

# RIISING STARS: A STUDY OF CREATIVITY AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN COUNTY GOVERNMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Creativity and experiential learning are not often identified with government as work place. This paper explores a nascent county government initiative designed to engage employees in creative problem solving as means of personal, professional and organizational development in service to community. The paper asks: 1) Does the program as currently working encourage employees to perceive themselves as creative actors in their work environment? 2) Do program participants perceive their creative suggestions as welcomed by supervisors? 3) Are participants likely to be contributors in the process of exchanging ideas in the workplace? Literature on creativity as pertinent to experiential learning and deep smarts is reviewed. Program features designed to overcome bureaucracy and instill knowledge sharing as a means of creating an environment conducive to creativity, innovation and sharing of 'deep smarts' are considered. Then, study methods are described, results are presented and implications of findings are addressed. The paper concludes with a brief analysis of the study's limitations and suggestions for future research.*

## INTRODUCTION

*The essence of creativity, as defined by Gibson (2005, p. 3) "...is to get people to develop ideas, for out of this flow of new ideas comes great innovations for change." Clearly, the ability of an organization to respond quickly and well to its changing environment demands high levels of creativity, yet many businesses and other organizations have been relatively slow to study, much less cultivate, creativity in the workplace. Most people realize that creativity is present in hugely successful entrepreneurs, such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, and it is part of daily processes of creative organizations, such as Disney and 3M. Creativity is a factor in small business, as demonstrated by the entrepreneurs that established them. However, for most workers it is per-*

*ceived as a magical, mythical attribute, found in a rare few, rather than a skill that can be developed in most people. Creativity is driven by motivation, inner work life and emotions (Hanna, 2008). There is evidence that it can be cultivated in the workplace (see Csikszentmihalyi 1996, DeBono 1992, Noone 1998). This paper explores a county government's attempt to foster creativity and collaboration among workers at all organizational levels. Specifically, the paper considers Rising Stars, an initiative intended to engage employees in conversations related to experiential learning for purposes of knowledge sharing and development, personal and organizational, while enhancing service to the community. We begin by considering the County's motivation for development of the program.*

## BACKGROUND

Historically government agencies are not known for agility, creativity or innovation. In fact, government, at most levels, is often characterized by being rational, hierarchical and bureaucratic. Many government agencies are typified by top-down decision making, which discourages creativity and/or innovative input from employees at most levels. The hierarchical structure of government often contributes to the maintenance of an organizational culture that is neither responsive to employee needs or those of citizens and communities in an environment of change. Frequently, this results in low satisfaction for both internal and external stakeholders. Further, Blau and Meyer (1987, p. 39) inform us that once an organization has been founded, it becomes "less open to new operating procedures that might be optimal" for the agency. Yet, in an environment of change there is a need to be responsive. This requires bureaucracies to adopt new operating procedures. These would include shared leadership, creative problem solving, and bottom-up decision making, all of which are essential to survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This exploratory study considers the efforts of one county government attempting to change its culture by implementing Rising Stars, a program designed to harness employee creativity and innovation at all organizational levels. In fact, the program is an attempt to share experiential learning, and specifically ‘deep smarts’, among workers at all levels. The goal for government is to better serve its citizens and community. This may be achieved by enhancing individual and organizational performance through the development and retention of employees.

## RISING STARS HISTORY

Rising Stars is a voluntary program founded in spring of 2011 by visionary government leaders of one county in Florida. Open to any and all interested workers, the program’s objectives are to “...create an engaged workforce by involving employees in strategic discussions...[and] “...connect[s] employees throughout the organization with programs and events to develop leaders for the long term success” of the county. Employees interested in sharing “...ideas and collaborat[ing] with peers” were invited to join and/or attend informal, yet professional meetings without obligation. The group, “...explore[s] opportunities to engage employees by discussing current business topics throughout [the] organization with professionals from all levels” (Azzara, 2012).

Mentoring is an important component of Rising Stars. The Mentoring Committee, made up of group members, “want[s] to implement tangible ways to show employees that they are valued and that the future of the organization includes them. By pairing up mentors and mentees, long term relationships...develop[ed]...”. The relationships are intended to foster individual development, increase opportunities for networking and improve employee morale while “augmenting career development” (Azzara, 2012). It is also hoped that employees will be more likely to share leadership and collaborate on solutions to complex problems, as well as gain understanding of themselves, each other and the organization. Consistently, the completely voluntary program is dependent on “...the intelligence, expertise, talent, and experience of ...individual[s]” (Hanna (2008, p. 1). It challenges employees to work in groups, and, as a result of their personal motivation, to take risks as members of a visible group, that considers problems from diverse new perspectives – all of which are components of the “Business of Creativity” (Hanna, 2008, p. 1).

## LITERATURE REVIEW/IMPORTANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

Csikszentmihalyi’s now classic (1996) work describes creativity as a central source of meaning in individual lives. On an organizational level, openness to creativity in the form of new ideas can make the difference between a firm remaining relevant or becoming obsolete. As Gibson (2005, p. 1) states, “There comes a point in the life of every organization when change becomes imperative ...for the survival of the organization.” Gibson (2005) lists both individual and organizational barriers to creativity. These include fear, leadership and its impact on commitment to

innovation, bureaucracy and its resultant policies, silo and/or turf in organizations, pressure to produce quantity rather than quality, and individual biases. Importantly, each of these barriers can traditionally be found in government hierarchies.

To overcome barriers to creativity, Gibson (2005, p. 3) suggests organizational leaders, “Passionately promote an atmosphere within the organization where ideas are valued, considered and, whenever possible, implemented.” This is consistent with objectives of Rising Stars, which encourages employees to take risks, step outside the comfort zone of their typical departmental thinking and exchange ideas with others in the community. In addition, big ideas and breakthroughs are often associated with creativity, but Hanna (2008, p. 1) suggests establishing a work environment supportive of small, incremental efforts as not only essential for support of creativity and innovation, but also as an aid in development of healthy inner work life for employees, something managers do not often appreciate in terms of individual and organizational performance beyond creativity.

Gibson (2005, p. 3) advises that, “...creativity and innovation [are] integral part[s] of all strategies and policies.” This is congruent with what Rising Stars is trying to achieve. The program relies on mentoring relationships wherein employees regularly exchange ideas as tacit and implicit knowledge; thus, mentors and protégés can motivate each other and learn from each other’s experience. Referring to motivation as a driver of creativity, Professor Teresa Amabile states, “The desire to do something because you find it deeply satisfying and personally challenging inspires the highest levels of creativity, whether it’s in the arts, sciences, or business” (Hanna, 2008, p. 1).

Some intriguing research that may link experiential learning and creativity requires the consideration of ‘deep smarts’, or the ability to combine experience, intuition and problem solving in ways that consistently “...produce[s] that mysterious quality, good judgment” (Leonard & Swap, 2004). Deep smarts can emerge from employees at all organizational levels and, potentially, Rising Stars is a program that can cultivate such knowledge in county government. Gibson (2005, p. 4) might describe Rising Stars as a way to “Establish a mechanism for the flow of creative ideas up and down the chain of command, a pipeline for the free flow of ideas between leaders and followers.”

In describing how Steve Jobs redesigned Pixar studios to foster creativity, Lehrer (2012) notes that cartoonists, computer scientists and other contributors had to come from the silos in which they had previously been housed. They had to mingle in order to promote a culture of collaboration and cooperation. Consistent with the recommendation to, “Promote and expect an atmosphere of collaboration and cooperation” (Gibson, 2005, p. 4), Jobs wanted to ensure creatively motivated people were accessible to each other. Similarly, county employees often function in silos, departments segregated by function. Participation in Rising Stars affords interested workers with opportunities for sharing ideas in an environment where mingling and forming unlikely collaborations is encouraged, but as of this time, is the program working? This is the driving question at the heart of our study.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Now that the Rising Stars program has been in existence for almost two years, it is time to evaluate how and if it is working. This brings us to our first research question.

### RESEARCH QUESTION 1:

*Does the program as it is currently working, encourage employees to perceive themselves as creative actors in their work environment? Do participating Rising Stars perceive themselves as actors in their work environment?*

Rising Stars is intended to assist employees who want to contribute to development of county government, while they become actors in their own professional and personal development. Consistent with Gibson's (2005) suggestion, the program attempts to "Give...employees the tools and the training needed for unlocking creativity and innovation" (Gibson, 2005, p. 3). When compared to other respondents who do not participate in Rising Stars, will these respondents perceive themselves as contributors in the creative process? This leads us to our next two research questions.

### RESEARCH QUESTION 2:

*Do program participants perceive their creative suggestions as welcomed by supervisors? Do Rising Stars program participants perceive their creative suggestions as more welcome by their supervisors than employees not participating in the program?*

### RESEARCH QUESTION 3:

*Are participants likely to be contributors in the creative process of exchanging ideas in the workplace? Are employees participating in Rising Stars more likely to be contributors in the creative process of exchanging ideas in the workplace than non-program participants?*

## DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY

On October 1, 2012, a web link to a questionnaire electronically administered by Survey Methods™ was disseminated to employees of all departments of the Florida county government in which Rising Stars is nested. This is a population of approximately 1600 employees. Prospective respondents were assured anonymity, confidentiality and that completion of the questionnaire, which was strictly voluntary, would take about 10-15 minutes if they chose to participate. They were encouraged to respond during work hours and, if normal access to computers was limited due to the nature of their work, they were directed to use computers at centralized, yet privately situated, locations throughout the county. Employees were informed that results would be analyzed by an independent research team; responses would be shared in aggregate form only.

## POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The questionnaire was disseminated electronically to all employees of one county government agency in Florida. Email "blasts" were dispersed weekly for a period of 30 days, reaching approximately 1600 potential respondents and resulting in a snowball sample of 518 respondents from all departments within the agency. The sample was homogeneous based on occupational field. It was heterogeneous based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and tenure within organization and occupational field. The sample was purposive meaning participants self-selected from within their departments. Therefore, the probability of any employee self-selecting from the agency was equal, meaning they were not pre-selected by the researchers. To that extent, the sampling is random selection (Babbie, 2004). No incentives were offered for respondents' participation, but they were assured of confidentiality and anonymity at the individual level.

## INSTRUMENTATION

The questionnaire consisted of six quantitative items intended to measure individuals' perceptions of creativity as pertinent to their work situation. Responses were weighted using a Likert scale as follows: Extensively = 5; Considerably = 4; Somewhat = 3; Minimally = 2, and; Not at all = 1. A summary of the items, inclusive of means and standard deviations according to Rising Stars participation are provided in Table 1.

In addition, scales related to leadership (Executive Servant Leadership Scale), followership (Proactive and Passive Followership Scales) and organizational citizenship behavior items were included in the questionnaire. The data relating to these other instruments and items are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to mention them as they were part of the questionnaire that was disseminated for this study.

## DATA ANALYSIS:

After questionnaire access was closed, the data were downloaded from Survey Methods™ into Microsoft Excel™ version 2010. Although there were initially 518 respondents, a total of 80 cases were removed due to missing values on greater than 5% of the items and/or patterns of missing items that did not appear to be random (see Kalton and Kasprzyk, 1982; Trochim, 2001). When the data were cleaned, a total sample of 438 respondents remained. Of the final sample, 202 respondents (46.2%) were male and 180 (41.1%) were female. 56 respondents (12.7%) declined to be identified by gender. The final sample embodied employees from multiple departments, including 132, or 30.1% who identified themselves as having over 10 years of service in their respective departments. A summary of respondents' demographic and organizational characteristics is provided in Table 2.

Statistical analyses of the study data included two-tailed non-directional t-tests for independent means based on the assumption that there is homogeneity of variance between groups. Correlation analyses and descriptive sta-

tistics were also completed. These tests allowed for examination of independence of relationships in conjunction with Rising Stars engagement (independent variable).

## RESULTS

In response to the first research question,

*Does the program as it is currently working, encourage employees to perceive themselves as creative actors in their work environment? Do participating Rising Stars perceive themselves as actors in their work environment?*

The findings suggest that Rising Stars participants perceive themselves as creative actors in the workplace. This is evidenced in the mean score for item 1 (**Do you believe you could improve how things are done where you work?**) (3.64). This compares with mean scores of 3.35 and 2.96 for those who opted out and those who were unaware of the program, respectively. Rising Stars participants also saw their contributions as marginally more likely to be successful, as indicated by their perceiving their ideas as being accepted. Their responses to item 6 (**If you have suggested them, how well were they accepted?**) was (3.53), compared with 3.39 for those who opted out 2.94

for those unaware of the program, respectively. A two-tailed *t*-test comparing Item 1 for non-participants with Rising Stars reveals a *t*-statistic of -2.15 with  $p < .05$ . This is a significant difference in how the two groups perceive themselves as actors who can improve how things are done at work. However, a two-tailed *t*-test for Item 6 did not demonstrate significant results. See Table 3 for additional information on these results.

In response to the second research question,

*Do program participants perceive their creative suggestions as welcomed by supervisors? Do Rising Stars program participants perceive their creative suggestions as more welcome by their supervisors than employees not participating in the program?*

Those in the Rising Stars program believe their supervisors want them to make creative suggestions more than the others. They responded to item 2, (**Do you think your managers want you to do things differently?**) 2.6, those who opted out and those who were unaware of the program responded with mean scores of, 2.31 and 2.36, respectively. See Table 1. A two-tailed *t*-test comparing mean scores for Item 2 for non-participants and Rising Stars reveals a *t*-statistic of -1.88 with  $p = .06$ . This approaches the .05 lev-

**TABLE 1**  
**CREATIVITY ITEMS**  
**MEAN SCORES & STANDARD DEVIATIONS**

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Creativity Items					
To What Extent					
Do you believe you could improve how things are done where you work?					
Mean - Stars	SD – Stars	Mean – No	SD – No	Mean – NK	SD - NK
3.64	0.14	3.35	0.98	2.94	0.17
Do you think your managers want you to do things differently?					
2.6	0.16	2.31	0.05	2.36	0.19
Would you be rewarded if you came up with a better way of doing things?					
2.44	0.20	2.10	0.06	1.94	0.16
Would there be negative consequences if you tried an improvement and it failed?					
2.44	0.19	2.42	0.07	2.67	0.21
Have you suggested ways of improving where you work?					
3.69	0.15	3.38	0.05	3.24	0.23
If you have suggested them, how well were they accepted?					
3.53	1.70	3.39	1.71	2.94	1.66
Mean Scores for all Items					
3.06	0.25	2.82	0.25	2.68	0.19
Stars – Employees Involved in Program; No – No Involvement in Stars; NK – No knowledge of Rising Stars Program					

el usually used to indicate a significant difference and may suggest that there is a difference in how the two groups perceive whether their managers want them to do things differently. See Table 3.

In response to the third research question,

*Are participants likely to be contributors in the creative process of exchanging ideas in the workplace? Are employees participating in Rising Stars more likely to be contributors in the creative process of exchanging ideas in the workplace than non-program participants?*

Rising Stars participants perceive themselves as more likely to be contributors in the creative process than others as indicated to their response to item 5. **(Have you suggested ways of improving where you work?)** Their mean

response was 3.69, compared with 3.38 and 3.24 for those who opted out and those who were unaware of the program, respectively. (See Table 1) A two-tailed *t*-test comparing mean scores for Item 5 for non-participants and Rising Stars reveals a *t*-statistic of -1.98 with  $p < .05$ . This is a statistically significant difference in whether the two groups have suggested ways of improving where they work, with Rising Stars more likely to attempt to contribute to the creative process at work.

**TABLE 2**  
**ORGANIZATIONAL & DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION**

	Frequency	Cumulative	
Males	202	46.2%	46.2%
Females	180	41.1%	87.3%
Gender Undefined	56	12.7%	100.00%
Age			
> 21 < 30	21	4.8%	4.8%
> 30 < 40	53	12.1%	16.9%
> 40 < 50	111	25.3%	42.2%
> 50 < 60	149	34.0%	76.2%
> 60	43	9.8%	86.0%
Age Undefined	61	13.9%	99.9%
Years in Department			
< 1	45	10.3%	10.3%
> 1 < 5	99	22.6%	32.9%
> 5 < 10	113	25.8%	58.7%
> 10 < 15	54	12.3%	71.0%
> 15 < 20	26	5.9%	76.9%
> 20 < 25	18	4.1%	81.0%
> 25	34	7.8%	88.8%
Tenure Undefined	49	11.2%	100.0%
Rising Stars Involvement			
Yes	45	10.3%	10.3%
No	342	78.1%	88.4%
Don't Know	33	7.5%	95.9%
Undefined	18	4.1%	100.00%

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This is an exploratory study, and it was conducted shortly after the creation of the Rising Stars program in county government. Importantly, the questionnaire was also distributed at a time when salary and budget discussions were prevalent throughout the agency. However, the Rising Stars program may have potential for positive impacts on individuals, the organization and the community. Some of the program participants' qualitative comments indicate that the initiative needs to be more widely communicated throughout the agency. This is also indicated by the number of respondents who indicated they 'did not know' about Rising Stars ( $n = 33$  as opposed to Rising Stars participants –  $n = 45$ ). Clearly, some of the other respondents have adopted a 'wait and see' attitude until their colleagues have achieved some level of success as demonstrated throughout the agency. This is evidenced by comments such as, "I have been able to make a few small changes in my 12 years. My coworkers give me credit for my ideas and capability, however, management scares me."

As a group, there appears to be no consistency in the perceptions of the organization by employees. With the diversity of staff, working assignments and ages, each see their organization through a different filter. Those who are engaged with the Rising Stars program seem to be more

engaged and exhibit a more positive response to the organizational environment as evidenced by responses to the survey. It is recommended that a similar study be conducted after the program has had more time to become recognizable as a part of the organizational culture. It is also advisable to ensure that managers from all departments understand the potential for the initiative, perhaps through training and/or some other educational measures.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

As has been stated, this is an exploratory study. It was conducted electronically and in a short span of time. Additionally, there were extenuating circumstances occurring in the organization – namely salary negotiations and budget cuts – that may have adversely impacted some of the respondents' interest in the Rising Stars program and/or participation in the survey. These are considerations that will be taken under advisement for future research on program effectiveness. Further, the study does not discern whether those engaged in the Rising Stars have a more natural positive approach to life and confidence in leadership and thus their participation in the group. It also does not discern whether those who have proffered suggestions and engagement would have done so with or without the institution of the Rising Stars program.

**TABLE 3: T-TESTS FOR STARS VS NON-STARS PARTICIPANTS**

	Item 1		Item 2		Item 3	
	Non	Stars	Non	Stars	Non	Stars
<b>Mean</b>	3.31	3.64	2.32	2.6	2.08	2.44
<b>Variance</b>	0.97	0.87	.89	1.2	1.09	1.75
<b>Observations</b>	375	45	374	45	374	45
<b>df</b>	418		417		417	
<b>t statistic</b>	-2.15		-1.88			
<b>p value</b>	.03		.06			
	Item 4		Item 5		Item 6	
<b>Mean</b>	2.44	2.44	3.37	3.69		3.53
<b>Variance</b>	1.50	1.71	1.03	1.04	2.92	2.89
<b>Observations</b>	374	45	374	45	360	45
<b>df</b>	417		417		403	
<b>t statistic</b>	-.02		-1.98		-0.85	
<b>p value</b>	.99		.05		.39	

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Fostering creativity is not a quick fix. And it can be a particularly difficult aspect of organizational change within a government agency. However, harnessing individual and organizational creativity can be essential for organizational survival in a turbulent economic environment. It can also be crucial for talent recruitment and retention, as well as serving changing communities. Suggestions for future research regarding creativity and the Rising Stars program might focus on how fostering creativity pertains to development of employees and future department/organizational leaders. In addition, the government agency in this study has developed a program to foster culture of continuous learning in community. Future research might examine ways in which continuous workplace learning is related to cultivation of creativity in individuals as well as the organization. Additionally, creativity might also be examined as related to leadership, followership and organizational citizenship. As was mentioned previously, appropriate instruments for measuring such impacts were administered with the creativity items in this study. These relationships will be explored in future papers where relationships between employee empowerment and creativity might also be explored.

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