Title:

Idea management

unravelling creative processes in three professional organizations

SUMMARY

Over the last several years, there has been increasing interest in the concept of creativity, with a dramatic increase in the number of books, training programmes and internet sites on the subject. However, I have noted that the environmental or contextual aspects of creative processes have received less attention than they deserve. Therefore my research builds further on the locus of creativity model by Csikszentmihalyi (1988) in which creativity is regarded as more than a merely individual cognitive process. In this research I take an intersubjective view of creativity: creative processes are understood as social behaviour involving the exchange of ideas, and the concept of ‘interaction’ is used as the root factor of the sensitizing concepts of standing, trust, testimony and favourite interaction. These four sensitizing concepts form the red threat for this research that is based on the study of literature and fieldwork in three Dutch organizations: Pentascope, Ter Weel and Corus. I have observed that organizations have large numbers of ideas hanging around, even when creativity is not encouraged—and these ideas are spread through the organization in an uneven way.

With regard to horizontal idea exchange—the way ideators deal with their ideas in regard to their colleagues—I have observed that employees want to communicate their ideas to their managers, which indicates that the concept of a horizontal organization is relative. Also, having an image of organizational creativity and taking creative processes seriously are two different things. The concept of ‘frontstage creativity’ is introduced for the case where the importance of creativity was communicated but the organizational structure to facilitate creativity was absent.

With regard to vertical idea exchange—the way ideators deal with their ideas with regard to leaders—we found that leaders who find ideas more important, who have higher trust in their employees’ competence, who feel that the ideas are expressed more convincingly, and who document ideas and reward ideators more often (in other words, those who demonstrate favourite interaction)—receive the highest volume of ideas. Those leaders
who only show high trust in goodwill receive a low volume of ideation; this was interpreted as an example of ‘frontstage creativity’.

From this research, it is clear that it is advantageous for organizations to have a computer-based idea-management system that is backed up with resources and a selection committee. Idea evolution is not only about the process itself, but also about defining the road and organizing the means. Having an idea-management system through which means are allocated introduces political dimensions, however. Hence, timing, reputation, lobbying and negotiation become important.

The stages of ideation can be labelled as the creating, selling and funding phases, which correspond with changing sets of actors. The concept of ‘match’, which is regarded as a positive relationship between the testimony and the actors involved, is suggested to help focus on the processes within these phases. This analysis resulted in a model: the crea-political process model, in which creative and socio-political processes are linked, and in which the management of creative processes is understood as part of these multi-faceted and interrelated processes.

This research shows that it is fruitful to regard creativity as a social process and that the variables for interaction that were used as sensitizing concepts in this study (namely, standing, trust, testimony and favourite interaction) are important to the way ideas evolve within organizations. Furthermore, contrary to the existing literature, this research has shown no evidence that the existence of a hierarchy undermines any aspects of creative processes. Ideators came up with relevant ideas that did not threaten existing power relationships.

The central research question is: How do actors construct and manage their ideas in different professional organizations and how do organizational conditions enable and constrain them? This question was reformulated for each of the three cases.

For Pentascope, the questions is: How do ideas unfold at Pentascope, an organization without idea management? This case was selected to probe the horizontal exchange of ideas. The consultants, however, wanted to communicate their ideas to their manager, but the ideator would usually be asked to ‘do something with it [the idea]’. Not only managers, but also other employees reacted very positively to new ideas. This enthusiasm was described as the ‘enthusiasm loop’ because there was a feeling that there were time constraints: ideators had to organize their own support, which did not necessarily mean that they would be given the means to follow through on their ideas.

It may be noted that there were no fixed routes for idea evolution found at Pentascope. Idea evolution, therefore, is not only about the process itself, but also about defining the road.
In addition, the primary business of the organization—to have projects with clients—was given priority, which could frustrate internal ideational processes. There were no explicit criteria for ideas. ‘Idea fit’ (the degree of fit between the idea and the organizational strategy), good testimony, good standing and support from one’s direct supervisor were observed to be important. Psychological issues also played a role, arising in such questions as, Why are you the right person to do this? Does it ‘give energy’ or does it ‘feel good’?

The best indicators for ideational success at Pentascope was how well the idea fit into the organization’s strategy. It was also observed that the ideas that people were working on were very general, or widely shared, to put it mildly. Taken together, this justifies labelling the creative process at Pentascope as ‘frontstage activity’.

For Ter Weel, the question is: **What is the volume of vertical organizational ideation in Ter Weel and what is the importance of the perceived quality of the ideas and of trust?** The estimated volume of ideas at Ter Weel was about 1500 ideas per year, which was about two ideas per employee per year. This was something of a surprise, because hardly any encouragement of creativity was observed, and the ideas were very unevenly spread around the organization. The team leaders who received the highest volume of ideas found ideas more important, had higher trust in their employees’ competence, felt the ideas were expressed more convincingly, documented ideas more often and rewarded ideators more often. This was not just a verbally expressed ‘importance’; it was unconsciously put into action. With regard to trust in goodwill, the relationship was inverted: high trust in goodwill was correlated with low volumes of ideation. This was interpreted as an example of frontstage creativity. The ideational inhibitions were linked to the concept of knowledgeability.

For Corus, the question is: **How do employees from Corus RD&T experience the idea-management system Eureka!?** From the Corus case, it is clear that it is advantageous for organizations to have a computer-based idea-management system that is backed up with a stimulation fund. However, having such a facility introduces political dimensions. The timing of submitting a project, the reputation of the researcher, and lobbying activities become important. Ideas do not come up or evolve in isolation; they are the outcome of negotiation. The stages of ideation at Corus can be labelled as the creating, selling and funding phases, which correspond with changing sets of actors. The concept of ‘match’, a positive relationship between the testimony and the actors involved, was suggested to help focus on the processes within these phases. This information resulted in a sensitizing model: the crea-political process
model, in which creative and socio-political processes are linked and in which the management of creative processes is understood as part of these multi-faceted and interrelated processes.

The last research question is formulated as: **How can the observed processes of interaction with regard to creativity be analyzed and interpreted in terms of the theoretical framework?** The structuration theory of Giddens (1984) was used to theoretically overcome the difficult relationship between individual creativity on the one hand and the constraining and enabling elements of the organizational structural on the other. Giddens’ concept of knowledgeability was helpful in this. The LOA model by Drazin, Glynn and Kazanjian (1999) was helpful in delineating creative processes and demarcating the field of the intersubjective level as different from the traditional fields of the intrasubjective and collective levels. However, because the theories that were used in this research are not integrated with one another, they provide us with only fragmentary understanding. The term ‘frontstage creativity’ was borrowed from Veenswijk (2005) to help explain observations at Pentescope and Ter Weel.

In this research, the focus was on social processes, which proved to be an interesting approach. And the choice of the four sensitizing concepts (standing, trust, testimony and favourite interaction) proved to be an interesting one. These four sensitizing concepts were found to be very important in creative organizational processes.

Some questions remain open. Do creative processes equal idea exchange or are other processes involved as well? For example, complaining or expressing dissatisfaction can be an interesting start for improvement, but at that stage, there are no solutions.

There is also the question of the definition of creativity. Amabile’s (1983) definition, which links ideas to the concepts of novelty and appropriateness, is widely accepted and also used in this research, but neither novelty nor appropriateness are as uncomplicated as they seem.

A third question with regard to definition would be how ethics play a role. Is finding a new way to steal or to kill creative? In discussions on innovation and creativity, there seems to be a rosy hue around innovation: it is seen as a positive thing, contributing to our wealth and security. But this can be a naïve point of view.

In the literature, it is emphasized that creative processes challenge authority, but I did not find this to be the case: creative processes seemed to strengthen authority. Unforeseen consequences, predicted by the theory of structuration, play a role. If theory claims that enthusiasm is important, people will be enthusiastic and develop a culture of enthusiasm that, rather than emphasizing creativity, becomes frontstage creativity. And if theory emphasizes
the importance of idea management—backed up with funds and implemented—political 
games about the allocation of resources develop.

Finally, there are some suggestions for the future management of creativity. What is 
needed is to unleash creativity in the Netherlands—in organizations and beyond—at regional 
levels and on a national scale. This calls for a mixed approach, where creativity should first 
be brought back into the organization, and frontstage creativity should be turned into a more 
productive form. Second, idea-management practices should be widely stimulated and 
 Improved in organizations, between organizations, in municipalities, among regions and at 
the national and supra-national level. The process of idea-management can be improved by 
relating it to creative thinking, knowledge management and by integrating it in the 
organizational idea structure. And finally, there is a need for more adequate theories on 
creativity. Creativity can no longer be regarded as solely a psychological subject, but 
creativity and innovation must also be regarded as social processes requiring social theories.