Creating a Culture of Innovation

The idea of creating a culture of innovation in the workplace is not new, but it seems to be a recurring theme in the enterprise across industries. The Harvard Business Review has a short article on this topic with the following three points, that I would like to expand a bit on.

1. Match Tasks to Skills:
    - Give your employees projects that are demanding, while also making sure the tasks are a good match for their skills and resources.
2. Evaluate Capacity to take on Challenges
    - Don't just give a new project to whoever has free time or could finish it most easily. Before you delegate, ask yourself, "Who would feel challenged by this project and has the capacity to rise to the challenge?"
3. Accept and Redefine Failure
    - Aim for 70% success. If you expect everyone to nail a task with 100% success, they are unlikely to take risks, which is an innovation killer. Letting them know that 70% success is OK will ensure they don't play it too safe.

Source for points: https://hbr.org/tip/2017/01/3-ways-to-create-a-culture-of-innovation

Match Tasks to Skills

These ideas are sound in the basics, but worth further discussion. On the idea of demanding projects, a good manager needs to understand the team make up. This first and basic step is far too often overlooked. I have time and again had employees or colleagues I have mentored tell me that I have given them more feedback and direction than they have ever received, or received in a long time. Why is that? My hypothesis is that it's because it is hard work – and takes time. Real time to talk, and accompanied by active listening. It takes trying to understand what drives people and what their goals are, and then shaping guidance to that set of needs and skills. This is the underlying foundation that makes this first principle work.

To give your employees projects that are demanding, while also making sure the tasks are a good match for their skills and resources is something that can only happen when you understand both the task at hand, as well as the skills and goals of your employees. The big value in this first point is more about the engagement with your own team, and the ownership that brings, than it is the task.

Evaluate Capacity to take on Challenges

Building on the first approach of knowing your people, this on is guidance to:

Don't just give a new project to whoever has free time or could finish it most easily. Before you delegate, ask

yourself, "Who would feel challenged by this project and has the capacity to rise to the challenge?"

Knowing your team and knowing their objectives helps create this opportunity for alignment. I have what I refer to as the "rubber band management approach". When I have high potential team members, I like to sit with them and have a talk that probes their capacity to stretch, to take on challenge. I then lay out the rubber band idea, and see if they bite. This approach says – I will set up a challenge for you that will stretch you, just like a rubber band. Before you break, I will partner with you to help you be successful, but you will be uncomfortable. We will repeat this challenge, again and again. What you will find is that each time, you stretch farther, and feel stronger and more able to drive on your own. This is what I see as the foundation behind this approach. Make the new projects and challenges a thoughtful part of a development plan, partnering with the team member to align with them on communication, and expectations. Help them know it is part of something larger and will help them grow while delivering meaningful value to their business.

Accept and Redefine Failure

The article points to a 70% success rate – I would push that a bit to say success goals should be set at the beginning and measured through the life of the work. It is not that 70% is success. It is that a recognition that over the life of innovation, the goals may shift with new knowledge. It is that even with this, teams may still fall short.

Do not pretend it is anything other than falling short of the original goal. At the same time, celebrate the things that are real. This may mean celebrating courage to overcome fear, or inertia. It may mean celebrate getting to that 70% or whatever level was attained, but still producing real learnings that can be used to add value to the business. It must still be about value at the end, to keep driving a culture of improvement. By casting the outcome as a value measure, we can help teams keep the focus, and therefore performance where it belongs, on what will add meaningful business value as opposed to make people just feel good about being busy.

The overall thing I take away from this is that we as leaders owe our teams the time to understand them, and the time to shape goals to stretch and grow them. We have to do this while holding ourselves and our teams to a standard of "Value Production". We must reward value produced over work performed.