How managers can maximize "creative flow" and apply it to their jobs

An understanding of "flow" helps a manager understand that people have times of greater productivity, and that they can do things that maximise a person's productivity at work. A good summary of an environment that is conducive to flow has been provided by Norman (1996). He said to induce flow, we need (1) a high intensity of interaction and feedback; (2) specific goals and established procedures; (3) motivation; (4) a continual feeling of challenge, one that is neither so difficult as to create a sense of hopelessness and frustration nor so easy as to produce boredom; (5) provide a sense of direct engagement, producing the feeling of directly experiencing the environment, directly working on the task; (6) provide appropriate tools that fit the user and task so well that they aid, and do not distract; and (7) avoid distractions and disruptions that intervene and destroy the subjective experience.

According to Williams and Krane (2001), the characteristics needed for flow are (1) focused concentration, (2) clear goals, (3) unambiguous feedback, (4) matching of skills and challenges, (5) merging of action and awareness, (6) loss of self-consciousness, (7) intrinsic motivation, (8) a sense of control, and (9) a transformation of time.

A manager can engineer the work environment so the above conditions can be met. Goals and procedures can be set, distractions can be minimized, honest and regular feedback times can be established. He can match a person's abilities to their challenges. As flow occurs where there is an optimum level of stimulation and stress, a manager can experiment with those two factors and get levels that works for each individual. People often experience flow better either in silence or with a predictable level of noise (eg television, but are disturbed by unpredictable noise (eg children). Others find music or conversation conducive to flow. Many can maintain flow by ensuring that they are not interrupted, (eg by the telephone), by asking for people to communicate with them primarily by email, which they can respond to when they are am out of the "flow".

A manager who knows that flow can't be sustained over a long period schedules times of intense work, then intense play. He forms people into teams and then disbands the team when the project is complete. A manager can maximize flow by understanding what times of the day he is more creative, and scheduling creative activity during that time. People usually have regular times when they can get into the flow. Some people are "morning people", others are "night people". Hence, a manager can introduce "flexible-time" into their working life to maximise productivity. Not just the public service flexibility, but flexibility from early morning to late night. Many managers have a mixture of presentations, meetings and administration. Administration doesn't usually need flow, so they can schedule it in non-flow times, and face to face meetings for times of greater flow, where they need to be solving problems. They can also schedule blocks of highest flow times for preparing presentations, when they need greatest flow.

Flow can also be maximised by considering the physical location of work. Some people are more creative in offices, some in open plan, some at home, others in a café or a park. So a manager would do well to find the places where flow happens. This is possible in jobs where parts of the job are transportable (certainly hard for sales people in shop front retail).

A manager can also detect when he or the group is out of the flow to adjourn for another time, and either go and do that part of their work that needs little creativity or have some fun as a group. Rather than just scheduling these "fun times" at specific times, he can make them be in non-flow periods. Flow also comes from things that are not routine, so a manger can change routines that are leading to uncreative work. Places, times, seating arrangements, order of meetings, food, style of discussion are all variables that can be changed to boost flow. Since flow is enhanced by semi-physical movement, i.e. walking, cycling and swimming, a manger can take his take the team on a walk while discussing a problem.

It has been shown by Pace (2004) that surfing the web has the necessary preconditions to create and sustain flow. If a manager wants to help people to experience flow, then he can get people to sit in a quiet place and research something on the web.

References

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