

Case Study: Creative Leadership and Diversity in a Manufacturing Technology Company

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the phenomenon of Creative Leadership, diversity and communication strategies to support creativity and innovation in a global technology manufacturing company. Visuals demonstrate various leadership traits and diversity connections within the context of innovation and creativity. The study found a clear definition of an organization's culture, effective communication, acceptance of unique skills and traits of co-workers and flexibility are building blocks for innovative processes. This exploration of leadership and diversity implementation integrates studies and practice through the discussion of a mid-size manufacturing company's practices and current literature. The study focuses on a global, innovative company in the technology field. The topics explored include leadership, diversity implementation, vision, culture and innovation, and leadership growth for the future.

Keywords: Creative leadership, innovation, diversity, inclusion, change management, organizational culture, leadership, communication, case study, career paths, collaboration, teams, implementation, vision, future

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Introduction

Companies of all sizes strive to implement creativity and innovation even as they manage the change that comes with disruptive technologies. Challenges that face industry include: the explosion in predictive-analytical tools, ever larger data pools, new materials, merging robotics and AI into workforces, retaining a skilled workforce, and creating an organizational culture supportive of innovation (Abecassis-Moedas & Gilson, 2018). Creative Leaders explore strategies of inclusion and diversity in support of creative thinking, multiple perspectives discovering multiple solutions, retention of skilled workers, managing change and chaos, and building team engagement. According to Taylor, Santiago, Hauer, Hynes, and Mickahail (2019) to understand how diversity works within an organization, leaders are challenged to ask:

1. What leadership changes are required to lead and perform with a diverse workforce?
2. What cultural knowledge is needed to communicate and operate with a diverse workforce?
3. What cultural attributes must one manage or address?
4. How are time and resources managed for diversity?

Figure 1 provides a visual overview of the challenges and interactions of diversity a leader will encounter.

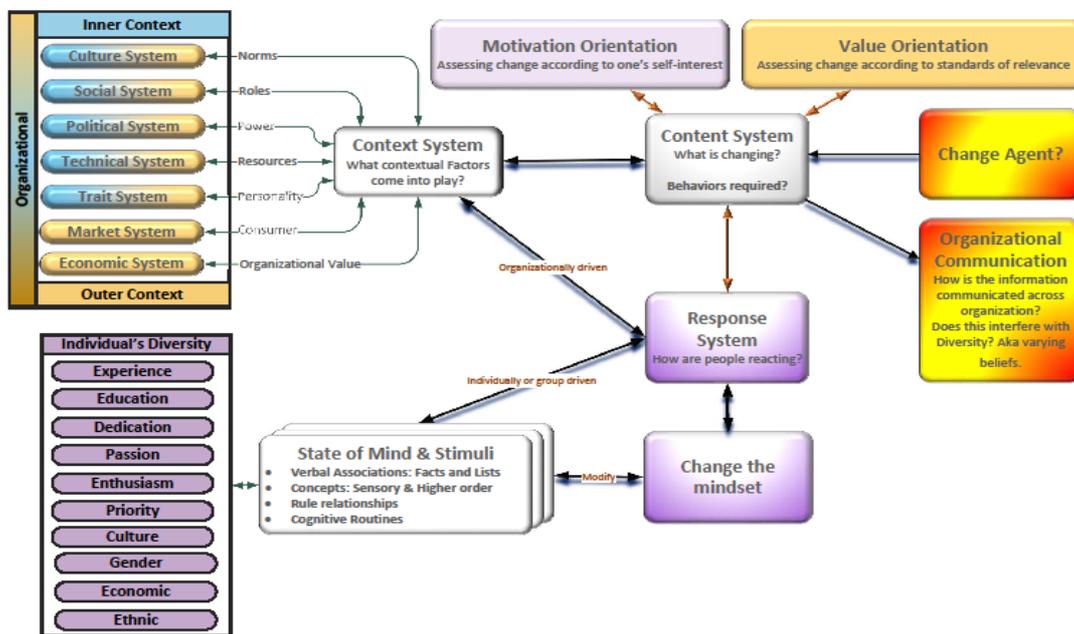


Figure 1: Concepts of Diversity and Communication (Taylor, Santiago, Hauer, Hynes, & Mickahail, 2019)

This study explored the best practices of a mid-sized manufacturing company in the technology field, discovering best practices in innovation, diversity and inclusion.

Methodology

The exploratory case study focused on the phenomenon of an organization creating an innovative environment. Samtec, Inc. the organization used in the study, is a member of Fortune's 15 Best Workplaces in Manufacturing and Production, demonstrating diversity and innovation. The company is a global manufacturing organization in the technology industry, with sales of \$100 million or more. The goal of the study was to identify best practices of a medium global operation demonstrating innovation in production, management, and R&D (Mickahail & de Aquino, 2019; Samtec, 2018). Narratives, interviews, and shared documentation were used to compile an overview of best practices of leadership for innovation and creativity. NVivo and Dedoose software were used in the analysis of the transcribed interview data, pulling out themes and organizing the data to share rich descriptions of leadership styles and practices.

Samtec, Inc.

Samtec, Inc. is a privately held \$800 million global manufacturing company specializing in the largest variety of board-to-board interconnects in the industry. Headquartered in New Albany, Indiana, USA, Samtec evolved from a small chip manufacturer to an organization with a global reach with products sold in more than 125 countries, offices located in over 24 countries and approximately 6,000 associates worldwide. Samtec's business model is based on Sudden Service, providing products in a timely fashion, with a global infrastructure of sales, engineering, operations, quality, and IT (Mickahail & de Aquino, 2019; Samtec, 2018).

Samtec has a culture of learning, training, and personal growth. Customer service is a key part of their identity, with a flexible manufacturing process that grew from meeting customer needs. The organizational culture is formalized in Samtec DNA: Speed, Innovation, Flexibility, Win-Win. (Mickahail & de Aquino, 2019; Samtec, 2018).

Leadership

Samtec emphasizes the need for leadership demonstrating the core values and philosophies of the organization. Statements from interviewees reinforced this concept: "... the people that report to you care about what you care about. What does the leader care about? What does the CEO care about?" As an organization with a flat hierarchy, leaders at all levels support the culture of innovation and are accountable to other leaders, but also to all employees. Innovation is a core value of Samtec, reflected in leadership's support of experimentation, creating a safe environment to fail, with a common comment being "...let's try it and see what happens." The description of leadership at Samtec aligns with Creative Leadership traits.

Creative Leadership is defined as both a philosophy and an act (Mainemelis, Epitropaki, & Kark, 2018). Creative Leadership as a philosophy that embraces change while envisioning the positive future. Upon implementation, it builds toward those desirable futures through innovative strategies, unleashing the collaborative creativity of teams. According to Mainemelis et al. (2015) creative leadership in organizations

depends on creative and supportive contributions, operating in a collaborative context. Further explanation includes three main concepts: facilitating employee creativity; directing the materialization of a leader's creative vision; and integrating heterogeneous creative contributions (Mainemelis, Epitropaki, & Kark, 2018). To maximize creativity, an organizational culture encourages diversity, creates a safe environment, supports open collaboration, and employs Design Thinking or similar creation strategies.

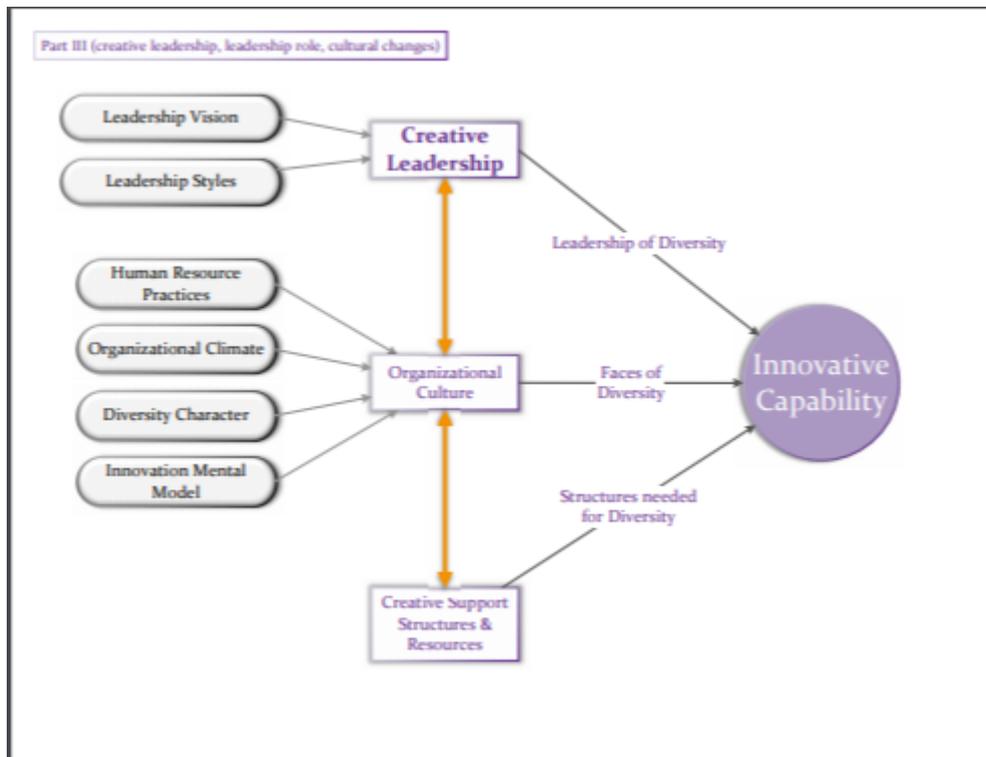


Figure 2: Creative Leadership
(Taylor, Santiago, Hauer, Hynes, & Mickahail, 2019)

Diversity and leadership challenges

To support creativity, diversity provides multiple perspectives and solutions. Diversity will not automatically create innovation, but diversity is supportive as a tool and resource. Leadership must be aware of communication strategies and share goals in a variety styles to engage a diverse workforce (Abdolmaleki et al., 2013). Complex leadership challenges include organizational as well as individual challenges. To address the multiple challenges of diversity and environment, a Creative Leader will assess and establish an appropriate hierarchy of communication and leadership. This organizational structure should support clear and transparent communication that flows throughout the organization, empower workers, support risk taking, encourage personal growth, create career pathways within the organization to retain skilled workers, allow agile responses to threats, and manage internal and external chaos effectively (Abdolmaleki et al., 2013; Abecassis-Moedas & Gilson, 2018; Bort, Bersch, Wagner, & Rueffer, 2017; Jin, Lee, & Lee, 2017).

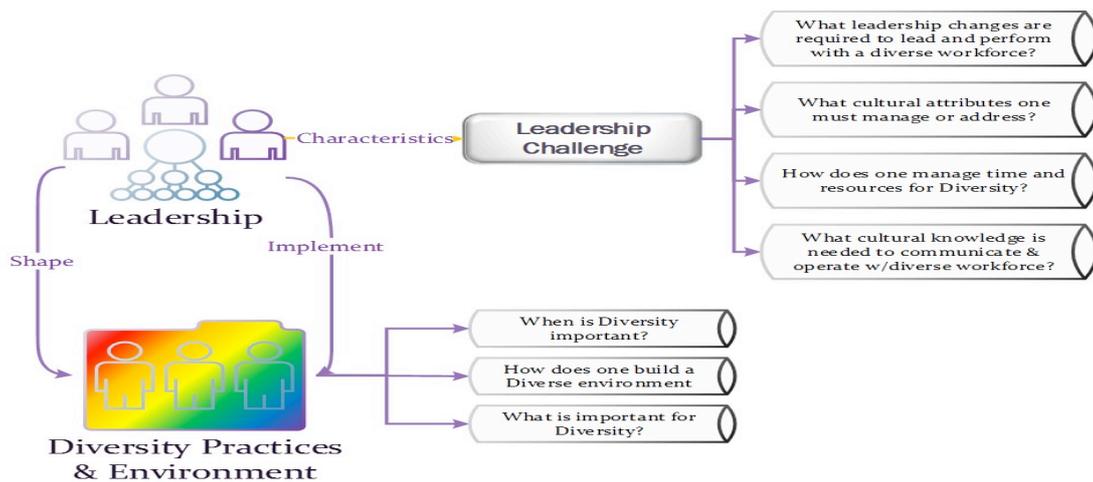


Figure 3: Diversity Practices and Environment
(Taylor, Santiago, Hauer, Hynes, & Mickahail, 2019).

Samtec has a cross-functional, flat, or horizontal, hierarchy. Narratives established that, while leaders establish core values, a true Open Door policy empowers all employees, with every individual able to “...ask about anything, anywhere, to anybody.” Everyone is encouraged to weigh in about processes, sharing their unique perspective of ways to improve customer service. This culture evolved early on, as the ‘organization as family’ attitude of a small company allowed ‘why’ to be asked often. As the company grew, leadership understood the need for diverse input on processes, and the Open Door policy was implemented, supporting a horizontal hierarchy. Managers operate in open cubes mixed in with other departments and are expected to ‘walk the floor’ regularly during the day. Issues are often resolved on the spot, before they grow to be major problems.

The Samtec culture assumes everyone has worth. Diverse skills and talents are appreciated, sought after, and utilized. People are not ‘boxed in’ by standardized measurements, rather Kolbe assessments are used to discover skills and aptitudes, as well as resolve coaching and mentoring style conflicts. A saying used several times in interviews was “...round peg round hole, it is our responsibility to find the jobs to fit the skills. You don’t throw the person out, you find where they fit.” Workers are encouraged to ‘try out’ different jobs within the organization without fear of failure. The creation and encouragement of varied career pathways within the organization retains skilled workers while allowing them to grow. Samtec emphasizes accepting the unique qualities of individuals, defines diversity as multiple individual life experiences, and builds diversity through supporting personal growth and seeking out new employees based on accomplishments and skills, not standardized measurements.

Application of Creative Leadership

Innovation has increased the pace of change, demanding flexibility and agility from organizations (Zhu, Zou, & Zhang, 2019). Creativity has become a product, and companies are viewing leaders and processes from this new perspective. Creativity itself is not classified as useful innovation until the results from employing this product are able to be implemented in a useful, sustainable form. In business, creativity does not exist just to exist, but to contribute to the organization in a meaningful fashion. The definition of Creative Leadership encompasses this concept

by including the idea of Creative Leadership as an act, as well as a philosophy. According to Mainemelis, Epitropaki, & Kark (2018) builds a better future through supporting creative solutions and empowering both individuals and teams; leaders create the vision of the future and empower the individuals and teams in an organization to work toward the vision.

One aspect of empowerment is the creation of a safe environment that encourages employees to use the Design Thinking strategies to empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test, while imagining, failing safely, and applying feedback (Chasanidou, Gasparini, & Lee, 2015). Innovative companies such as Samtec create an environmental climate of experimentation and possibility thinking. Mantras such as 'fail fast & recover quickly', SOW (stuff on the wall), and 'Ready-Fire-Aim' allow associates the opportunity and freedom to unleash creative ideas and solutions to old or new challenges allowing products and services to positively impact the bottom line at a quicker pace. Transparent problem solving through high-intensity group brainstorming is intended to quickly combine diverse ideas and move to action. Virtual conference rooms allow 'standing meetings' to occur regularly across the globe, as well as encouraging 'on-the-spot' and short idea sessions to convene organically. Allowing all employees, no matter their 'rank', to participate in ideation is a proven success tool in innovative organizations (Dodge, Dwyer, Witzeman, Neylon, & Taylor, 2017). Moreover, organizations that support creativity through giving workers the most autonomy have the greatest success in innovative fields (Stachova, Stacho, & Vicen, 2017).

Leadership Challenge and Role

A leader establishes and shares the vision of the organization's desired future. The leadership role is to foster the innovative work environment through transparent communication, empower the individual through accepting diverse perspectives, while coaching toward the business drivers (Taylor, Santiago, & Hynes, 2019). The Creative Leader remains a champion of the organization's core values while communicating a clear vision of the desired future of the company, allowing the workers to engage, no matter their position.

Samtec encourages mentoring at all levels, assuring the clear communication of expectations. The establishment of teams that cross departments, inter-departmental trainings, and virtual teams meeting regularly and as needed across the globe, ensures there more people communicating and focused on solving a challenge. Complex challenges are addressed more effectively through diverse processes, intense communication, and diverse multicultural teams. These processes enable an organization to capture and exchange unique information while increasing the perspectives aimed at addressing issues (Hajro et al., 2017). Creative Leaders lend support with resources and a clear vision. Part of creating a clear vision is sharing a definition of the organizational culture.

Defining the Culture

Samtec's culture supports creativity, experimentation, and innovation. This culture led to the development of Sudden Service, a global infrastructure of engineering, sales, operations, quality, and IT that optimizes specialized technology centers to

provide a complete level of service and support for customers (Samtec, 2018). The culture of innovation is modeled by leadership through customer interactions and a strong work ethic. It is facilitated by the open floor concept of the organization, in all locations. Samtec's core values and goals are always on display, both through physical signage and employee attitudes. Sustaining a positive creative culture is a challenge which Samtec meets through clear communication of how their culture is defined.

Defining an organization's culture was listed as a key step to creating an innovative workplace in the case study interviews. The definition of an organization's culture is the structure that supports the company's philosophy. Samtec's culture evolved as the company grew from a small organization with 'we are all one family' values to a global presence that continues to keep caring for one another as a core value. The founder's emphasis on customer service led to the flexible manufacturing processes that serve the customer best. Decisions are based on what is best for the customer, not just the organization's bottom line. The culture supports the philosophy of customer service, because Samtec defines itself as a marketing organization first, and a manufacturing entity second. The emphasis on the customer drives the innovative culture that supports questioning all processes.

Part of the questioning culture is Samtec's ability to embrace a culture of 'why'. All employees are encouraged to ask why, as well as suggest 'how'. Every employee is empowered to act in the customer's best interest and suggest solutions as well as point out challenges. Every individual has worth, and his or her diverse experiences and skills are valued. Labels do not limit people and retention of workers is seen as a measurement of success.

However, communicating the definition of the culture in a memorable style that translates to a diverse group can be difficult. Samtec defines their culture through trainings sharing the 'Samtec DNA'. Visuals throughout the company headquarters remind workers of their 'DNA': Flexibility, Innovation, Speed, Win-win. The win-win is a reminder the customer and organization both win when the job is done correctly. Innovation and speedy delivery of unique products support the customer experience. Flexibility allows the organization to respond to the rapid changes organizations face in today's time of radical innovation and global competition. The core values are reflected in the practice that every worker is valued, expected to show respect to others and themselves, and to continue their personal growth.

With training, the phrase 'Samtec DNA' encompasses the flat but lean philosophy of operations that empowers all workers; the aptitude and appetite for innovation, collaboration, and keeping the vision of customer first. Mentoring and on-going trainings develop self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and job skills. 'Fast to Fail' processes establish a safe environment to experiment with prototypes and processes. Throughout the data gathering process, Samtec DNA was used to symbolize and convey an innovative attitude, self-worth, and diversity. This inclusive culture supports the sharing of cultural knowledge and diversity.

Cultural Knowledge and Diverse Innovation Group

The innovative group must desire, and feel empowered to solve a problem. Innovation is a voluntary act, one that cannot be dictated, but one that can be encouraged through a safe environment and open culture. Creative Leadership acts as a guide to coordinate decisions and support the collaboration that enables group members to communicate and create. According to Wartzman (2014) the leadership shares exiting knowledge and gives access to knowledge and power in support of the creative team.

Further, leadership helps shape and implement the building of internal and external relationships, developing trust among the culturally diverse members (Dodge, et al., 2017).

The environment and context that drives innovation is created and sustained by the leader (Stachova, Stacho, & Vicen, 2017). A core part of an innovative and diverse group is building trust across cultural, gender, educational, and multitude of other diversity factors. Trust is considered in a standalone construct isolated from culture, but culture is major effector. Taking these factors into consideration, then a primary challenge to developing a diverse innovative team is time and communications, as illustrated in Figure 4.

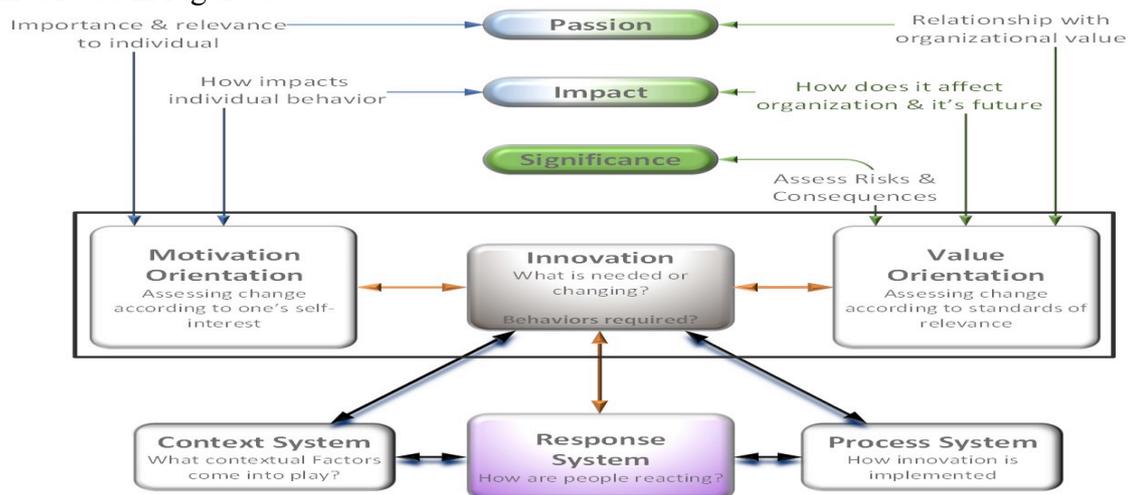


Figure 4: Leadership, Leverage, and Passion
(Taylor, Santiago, Hauer, Hynes, & Mickahail, 2019)

Leaders need to focus on and create an innovative environment through understanding what motivates the workers, the reward, and the underlying core behaviors. Harnessing and employing the knowledge and passion resident in the workers of the organization, to enable the decisions, culture, and unique characteristics of workers, is part of an organization's value (Maruta, 2014; Pontikes & Barnett, 2017; Wartzman, 2014). Diversity and collaboration support effective decisions with more creative options (Rock & Grant, 2016).

The process system analyzes how one encourages and implements innovation. The environment should reflect a supportive, innovative organizational culture, allowing the worker to realize their potential and follow their passion. A transactional, repetitive environment stifles empowerment and creativity, leading the worker to feel like a cog in the machine. The visual representation in Figure 4 includes the context system and interaction with motivation, orientation and value, drivers that influence

innovation. When creating an organizational culture, the needs of the entire organization should be considered, with a vision and philosophy that creates a positive value response from members and leadership across the organization (Taylor, Santiago, Hauer, Hynes, & Mickahail, 2019).

Conclusion

This study used a case study to explore the best practices of an innovative manufacturing company in the technology industry. Creative leadership practices, innovation strategies, and communication techniques used by the company demonstrate effective approaches to discovering and supporting creativity and innovation within an organization. The internal and external influences are mitigated or enhanced to align actions with the organizational vision through leadership practices and the organizational culture's impact. Consistent trainings are part of the communication plan to ensure core values are ingrained in the organizational culture. Mentoring and daily leadership interaction contribute to employee empowerment.

Samtec demonstrates Creative Leadership that supports innovation. From establishing a clear vision based on Core Values to defining the culture in the easily shared 'Samtec DNA' concept, Samtec has created an organizational culture supportive of innovation and creativity. Sustaining an innovative culture in a manufacturing company is a challenge that has been met through establishing clear expectations, internal communications, and creative tools that allow virtual teams to interact globally.

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