

Trying to Spark Innovation? Look Around . . .

By Dr. Laura Riggs

Today's marketplace is tough. Companies are working with fewer resources and facing growing, global competition. To be successful, organizations have to get ahead of the curve—anticipate, innovate and create—before competitors and in ways that impress customers. How is innovation accomplished?

“Brainstorming sessions” and “innovation workshops” are tools that are becoming increasingly utilized. Companies are using facilitators, engaging in creative exercises, and traveling offsite to try to help employees break free from status quo thinking. When planning such excursions—and better yet, when considering how to create a culture of innovation at home—don't forget to attend to the physical environment. According to recent research, a bland physical environment can dampen creativity and a visually stimulating one can facilitate it.

Although research on the physical environment is limited, one recent study showed that certain spaces can facilitate problem solving and innovative thinking. For instance, rooms with more visual detail (i.e., with more objects designed to add aesthetic interest) help people think and express themselves in novel ways. And the more detail, the better. (These researchers found no “stimulation overload” effect). The same is true for rooms that are spatially complex—rooms with furniture, “nooks” and seating arrangements that are interesting and promote social interaction enhance creativity. A view of the natural environment and the use of natural materials (e.g. wood and stone) make a difference too. Anything to avoid? According to this study, cool colors (e.g., gray) and manufactured

or composite materials (e.g., drywall, steel) are associated with decreased creativity.

Creating an atmosphere that is open and playful facilitates innovative thinking as well. Research has shown that playful activity is associated with more imaginativeness and originality. According to one investigator, “play seems to develop a more generalized attitude and/or schema which predispose the individual to creating and using novelty.”

Research is important, but what results have companies seen in the real world? Dave Osby, former innovation manager at Eka Chemicals, noted an enormous increase in energy and ideas when he held meetings at Catalyst Ranch, a unique meeting space packed with toys, adorned with rich visual detail and warm colors, and loaded with windows and “cubbyholes.” “What a refreshing change from the hotel ballroom meeting spaces we've used in the past...at Catalyst Ranch, the energy was higher, the ideas were fresher and people really enjoyed themselves.” So much so that employees asked when they could return to the Ranch and then created their own innovative meeting space back home.

Kim Newkirk, a corporate trainer who has worked in many types of settings concurs. She believes that colorful,



stimulating spaces like Catalyst Ranch create an “out of the office think tank.” Specifically, she feels that people can more easily relax and break free from status quo thinking in settings where there appear to be no rules or boundaries on thought or behavior. As she notes, “the rooms at Catalyst Ranch allow people to move around as needed, sit on a swing, draw or knead play-do if they want to, grab something from the fridge”—all aspects that she feels ultimately encourage freedom and learning. “The Ranch truly is a

catalyst for creativity and innovation.” She sees the learning that takes place there stick too. “People seem to participate, listen, and engage more effectively.” One organization she trained agreed and decided to create its own warm, colorful “think tank” room at its home office.

In today's competitive marketplace, results like these matter. Successful companies must innovate and develop employees who think creatively and look at problems and situations with fresh eyes and ears. In determining how to achieve innovation and creative thinking, decision makers mustn't forget to look around. Whether working onsite or off, the physical environment seems to matter. So leverage those walls to your advantage.

Your meeting, our space. *Shazam!*

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