

Posted on Thu, Nov. 27, 2008

# STEVE FARMER

BY RICK PLUMLEE

The Wichita Eagle

Thousands of books have been written about business leadership, but you would be hard-pressed to find many pages dedicated to helping employees be creative on the job.

That seems odd to Steve Farmer, a Wichita State University professor of business management who considers creativity a critical factor in the workplace.

"Creativity leads to adaptation to changing circumstances and therefore allows success to be sustained and not just short-term," Farmer said.

That will be one of the points he will make in his presentation "Building the Creative Worker" at 7 p.m. Sunday on WSU-TV, Channel 13 on Cox Cable. The show can be seen again at 7 p.m. on Dec. 11, Dec. 14 and Dec. 25.

Farmer has spent years researching creativity in the workplace in this country and internationally. For workers to be creative, he said the tone has to be set by a business's leaders.

If that happens, he said, "Even those people who by personality are non-creatives, can hit the level of the blue-sky thinkers... those who see and think, 'Gosh, that's a creative person' when it comes to specific business issues and problems."

He cited Apple founder and chief executive Steve Jobs as a good example.

"Apple is an extension of who Jobs is," Farmer said. "I wonder what Apple will be like when he's gone."

1. Of the three things you indicated employees need to have to be creative -- resources to do their work, opportunities to be creative and motivation to be creative -- does one stand out over the other?

"Motivation. If you're motivated, even if you don't have the expertise or knowledge, you'll go look for it."

2. If having creative workers is so important, why isn't it encouraged more by employers?

"First, no matter how much organizations say they want creativity and innovation, the prime directive of an organization is efficiency.

"And organization and efficiency can sometimes be at odds with that because to be creative you often have to do things differently.

"By definition, creativity is uncertainty. You're getting somewhere, but you aren't sure how or how long it's going to take you.

"And that's hard for organizations to live with because the one thing they can't stand is uncertainty.

"The second reason is because there is a common myth that only some people can be creative. If you believe that, then why would you bother trying to lead someone to do it? You would just go hire for it.

"But it's a myth with some substance to it. Some of us are more creative than others.

"I'm not creative in areas like the arts. I wanted to teach myself to play the guitar so I got 'Guitar Playing for Dummies.' I couldn't make it past page six. What does that tell you? I couldn't even rise to the dummy level when it comes to the performing arts.

"But I can still be creative in certain ways and in certain areas with certain tools."

### 3. Can efficiency and creativity coexist in a business?

"Absolutely. When we think of creativity in terms of art and performance, that's done for its own sake.

"But creativity in an organization has to be useful and practical. It has to serve the organization's mission, which means ultimately has to do something that makes you more efficient... opens a new market, generates more revenue.

"Think of Southwest (Airlines in regard to the humor its attendants use). Humor and creativity is a mix.

"The humor may not have any immediate purpose, but it has a second order of effect. As a traveler, you like it. Employees don't feel like robots. It also lets the employees know that the company values them for who they are."

### 4. Can creativity be encouraged for those assembling aircraft?

"There may be reasons that when you're assembling things that you don't want freedom of action. Assembly-line work doesn't lend itself to creativity. Creativity requires autonomy.

"But in many ways, an assembly-line worker could be one of the first to see how

to improve a process. But will that worker get listened to?

"Aircraft companies are populated with engineers (with the thinking that) there is one right way to do things.

"At the same time, aircraft companies do exist in a really turbulent environment. One of the great advantages of being creative is it makes you adaptive, helps you adapt better to changing conditions."

5. As many business leaders shift into survival mode in these turbulent economic times, are those who encouraged creativity in the first place sticking with the plan?

"Cost-cutting and financial risk have moved up for executives and work force issues have gone way, way down. But you can't turn creativity off like a spigot.

"We don't measure things like creativity very well. They don't show up on our balance sheets.

"But an employer who sticks with encouraging creativity will also reach the goal of being more efficient."

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