Developing an Innovative Culture in Your Organization

Searching for a more innovative culture in your organization?

Dean Keith Simonton, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, has found through his research that there are five key variables that affect creativity and innovation in society as well as organizations:

Childhood Development:

Plus: Being the last-born in a family with moderate family conflict and diverse role models can fuel original thinking.

Minus: First-borns are more likely to think in conventional ways. Too much family conflict can cause a reluctance to take risks.

Individual Traits:

Plus: Being aggressive, egocentric or antisocial makes it easier to ponder ideas in solitude.

Minus: Resistance to change or a readiness to give up easily can derail new initiatives.

Cognitive Processes:

Plus: Taking time off and letting ideas incubate can allow original ideas to take root.

Minus: Working doggedly on a goal rather than putting it on the back burner for a while can choke off fresh approaches.

Career Environment:

Plus: Freedom to take risks, do a variety of assignments and work on multiple projects at once can spark flexible thinking.

Minus: Pressure to play it safe or close off alternative perspectives can shut down creativity.

Society/Culture:

Plus: Civil conflict, political fragmentation and cultural diversity can trigger creative thinking.

Minus: War and anarchy disrupt work on new ideas.

What are the implications of Simonton's findings for us as leaders? There's not much we can do about an employee's childhood development (except seek to select only last-borns).   Leaders can pay attention to the environments they help to create and the cultures within their organizations. If innovation is necessary, an environment that encourages and rewards risk taking for the advancement of the organization is something leaders should aim for and help to create. As culture managers, leaders who understand that an acceptable level of conflict is desirable will assist the innovative effort.