

The Eureka Moment

While giving a talk recently to a group of managers and potential managers, I referred to the original “Eureka!” moment: the possibly apocryphal story of Archimedes stepping into the public baths and realizing from the displacement of the water the solution to a problem he was working on. The audience looked at me blankly. It only took a couple of questions to determine that they didn’t know who Archimedes was and also didn’t know what a “Eureka!” moment is. Quite simply, it is that instant when you realize that the solution to a problem you’ve been working on is staring you in the face and you hadn’t seen it. In other words, it’s a sudden flash of insight. It is said that Archimedes was so excited by his realization that he ran back to his workshop without even bothering to grab his clothes.

That certainly sounds pretty good, if you can get it to happen. Fortunately, there are some easy ways to do that. Unfortunately, there are also ways to make sure that it doesn’t happen. Those are even easier.

The easiest way to prevent a Eureka moment from occurring is to refuse to take a break. Archimedes had his moment when he put down the problem of figuring out if a crown were made of pure gold and took a break. I’ve known countless engineers, managers, authors, etc, who all reported solving a difficult problem after walking away from it for a while. Despite that, in company after company, I see people being yelled at for not working hard enough when they solve a problem by walking away from their desk instead of sitting there banging their head against the proverbial wall. Of course, if a manager has never heard of or experienced a Eureka moment, it’s entirely possible that they don’t even recognize the possibility that something worthwhile is going on.

Does it make more sense to solve a problem by leaving the office for a couple of hours, or to spend eight or ten hours banging your head against the wall and not come up with a solution? Despite this, at one company I heard a manager tell an employee that he “owed the company time” because he didn’t solve the problem while sitting at this desk. At another large company, I witnessed a manager tell an employee that he wouldn’t be getting a raise because he hadn’t solved the problems in the office. This, despite the fact that the employee had finished everything ahead of schedule! In both of these situations the employee had managed to capture that Eureka moment, and in both situations was penalized for it.

The problem, from the manager’s point of view, is that the employee didn’t appear to be working. He might have been walking around the campus or going for a run or at the gym. In one case, the employee was sitting in another part of the office complex, apparently staring into space. Clearly, someone is only working when they look like they’re working, right? Well, in practicing jujitsu, I’ve found that the most skilled practitioners look like they aren’t doing anything at all as their partners fall down. In fact, I’ve frequently heard people claiming that the technique was clearly staged, at least until they got thrown. Appearances can often be deceiving. Now, one might argue that some people really are goofing off: perhaps the game they’re playing even has a “spreadsheet” mode. Ultimately, however, it’s easy to tell the difference. Just pay attention who is accomplishing productive goals and who is not.

So, the first step to creating Eureka moments is to not fight them. When a manager focuses on results and gives their employees freedom to tailor their working style to suit themselves, the employees are free to figure out their best ways of generating Eureka moments. Don't fight it; embrace it. Giving people freedom to work the ways they find best is also a great way of sharply increasing motivation and loyalty to the company. Best of all, it doesn't cost anything! Google's famed "20 percent time," in which employees are given one day a week to work on their own projects, famously produced Gmail, Google Talk, AdSense, and other popular Google products. Other heavyweights such as Apple and LinkedIn have introduced similar programs.

Next, it's important for people to recognize when they're stuck on a problem and take a break. That break may be short or long. It may involve walking down the hall to get a cup of coffee or it may involve a trip to the gym or listening to music. The key point is that it must be a real break: if you're spending the morning writing software, looking at Facebook won't help. Your brain needs a real change of scenery. Some type of physical exercise is often one of the best ways of generating a Eureka moment as exercise dramatically improves concentration and focus. How much of a difference does exercise make? One school found that student behavior, test scores, and concentration all improved dramatically by giving the kids more time to run around. Adults aren't so different. We work best when we mix intense concentration with variety and relaxation. Despite Archimedes, it's not necessary to run naked through the streets.

What are you doing to encourage Eureka moments in your organization?

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