks to be creative at work. This creates a disconnect between the corporate value and employee perception. Creativity, problem solving, agility, and critical thinking are cited as essential skills, but simply hiring for creative talent isn't enough. A recent study by Ivecevic et al found that emotionally intelligent supervisors lead to happier, more creative, and more productive team members. Therefore, leaders should focus on their own emotional intelligence (EI) and prioritize it within management. Leaders should also allocate support and training for managers and provide employees with time to daydream and build the necessary skills to foster creativity.

Gallup's study of creative companies found that three common criteria among the winners were an expectation to be creative, time to be creative, and freedom to take risks. These criteria apply to leadership within organizations, as well as leadership within one's own life, such as being a leader in one's family or community. Leaders should build their emotional intelligence to meet people where they are, improve their communication skills to make others feel heard and psychologically safe, and model precursors to creativity such as facing uncertainty with confidence, engaging curiosity, and allowing time to daydream.

One of the biggest barriers to creativity is intolerance to ambiguity. To overcome this, we need to recognize when we are feeling uncertain and how it might be affecting our decisions. We can turn to evidence-based frameworks, such as the Foursight Creative Problem Solving (CPS) method, to work through challenges and come up with novel solutions. CPS involves a series of four steps and a variety of exercises to diverge and converge repeatedly until we develop a final solution.

Tolerance of Ambiguity (TOA) is highly correlated with creativity and resilience. Although a causal link has not been evaluated, evidence suggests that increasing TOA with creativity can improve resilience. Physicians with high TOA are happier, less prone to "overdiagnosis," and more resilient. In managers, a high locus of control is correlated with high TOA. By embracing creative principles to improve tolerance of ambiguity, we can find resilience in the face of rapid change and make better decisions. Applying a validated system such as the CPS method can provide a structure for creative problem-solving to gain insight and disruptive solutions.