CPS HR CONSULTING

Spark New Ideas:

How to Enhance Innovation in the Public Sector Workplace

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Contents

Introduction

Two-thirds of enterprise-level CEOs surveyed by Forbes in 2017 (Forbes Insights, 2017) believe that innovation and disruption are key to sustained business growth. As the economy shifts and technology evolves, the public sector and role of government must continually align itself to the needs of our changing world.

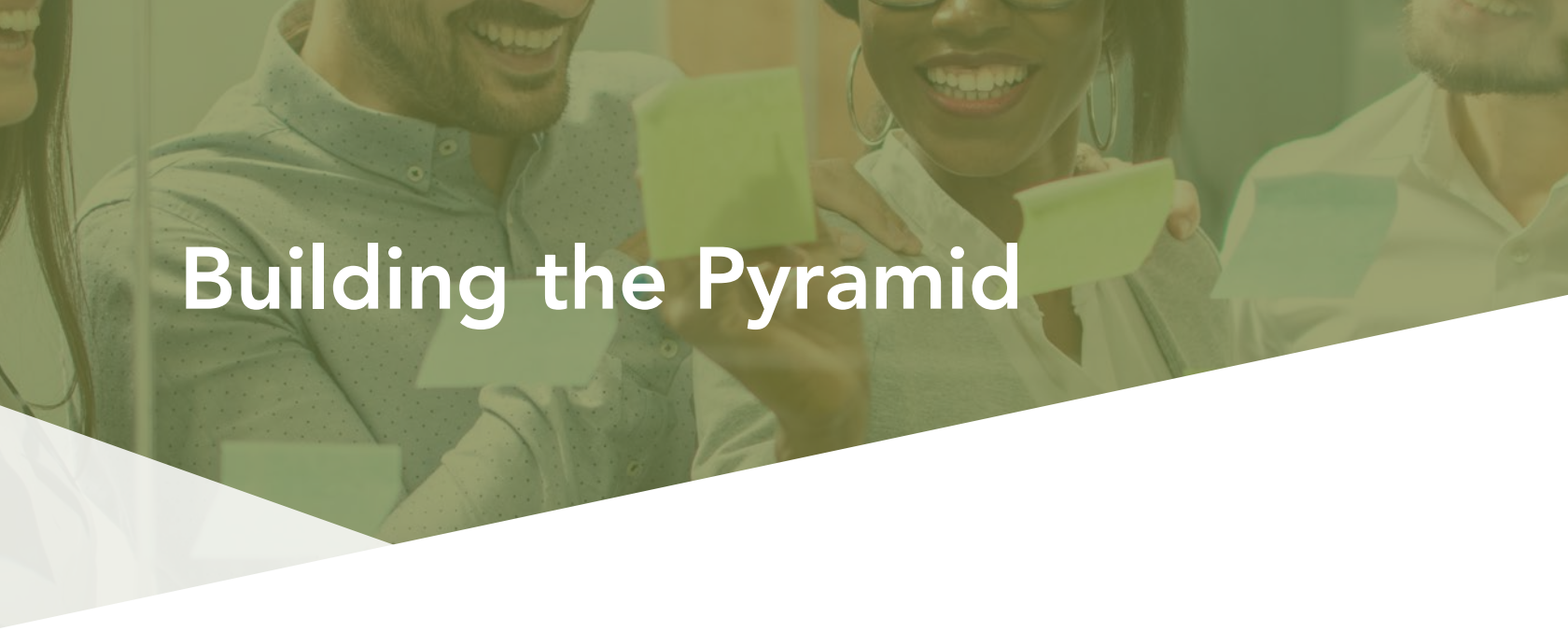
With the right intention, culture and infrastructure, taxpayer funded institutions can lead the way in developing innovative approaches to serving and uplifting the populace.

Today's CEOs (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2017) say that creativity and innovation are their organization's highest priorities, and, indeed, data suggests that companies that put a high value on these two priorities have had the most significant business growth (IBM, 2010). Additionally, as artificial intelligence (AI) and automation become more integrated into the workplace, hiring employees to perform algorithmic or straightforward mechanical tasks will be less critical. Those people that use their remarkable capacity to envision an alternative method or unique future will be highly valued and necessary.

Building an innovative workplace is not simply a matter of willing it or providing art supplies in the breakroom. It requires cultural, operational and individual commitment. While these commitments to innovation are not formulaic and may look vastly different across a wide variety of organizations, the fundamentals will be the same. This is because, as neuroscience has uncovered, the human brain is innately creative.

Breaking it Down: The Components of an Innovative Workplace

1. **Growth-oriented Work Mindset:** The cultural and organizational understanding that the human brain is inherently creative and has unlimited ability to change and improve with effort and training
2. **Social and Emotional Aspect of the Creative Workplace:** Understanding the importance of building trust, effective communication and a foundation for resilience
3. **Embracing Risk and Failure from an Organizational Perspective:** Innovation is risky AND motivating for your employees.
4. **Deep Work Time and Autonomy:** People have limited attention spans. Give them agency to prioritize interruption-free time on the important and complex projects.
5. **Varied Idea Exposure and Time for Incubation:** Diverse and unrelated concepts and experiences provide the kindling for igniting new ideas. This is enhanced by building in time for reflection, both at work and at home.



Building the Pyramid

Each of these five building blocks requires the previous component to be fully implemented for the organization to experience the greatest impact.

For example, without having trust and communication, the social and emotional aspect of the creative workforce, employees are very unlikely to take risks. Therefore, rolling out systemic changes should happen in a stepwise manner. The components at the base of the pyramid below will have the most impact in your innovative organization and should be built first.

STEP 1: Work Mindset

The human brain is inherently creative and has unlimited ability to change.

Neuroscientists know the following:

1. The human brain is incredibly adaptable and changeable.
2. The human brain is wired to continuously form new connections, networks and concepts.

Building a workforce where every individual member understands their brains' capacity for change and novel idea-generation promotes a fundamental faith in their ability to be creative and improve at virtually anything with practice and effort. It ensures a workforce that has a growth-oriented mindset. Growth-oriented teams are more likely to push themselves beyond their comfort zone, persevere when times are tough and be more deliberate in their learning from failures and mistakes (Dweck, 2007). Employees who view themselves as perpetual students in the "school of life" are also more curious and more likely to have "intellectual humility". This trait is one that keeps us open-minded and helps us recognize the value in others' diverse experience sets and knowledge (Kross & Grossman, 2012). Google human resources guru, Laslo Block, cites "intellectual humility" as the most important characteristic he looks for in hiring (Bryant, 2013). While a certain amount of intellectual humility is determined before workers end up in your organization, Stanford University's Carol Dweck's research suggests this trait can be cultivated (Dweck, 2007).

Implementation

Teach your employees about the brain's incredible plasticity

Giving your employees a lesson on the brain and its adaptability will kick-start employee growth mindset (Dweck, 2007). Many companies (including CPS HR Consulting) have consultants that can teach this concept effectively to non-scientists. Book clubs (e.g. Mindset, The Talent Code, Soft-Wired, The Brain that Changes Itself) or gatherings designed for watching and discussing videos, including TED talks (eg. speakers Michael Merzenich, Robert Bilder, Carol Dweck) are also effective. The goal is to have this concept permeate the culture, not just be another trend, so multiple modalities of exposure to the science of brain plasticity is ideal.

"Employees who view themselves as perpetual students in the "school of life" are also more curious and more likely to have "intellectual humility."

STEP 1: Work Mindset (cont.)

Implementation (cont.)

Teach your employees about their ability to be creative
Some employees will believe that innovation is the stuff that only artists and designers are capable of. As a manager, your job is to show them that this isn't the case. Include a 5-minute creative activity at the beginning of staff meetings (e.g. Three Words, 9 Dot Puzzle, Improv Warmups). Showcase innovative solutions devised by teams or individuals of traditionally non-creative departments at meetings and events. Research and discuss the big innovators in your field. (Look internationally as well.)

Continuously coach and develop your people with free courses or lunch and learns
To demonstrate your strong belief in your staff's ability to learn, give them numerous opportunities to do so. These courses do not have to have an obvious direct connection to the organization's bottom line. These seemingly disparate development opportunities could be the source of the most novel solution your team comes up with. (The science of this can be found in Step 5.)

Managers can model self-improvement and show vulnerability
If you want your team to expect intellectual humility from each other, set the example. Show your desire to learn new things, be open-minded to diverse opinions and admit when you don't know something or need to build a skill.

Expect innovation from non-traditionally creative departments/teams/people
People are exquisitely attuned to the expectations and values of those who manage and lead them. Having high expectations that a department or individual will help innovate and demonstrating, verbally and otherwise, value for outside-of-the-box thinking will be noticed and positively impact performance.

Hire for intellectual humility and growth-oriented mindset
When possible, screen new hires with these characteristics in mind. Hiring departments can develop a batch of interview questions that will allow the candidate that possesses these qualities to rise to the top of the applicant pool. Or use already available resources that assess humility either directly or indirectly.

STEP 2: The Social and Emotional Aspect of Your Creative Workplace

Understanding the importance of building trust, effective communication and a foundation for resilience.

The human brain evolved to protect the health and wellness of its owner. Unfortunately, evolutionarily ancient protective instincts can lead to maladaptive stress responses, undermining an individual's ability to be maximally innovative. Much research from neuroscientists and psychologists shows the devastating impact chronic negative stress can have on our bodies and brains (Mariotti, 2015). Notably, it can decrease cognitive capacity (Eunice Y. Yuen, 2012) and the ability to feel empathy for others (Todd AR, 2015).

Furthermore, people are wired to be social and have neuron networks to promote empathy, understanding and social learning. Several studies demonstrate that individuals who feel emotionally close to their peers and supervisors have lower cortisol levels (a physiological indicator of our stress response) (Ahnert, Harwardt-Heinecke, Kappler, Eckstein-Madry, & Milatz, 2012). Not feeling like part of a group is a very stressful experience because, in our evolutionary history, being ostracized socially put our survival at risk (Lieberman, 2013).

One feature of strong relationships is trust. Most of us intuitively understand that trust is a positive feature of a work environment, but there is also evidence that organizations without trust suffer in revenue and growth (Zak, 2017). Lack of trust can cause unwanted negative rumors and poor engagement among employees.

Taking care of the whole person in the workplace is paramount to fostering creativity. Innovation within any organization depends upon its people, and people have brains whose cognitive, social and emotional circuitry are completely overlapping. This means not a single one of your employees can work without social and emotional stressors affecting them intellectually, nor can they make completely rational decisions without emotions being factored in, even if unconsciously (Damasio, 2005).

Implementation

Create a culture that recognizes and manages stress and emotions

In order to thrive and be innovative, employees must not be overwhelmed with interpersonal or organizational stress. Thankfully, many research-based strategies exist not only to reduce stress acutely but also to train employees to be better at managing stress with practice. Many of these strategies, while they appear simplistic, are biologically sound, and evidence-based. They often involve spending time recognizing and acknowledging the emotion and then reasoning through a way to re-approach the problem.

Survey your workers to assess their social-emotional state and values

Anonymously surveying your workers has never been easier. Simple tools like Google forms and Survey Monkey allow organizations to gain insights that can help managers determine where workers need support, training and morale boosts.

STEP 2: The Social and Emotional Aspect of Your Creative Workplace (cont.)

Implementation (cont.)

Practice naming and taming emotions as a group and individually
One of the most effective ways of dealing with runaway emotions is naming them, whether it be by saying them aloud, in writing or simply noting them explicitly to yourself (Tabibnia, 2008). For example, if a coworker says something insensitive, recognizing your emotion (e.g. anger, shame, disappointment) using the methods described above will lessen the biological significance of the emotion. Managers can lead the way by modeling desired behaviors during meetings and interactions with their team. While this may feel awkward at first, building a culture that embraces emotional transparency will reap huge benefits and eventually become the norm.

Model and support taking mental health days
Negative emotions are catchy and spread unconsciously because we are wired to be social. Recognize your own need for breaks, and be supportive of employees that need to spend an occasional day at home in order to start fresh the following day.

Build strong relationships and trust with transparent communication
With so much change and volatility in our modern workplace and economy, some anxiety is inevitable. However, lack of communication, especially during times of transition or upheaval, can easily lead to lack of trust. Business leaders should foster an open dialogue across the organization. Wherever possible, acknowledge business changes and challenges with all employees as well as the organization's strategy to overcome them. And keep the communication two-way by allowing strategy input from those at all levels.

Invest in digital and social infrastructure to ensure people can disagree and challenge each other's ideas respectfully
Creating a culture in which employees at all levels feel comfortable giving their respectfully worded opinions freely to a superior is the goal. Innovation requires disagreement and intellectual debate. Model and encourage this type of genuine debate. Technology has made communication much easier. And there are many digital platforms that allow anonymous feedback and complaints if employees worry about the consequences of openly disagreeing with colleagues and managers.

Acknowledge and celebrate victories
The trust formula includes the need for recognition and the need to feel supported and appreciated by peers.

Devote resources to relationship-building across the company
Organize and allocate discretionary budgets for department- and company-wide social events. These impact team connectedness, make employees feel like they are part of something bigger, and leaders who allocate resources to ensure their teams have strong social bonds have better-performing teams (Rozovsky, 2015).

Set up organizational infrastructure so that various teams and individuals can work together
Audit all projects for their potential to be based on more cross-functional teamwork. Projects that demand more collaboration across departments, when possible, will strengthen relationships as well as enhance the product output.

STEP 3: Embracing Risk and Failure from an Organizational Perspective

Innovation is risky AND motivating for your employees.

When employees don't feel that they're challenged or consistently learning, they tend to lack motivation and underperform. However, when someone is attempting something experimental or innovative, and is therefore unsure if their efforts will succeed, they are maximally motivated to see the work to completion (Pink, 2011). Think back about some of your most fulfilling personal or professional projects. Likely, they were just out of your comfort zone.

This drive from challenge and the potential for failure is explained by findings in neurobiology showing that peak motivation comes from work that has approximately equal chances of success and failure. Drive is dependent upon reward activity in the brain ("this feels good, so do it again"), and these reinforcing signals are most active when success is maximally unpredictable (J. Mirenowicz, 1994). In terms of survival, this function of the human brain served to encourage curiosity and exploration in order to support the species maximizing its use of the environment and being adaptable to changing conditions (Nicholson, 1998). For today's workforce, this means that the risk itself feels good and therefore enhances motivation to power through the most challenging aspects of new projects.

Workplace failure does not need to be interpreted as letting an entire agency go under, nor does risk need to get incorporated as watching a department fail in order to better motivate employees. To take advantage of the brain's natural tendency to thrive under uncertainty, potential failure can be infinitesimally small. For example, when hypothetical Jonah was first asked to start adding technical reports to his writing duties, his boss knew that there would be a learning curve and that the first products would not be spectacular. The company ensured there were no potential negative consequences from his initial growth by assigning a seasoned technical editor to review the first ten pieces. This both challenged Jonah and let him know that he was trusted.

Building a culture in which failure, learning and iteration are part of the norm is a key component of building an innovative organization. Experimentation has been an integral part of many creative problem-solving and design-thinking processes, and they are used by those who are most well-known for being great "creators" (Coyle, 2009). Challenge and risk are inherently stressful. So, one important reason to have built a socially- and emotionally-aware workplace culture before pushing for outside-of-the-box production, is so that the organization is prepared to acknowledge the accompanying stressors and be poised for resilience. One can only ask individuals and teams to take risks with the appropriate supports in place.

STEP 3: Embracing Risk and Failure from an Organizational Perspective (cont.)

Implementation

Give employees some autonomy to decide on projects
Google, one of the world's most innovative companies, allows employees to work on a project entirely unrelated to their job description for 20 percent of their work time. Inherent in this practice is the chance that the self-determined project will not produce anything of market value. But giving employees this level of autonomy boldly represents the company-wide value of being comfortable with some level of risk, thereby making employees more motivated and therefore productive. This ostensibly reduces "lost time" because it "buys" time back into the system through added productivity.

Re-evaluate compensation models
Performance-based incentives can be helpful for the short-term but have a risk of depressing innovation because many employees will be stressed by the thought of missing out on a bonus. It is also ultimately unsustainable, as the brain demands increased reward over time to achieve the same level of biological reinforcement. Thoughtfully designing incentives by surveying colleagues on who they feel is the most innovative employee, or taking other measures not directly tied to efficiency or production, may avoid the risk of pay being tied to output.

To motivate your employees, give them appropriate challenges as well as input on priorities for organizational growth
Giving employees autonomy and say in their projects and responsibilities will help them better self-assess and find their own sweet spot of growth. Have feedback sessions as part of performance evaluations that include "stretch" goal-setting each year.

Have leaders share their failures
Ensure leaders model the value of learning from failure. When possible, encourage sharing of what insights were gleaned from projects that did not go as planned.

Create an "Oops" Board
Make failure less threatening by creating a poster/whiteboard or digital version of a failure board. This is a place where employees publicly share their failure and more importantly, what insight they gained. Meetings can be opened with teams sharing their weekly "Oops" and "Insights." Alternatively, it can be anonymous (this is where digital platforms can be attractive), but keep in mind that it will be most effective when individuals and teams take responsibility for errors and subsequent learning in order to both build relationships as well as enhance the organizational culture of embracing risk.

STEP 4: The Importance Deep Work and Autonomy

People have limited attention spans. Give them agency to prioritize interruption-free time on the important and complex projects.

People have the incredible ability to filter out less important stimuli in order to focus in on what's relevant, allowing seemingly impossible human accomplishments like landing a rover on Mars (twice now!). It is critical that the brain is able to make this choice to divert attentional resources away from irrelevant input, like the clothing on our skin, throughout the day, and instead towards stimuli really deserving of our focus, like, for example, our weekly report to the board of directors. This is because our attentional resources are finite. As anyone who has ever been repeatedly interrupted while attempting something complicated or novel knows, we cannot perform well on anything we are not able to devote almost our entire focus to. When we turn our attention toward one thing, brain activity is drawn away from some other point of focus (e.g. texting and driving). Envision a small jump drive. If you fill it up and have another file to store, you have two choices: 1) not to save the file or 2) remove another file to make space (Gazzaniga, 2002).

Reflect upon the last 48 hours at work, the tasks you paid attention to, the items you accomplished and the feelings you experienced. Did you spend any significant time focused deeply on a large project, or did you spend it anxiously and distractedly putting out fires and doing housekeeping-style tasks? If you participated in the former, congratulations! You are, by far, in the minority in our modern, harried workforce, and you are likely a happier and more satisfied employee (Newport, 2015). If you didn't, then it may be worth your time to reflect upon how to ensure that you get focused project time or "deep work." While you may feel you're good at multitasking, what you're actually doing is what scientists call "task-switching," which is very brain resource-intensive and extremely inefficient (Goleman, 2013). The best work is produced by periods of intense and uninterrupted focus (Newport, 2015).

The phenomenon of deep work is one that recognizes the inherent limits of our attention and prioritizes the meaningful projects that many knowledge workers are actually hired and paid to do. To curate opportunities for deep work, there must be organizational commitment to time without the distractions of colleagues, social media, alerts from the outside world and other drains on attention. This is, of course, no small feat. The benefit will be enormous however, because the human brain is so adept at getting better at what it repeats. This means it will much more easily and effectively tune out distractions after some practice.

People who spend time in deep work are also much more likely to report the experience of flow (Newport, 2015). Flow is that seemingly timeless experience where the task is challenging, yet attainable and deeply rewarding. So once a worker has attained and practiced it, they will be more intrinsically motivated to repeat the experience.

Implementation

"Meeting-free Mondays"

One way to ensure larger blocks of uninterrupted time is to strongly discourage meetings 1-2 days a week. Depending on your operations and infrastructure, this will be easier and more valuable for certain organizations and departments.

STEP 4: The Importance Deep Work and Autonomy (cont.)

Implementation

Acknowledge and provide infrastructure to support the need to check "housekeeping" items off the cognitive "to-do" list

How many times have you been interrupted from deep focus work by the thought of a work or home chore that needs to be accomplished? These distractions are very resource-intensive, and switching back to the task at hand creates "attention residue," a huge lag in the ability to get back to the same effectiveness and productivity. In order to remove personal distractions, provide personal chore days each month (or half-days). Additionally, in-house "automate" days can serve as dedicated periods of time in which teams or individuals create processes that eliminate or decrease distraction. For example, automating a process can mean everyone uploading or turning in hard copies at the same time each day.

Provide in-house yoga or meditation classes/online resources/apps to practice deep focus

The brain is plastic (changeable) (Merzenich, 2014), and therefore practicing controlling our attention can generalize to practice at deep focus (Goleman, 2013). Meditation and yoga are exercises in controlling attention (Winston & Smalley, 2010). Many easily accessible apps and websites can allow these practices to take place from an office chair or in other short time increments throughout the workday.

Be mindful of implementing new technologies for communication to ensure they don't become a drain on productivity

Effective communication across all levels of the company is necessary for innovation. However, being continuously available and connected can be a liability. Intranets and internal messaging systems can be modified to include downtimes or to turn off sound alerts and notifications.

Ensure that every critical task has multiple individuals who can serve as backups

In order to focus deeply, employees must not be burdened with the fear that the organization won't function appropriately while they work on a complex project. Having employees cross-trained in multiple sectors of an organization can avoid this. Trader Joe's, for example, trains every employee in virtually every aspect of store operations.

Recognize the importance of employees' personal lives and interests

Employees need more "off-time" than has been previously thought – time when they are thoroughly disconnected from work. When they can complete personal tasks, including strictly social ones, during "off-time," they won't be as regularly distracted at work by personal matters.

Effective communication across all levels of the company is necessary for innovation.

STEP 5: Exposure to Varied Ideas and Time for Incubation

Diverse and unrelated concepts and experiences provide the kindling for igniting new ideas. This is enhanced by building in time for reflection, both at work and at home.

The human brain is built for insight and creative thought because of its tendency to constantly make new and varied connections (Sporns, 2016) (Gazzaniga, 2002). Neuroscientists have revealed that this default creative capacity is best accessed after periods of reflection as novel ideas will integrate or re-combine with already existing ones during this downtime. Many work environments unintentionally suppress this innate human ability by siloing teams, hyper-specializing roles and creating unnecessarily fast-paced work environments.

New idea-generation and creative problem-solving will occur more frequently when individual and team exposures and experiences are varied and diverse. Work environments that provide exposure to art, sports and cultural experiences will allow for maximal bonding and brain network activation. These experiences coupled with regularly scheduled downtime will prime the brain for insights and creative output.

Scientists discovered a network activated during quiet reflection while observing brain activity (during fMRI) when their subjects were not given any cognitive task. As evidence has accumulated since this first discovery, experts now believe that this so-called "reflective" network is important for empathy, deep conceptual understanding, helping to integrate new information into existing networks and, most relevantly here, creative insight.

Reflect upon where your greatest insights have occurred. Were they at work sitting at your desk? Likely not. On the contrary, usually the moments occur during a long drive, the shower, exercise or other periods during which we tend to "zone out."

The task-driven and shallow focus of fast-paced, modern work life means most of us rarely get time to spend in our reflective network during the workday. Yet we get our best ideas when our reflective network is activated. Creating times and spaces for reflective network engagement at work is an investment that will undoubtedly result in more insightful breakthroughs, problem-solving and production.

The recipe for great ideas needs the right ingredients. These ingredients include exposure to ideas unrelated to work through cultural or intellectual enrichments and time for percolation.

STEP 5: Exposure to Varied Ideas and Time for Incubation (cont.)

Implementation

Encourage unplugged breaks during the day
While it may appear that your employees are doing nothing, break times can be those with the most insight (like a shower). These types of breaks can be encouraged with "quiet" phone-free break rooms, walking paths around the grounds or simple readily-available meditative activities like adult coloring books, knitting or model airplane building.

Ensure teams aren't siloed and can communicate and share ideas easily
Social engagement enriches brain network activation. One way to promote engagement could involve hosting cross-departmental brainstorming sessions to address a challenge that one specific team is struggling with. A less direct method would be to create common break areas where employees will inevitably mingle.

Value workers off-time and model not responding to emails/texts after hours
Employee time spent in the reflective network at home is also valuable to employers. Obviously, how employees spend their time away from work is not for employers to determine but ensuring they are not "on" and available for work around the clock will improve the chances that they are reflecting. Model this by not responding or emailing/texting during non-work hours as well.

Consider cultural events that expose employees to concepts that aren't seemingly related to work
Imagine a lunchtime smoothie-making workshop, a Holocaust museum visit, a TED talk of a scientist discussing climate change, a tech leader demonstrating VR glasses, a harpist performing Handel in the lobby. While none of these experiences may be directly related to the work you do, each of them adds richness to brain networks, further priming it for innovation.

Develop a culture of permitting time for ideas to develop
While giving downtime at work and home to employees will increase the likelihood of insights and innovation, it is not formulaic. Insights often take time while the brain connects previously disparate networks. Build in percolation time to every project or deadline.

Provide an environment that is distraction-free
Designate a room where phones and tech are silenced or banned. It could be for napping or quiet repose or even media-free social interaction.

About CPS HR Consulting

CPS HR Consulting is a self-supporting public agency providing a full range of integrated HR solutions to government and nonprofit clients across the country. Our strategic approach to increasing the effectiveness of human resources results in improved organizational performance for our clients. We have a deep expertise and unmatched perspective in guiding our clients in the areas of organizational strategy, recruitment and selection, classification and compensation and training and development.

To discuss how our services and expertise can benefit your organization, reach out to us at:

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