

THE ART OF IMITATION

BY WALT GRASSL

Five ways to enhance your creativity at work by mimicking the successful behaviors of others.

SAM AND BORIS WERE HAVING LUNCH.

Boris candidly told Sam that he admired his creativity and innovation. Boris was pretty risk-averse and never wanted to be the nail that stands out and gets pounded down. Sam mentioned that he didn't always make an effort to be noticed. He learned to acutely observe the traits, ideas and concepts of others, and incorporate them into his own professional style.

After lunch, Sam went back to his office and tried to figure out what made him different. He came up with five rules that influenced him.

Find someone to model. Sam remembered that one of his bosses, Earl, would always call out the elephant in the room. On occasion, a senior person in a meeting was misinformed. Many in the room would be reluctant to correct the information. Earl would consistently and respectfully point out the disconnect. Once the issue was discussed, the path forward could be more clearly decided.

In the workplace, pay attention to your coworkers and your leaders. Specifically, pay attention to the ones that stand out in a good way. Ask yourself what makes them special. Are they good at giving presentations? Are they detail-oriented? Are they willing to politely but firmly challenge authority? Or do they keep quiet and allow a negative outcome to occur? Do they dress in an appropriate manner that makes the right impression on others?

When you model someone, don't be afraid to copy their behavior. It isn't easy to imitate someone exactly—and it wouldn't be good to do so on a long-term basis anyway—but your version of them will be your own and/or it will quickly evolve to your own style.

Find someone else to model (and repeat often). Sam realized that, in his career, he'd met many unique individuals: bosses, peers and subordinates. From the ones who truly stood out in a positive way, he tried to figure out what he could do. For example, Rich, a former coworker, believed in reassigning employees to growth roles when they got too comfortable and stopped growing. Sam incorporated that trait in his leadership.

Bad role models can be helpful too. Sam had a manager named Bob who did two things that frustrated Sam. First, Bob was an extreme micromanager who was always looking over

Sam's shoulder. Bob never gave Sam the room to do his work. Sam felt like he wasn't being trusted. From Bob's lesson, Sam avoided micromanaging his people.

Bob had a second bad habit. He would assign a task, and when Sam or others would turn in exactly what he asked for, he would mark it up and ask them to rework the assignment, with no explanation. That bothered Sam and his peers. When Sam became a manager, sometimes he would receive work that was not what he expected. Before acting, he would pause and assess the situation. He thought about what he had asked for. If the result was acceptable as an end product, he would say nothing and learn to be more precise when describing task assignments. If the result was simply unacceptable as an end product, he would sincerely apologize to the person for having to rework the task and acknowledge that it was his mistake in the task definition.

Over time, the best of the good examples will integrate into your unique behavior. And if you catch yourself engaging in bad behavior, you can correct it.

Seek outside sources of inspiration. Sam was a voracious reader. He read books, blogs and magazines. He kept up with industry trends and also trends from outside his industry. He studied technology and leadership. If he came across something that might transfer to his career, he would see if he could make it work. As a result, Sam developed a reputation as an out-of-

Bad role models can be helpful too.

Learn from their bad habits
and make sure not to copy them.

Walt Grassl is a speaker, author and standup comedian and hosts the radio show *Stand Up and Speak Up* on the RockStar Worldwide network. Visit www.waltgrassl.com for more information.



business issues

the-box thinker. He was really just open to new ideas and always striving to improve the products and processes in his workplace.

Combine two seemingly unrelated ideas. Earlier in Sam's career, the concept of concurrent engineering became popular. Sam also participated in a process called Design For Manufacturing and Assembly (DFMA). DFMA involved having a manufacturing department review designs to determine if they could indeed be efficiently produced before they were finalized. Sam took a risk on a small program he was managing and took DFMA to another level. He invited his manufacturing people to participate in the design process from the beginning. This saved the cost and schedule impact of completing a design iteration after the DFMA.

Sam received kudos for his innovation but the change did not catch on throughout the company. And that's another lesson Sam learned: Not all tries will succeed. And even those that do may not become widespread. But the trial and error process enhanced Sam's reputation as a creative thinker. He

was regularly invited to be a member of teams formed to improve company processes.

Ask "What if?" Sam believed in challenging the status quo. Why do we build our products this way? What if we started with a blank sheet of paper? What would our new process be like? Is there a cost-effective way to benefit from the results of this exercise?

Every company's culture is different. Exercise your judgment as to how much you challenge the status quo. But if you don't play the "what if" game, you will not see opportunities to improve your workplace and advance your career.

When Sam finished his reflection, he had these five tips to be more creative and innovative. They involved integrating the best practices and ideas from others into his own work habits. He met with Boris a week later and shared his notes and examples. Boris liked them so much he asked Sam to come and present them to his team. Sam was happy to do so. ■