

YES! AND... CREATIVE GORILLA # 131

Let teams organise themselves for greater performance

Self Organising Teams...

"A hippie celebrates Christmas too... just differently." – German police report



"Christmas Marijuana"

Could you team design their own structure ?

I was once involved in the decision to transfer a call centre operation from London to the USA. It was critical to the success of the transfer that the team continued to provide good service until the moment of the live transfer, whilst they sought other jobs. So it was vital to maintain morale and to motivate people.

I arranged a planning workshop with four representatives of the call centre, its management and HR. One question I had for the representatives was, "What will help motivate people in the call centre to maintain a high standard of service until the transfer?"

When preparing this question, I thought through a number of possible responses and discussed these with HR. What would be top of your list of responses? This was theirs:

"We would like pot plants on each desk to brighten the centre." I admit, this was not on my list.

I agreed to the request and after the meeting, arranged for them to go to a shop to choose the plants. Naturally there were other requests, help to find new jobs etc., but the plants were the first. It cost us £75.

I was reminded of the story last week when running a Creativity and Innovation weekend with a great group of Open University MBA students.

We were running through the [Random Connection](#) technique on the challenge of "How to motivate a team?" (Click on link to see overview). One person had been given a [Tangle](#), a toy, that is highly flexible and made of several interconnecting components.

The idea sparked from the Tangle was to have teams design their own organisational structure rather than have management impose it. We decided the idea was interesting enough to evaluate.

(I appreciate that there are some case studies on self-organising teams, such as the Volvo experiments of the early nineties; ours is a more limited idea).

In the course we considered the idea from three angles (Dreamer, Critic, Realist) using the [Disney technique](#). (Click on link to see a Creative Gorilla article).

The positive aspects of the idea include:

- Making the team feel more empowered
- Teams are closer to the work and should know how to organise the structure better
- Individuals are more likely to accept the structure if they are involved in the design
- Individuals are likely to be more flexible and motivated for change

Criticism of the idea includes:

- It may cause problems in the organisation; all teams would need to design their own structure
- There would be too much self interest and disputes would arise

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- More dominant or experienced team members might influence the design too strongly
- It may cause issues with job grading
- It's more challenging for the manager

Realistically:

- It could be worth trialling with one team
- The team could be facilitated to develop the design to avoid dominance of any one person
- The leadership team could request a suggested design from the team, rather than give the team the final decision
- The leadership team could monitor closely for signs of issues

SO

I confess I ran several teams in my career in organisations and never considered having them design their own organisational structure.

As I reflect on the idea and I admit a bias towards giving it a try, I think the criticism stems from the thinking I adopted with my call centre team – assuming the worst will happen.

As creative leaders, what if we prepare for the worst and assume the best; that people will act not from self-interest but from the interests of the team or organisation? If we approach everything with a worst case mind set, are we not likely to provoke a self fulfilling prophecy?

ACTION

Have you ever tried this idea of teams organising their own structure or seen it in operation outside of manufacturing industry teams? What was the result? I'd like to hear from you.

Overall, the idea has merit and is worth a trial. Could you trial this with a team in your organisation?

If you were wondering, the call centre team gave great service in its last six months. All people who wanted jobs got them, with some coaching, and the morale was very high on the

final day. I like to think the pot plants played their part in that.

Googling "pot plant" to check if it were common usage in other countries, I came across a story about a man in Germany using a cannabis (pot) plant as a Christmas tree until police raided his home.

It made me think, what if the call centre agents had gone out and bought a supply of cannabis plants? ("Well, you told us we could buy pot plants.") There could have been some interesting calls!

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Contact John or Kate Brooker:

Speak: +44 (0) 20 8869 9990

Write: hi@yesand.eu

Read: www.yesand.eu