# Project management and creativity – success factor or pain?

The words 'innovation' and creativity are heard more and more, not only in the buzz surrounding small startup companies but also from large organizations, not just from those working with technical development. Even organizations that you might not spontaneously think of as creative environments are becoming interested. "By being more creative we increase the likelihood of success in our projects", we hear. But when it comes down to it, it is not so certain that creative ideas are that welcome, they could even be viewed as something of a pain. This article explores the contradiction.

Let's begin with the word 'innovation'. Why is all this buzz? One way of answering the question is to use Google Books Ngram Viewer that is a tool to analyze trends. This picture shows how often the words "productivity" and "innovation" have appeared in literature during the past 100 years. The chart is quite dramatic! For many organizations, I think it's about looking at growth and profitability in more ways than just increased efficiency. How can we compete better in new ways?

Anders Cöster/Wenell Management AB/170228
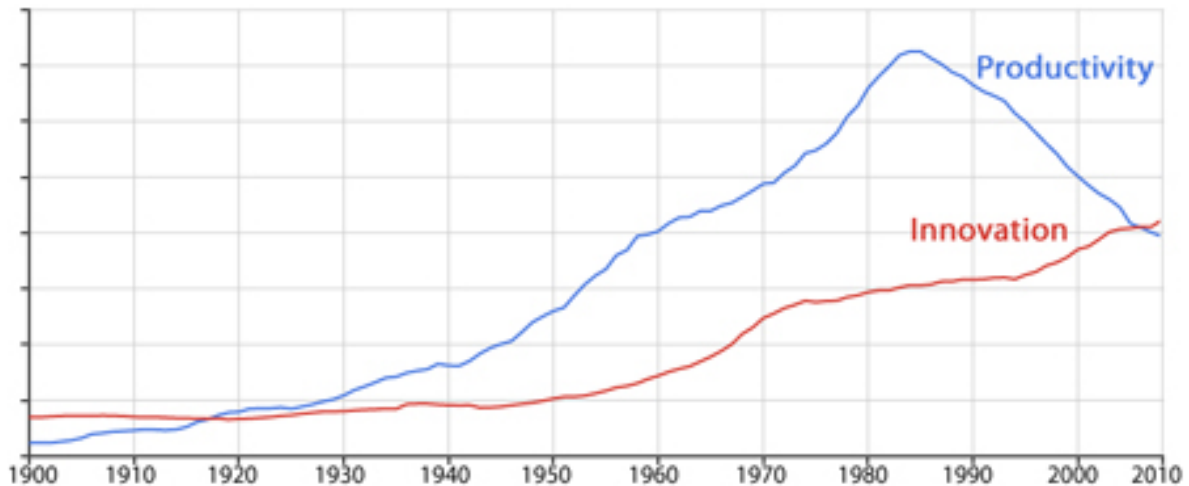
Economics is, of course, a powerful drive. But it's also about job satisfaction. How do we create engagement and motivation? Do you, for example, enjoy working in projects? If we emphasize too heavily on methods and leadership that focus on meeting tight schedule and cost constraints, we may end up in a situation where ideas and alternative views are seen as a threat rather than something positive. Initially, suppressing suggestions and ideas may seem to get projects to deliver better. But motivation can suffer, people also have a need to influence. To be allowed, and even encouraged, to come up with ideas and alternatives to how something is done is good for commitment and motivation.

Timing

But what happens when you are close to an important delivery and you let a new idea through? You might have to do late changes that will cause you miss a deadline. As always, there are no simple truths that works in all situations. If you come up with ideas very late in a project, you should of, course, be careful to implement them. Maybe they would find a better place in a following, similar, project? But being creative is just as much about being good at solving problems - and that can be useful at any time in a project, even the day before delivery!

Are ideas and problem solving two different things? Well, yes and no. An idea can be just about anything, and may come at any time. But if that fresh idea we just came up with is a good one or not we don't know. Problem solving is much more focused. In general, we know if the solution is a good one or not. An alternative design will meet the specification, or we have resolved a legal issue in a contract with an alternative writing. The connection is that creative ideas are often what solves problems.

Anders Cöster/Wenell Management AB/170228

The project manager role

But what does creativity mean to the project manager's daily work? How should you act? The answer depends of what kind of project we are talking about, and which phase it's in. Let's have a look at this image.
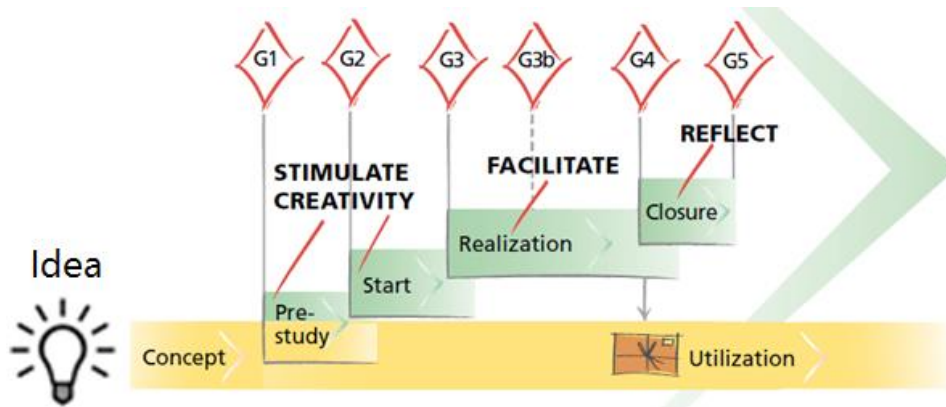
As project manager, you often get assigned to projects in which things to deliver are more or less defined. That is, the basic idea is already concretized in a project assignment: Deliver this. But it doesn't mean that creativity no longer is needed. On the contrary, there's always room for, and need for, ideas and creative solutions. However, as a project manager you need balance in between more open and unbiased idea generation and more focused problem solving. What is most important right now?

Idea capture

There are several important differences in between the old suggestion box - which didn't work – and the ambition to really encourage creativity. Creative ideas can't be commanded, instead you need a good and effective way to capture ideas whenever they occur.

- Show that ideas are welcome regardless of when they emerge. Encourage discussions about value, it's often in a completely different area than where the idea first appeared.
- Put ideas on the walls instead of putting in a box whose contents no one can see.
- Encourage teamwork and others to improve the original idea.
- Implement the best ideas. If no ideas are implemented commitment and motivation will die.

I've got experience as a leader for articulated innovation projects, which often do not even have a clear idea as a starting point. There are reasons to differentiate in between innovation management and project management, the need for methods, processes and leadership are similar, but not identical. An innovation project is also a project, and many methods are the same. But where a typical project is about delivering an innovation project

is about open search, and understanding what question you are trying to answer. As project manager, one must also understand creativity as a process and how to lead and coach in this context.

The creativity switch

You often hear that process kills creativity. I'd rather view it as an act of balance. If you don't have a basic structure for the work, it's hard to become efficient or to follow an overarching strategy. You tend to get lost. On the other hand, inflexible and detailed processes can really hamper creativity. Foremost it's about what you, as a leader, expect and encourage or not. Be aware of what you ask of your team.

Let's elaborate on that. The image below illustrates.
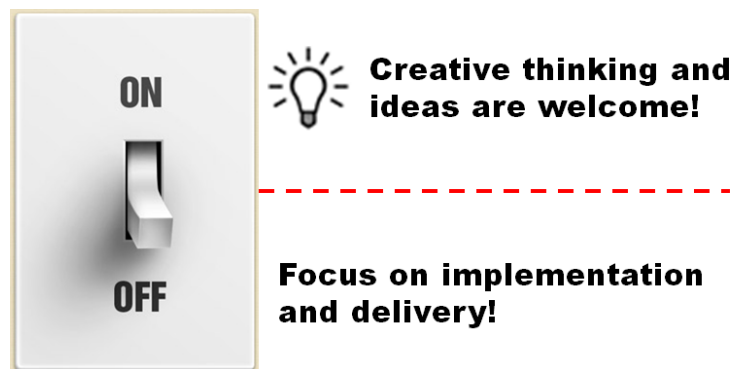
If your expectation is idea generation and problem solving, you use a method that is suitable for that. But somewhere you have to move on and focus on implementing the ideas. The switch becomes a symbol for current focus - and thus how expectations are expressed and followed up. The switch should be made clear not only in words, make it visual also, for example, in the project room with a real switch and a lamp.

But how do you lead the actual idea hatching? Is it not true that some of us simply are born more creative than others? I view creativity as a skill among many other. Talent is, of course, helpful but with proper training anybody can get better at creativity. There are a variety of exercises and tools that can help. As a leader, you have to think a lot more in terms of coaching than in monitoring and control. The correct behavior of the leader is crucial. And that can also be improved with proper training.

Success factor or pain?

So, is creativity in projects a success factor or a pain? Creativity is definitely a success factor, for results as well as motivation. BUT with poor timing it can become a pain. It is important with the right focus. Encourage the right behaviors and be clear on expectations, for example by using the symbolic switch.

Anders Cöster/Wenell Management AB/170228

Finally, some advice on the way: When someone comes up with an idea the very first comment should always be something good or interesting about the idea. Give all ideas the chance to grow. What initially seemed totally weird often leads to the most groundbreaking ideas!

About the author

Anders Cöster, M.Sc, is Senior consultant at Wenell Management and has many years of experience working with project management, leadership, innovation, processes and business development in different organizations – everything from self-employed to large international organizations. He is also active developing organizational culture. This involves training and coaching of teams and individuals as well as facilitating workshops and performing presentations. Anders is a creative problem solver and is happy to, respectfully, challenge orthodoxies. He has several patents pending.

LinkedIn profile: https://se.linkedin.com/in/anders-cöster-a1074b59

Anders Cöster/Wenell Management AB/170228