

Becoming a Creative Rebel with Van Lai-DuMone of Work Smart Advantage

SPEAKERS

Van Lai-DuMone, Lara Schmoisman

Lara Schmoisman

This is Coffee N° 5. I'm your host, Lara Schmoisman. Hello. Welcome to Coffee N° 5. This is a very special episode, because today we're going to talk about creativity and having fun in the workplace. Something that I really support with my team. And the best person to talk about this is Van Lai-DuMone, founder and creative director of Work Smart Advantage . Van believes that good and creative ideas can be found at any level of the organization. And cultivating creativity in the workplace, helps teams development, create a better work environment, and people get the better performance. Hi, Van, thank you so much for being here. We have a previous conversation, and there's so much fun. So I want to see if we can put everything in this podcast. And...

Van Lai-DuMone

It'll be a start.

Lara Schmoisman

Yeah, let's start the conversation at least. So I'm big at work culture, everyone knows that I'm big at leadership and mentorship. So I am so fascinated, what you do is like, how did this started? Let's start for that.

Van Lai-DuMone

Sure. So my work is in bringing creativity into the workplace. And I do it around around team development and leadership training. And then I do team development, leadership all within the lens of creativity, play and experiential learning. And the reason I did this is because creativity has just been a part of my life my entire life. I'm not a trained artist, I just always been very creative. And but then I didn't do anything with it. Right? I went into the corporate world, the corporate environment went into learning and development in the corporate environment. And what I found in the corporate environment is that training was so dry. And I hate to say but boring. And it's oftentimes, like there was no retention of information, right, you would show it for workshop, you will learn the information. And then you would just leave and go about your your day.

Lara Schmoisman

Wow. And it also it's hard sometimes to do team retention,

Van Lai-DuMone

team retention as well. Is there just Oh, yeah,

Lara Schmoisman

yes. I mean, it, having a team that is involved with each other, make sure that the team will stay longer and happier.

Van Lai-DuMone

That's right. That's right. And we do differentiate this idea of team building, and team development, right? So team building I look at as having fun together. You'll like having fun together, creating space where you guys can play together, which is all amazing and great. That definitely helps build trust. But then there's other element of team development, which is more around how do we work well together? Right? Going a little bit deeper, like what values do we share? Do you know what I bring to the workplace by special skills by like the project that you're doing with your team? The the hidden talents?

Lara Schmoisman

Yes,

Van Lai-DuMone

Right. Like...

Lara Schmoisman

That... That's a challenge.

Van Lai-DuMone

That's a challenge. That's right. But things like that really helped to develop a bond for the team. So yeah, so but but in terms of workplace culture, I think those things are so important, because when you train people on just skill, it doesn't build those bonds that you change. If you train people in mindset, behavior and skills, then you're really addressing the person holistically. And then we add creativity to it. What you're then bringing in is a tool that we are that innate in all of us.

Lara Schmoisman

I am...I'm always curious because in... and I just implemented this in my own company, the team reviews, we have two reviews made of the year and end of the year. And I always found those reviews in corporate worlds super dry, that the goals were basically about I want to bring this money to the team. They weren't personal goals. So for me when I was doing these interviews was like what's your personal growth goal in the company? What do you want to learn how you want to grow in the company? And I found out that many times they don't even know what possibilities they have to grow because people weren't educated to that. We're like, okay, you do this you get the promotion you've been so many years you get the promotion, but there's so many other ways to grow in a company. So how do you transition a team the team believes or core values into a creative believe

Van Lai-DuMone

so I think for me, a lot of it is around and for what you're saying right now it's so true people because I'm you took me back to when I was in corporate where those performance reviews, even if I had a say in them the questions that were asked were so dry and static, that I didn't even feel like after the review

You It was really benefiting me at all other than the percentage of my raise that year. Yeah, right. But the way I look at creativity into the workplace and how it affects things like personal professional growth, is the fact that when you're allowing for creative in the workplace, and when you nurture creativity in the workplace, what you're really doing, at the base of it all the foundation of it, is you're giving people a place to have their voice heard, in different ways, because not all people are going to express themselves, if you just, you know, if we're just sitting one on one talking like this. But when you add in these creative elements, to get people to lower their barriers, and really create and collaborate together,

Lara Schmoisman

absolutely. For example, when you introduce someone to your team, to join your team, you're interviewing someone that you want to bring added value to your team, of course, but then I feel like when the company's many times is how you can keep giving to the company, but at the same time, is we're not giving anything back. So I think that we need to incorporate that thought of the company needs to grow and need to help these employees or team members become to bloom, how the company can mentor you, or what the company can do for you to grow. And to know that the possibilities of growth are beyond your position. So you mentioned the word creativity, in this team development or team culture building. How do you...give me an example. Like if you... my team is completely virtual. What would you do?

Van Lai-DuMone

So I so completely virtual is something not new to you, but new to us, right? Since Mars, all of our work was was live. So we had to make a pivot. And trust me that that didn't happen fast. And it almost was a time of just hunkering down and not knowing what to do. And in that uncertainty, something just evolved from that, right, based on my client needs. So in this virtual environment, what I often do as the same as I did in person, and we've just transitioned it to, to be available virtually, but for an example, is looking at a company mission. So we have this workshop where I look at a company mission, I worked for many companies, where there's a mission statement, where I had zero attachment to that mission statement. Right? It was something that someone wrote a long time ago, or someone wrote recently, but I had no say in it, it was just our company mission. So how do you expect anyone who is working on the ground floor or in your company to be attached to that mission, and the only way I could figure out how to do that. And that's why we run this workshop is letting people look at their personal values, first, their personal mission, and allowing time in the workplaces not not go home and do this on your own, allowing time in the workplace, to look at your values. Look at your personal mission. Now let's look at that company mission. And how does that align. So now you've built this bridge between my connection and my personal values to what the company is doing.

Lara Schmoisman

Let's talk about team building. Because that's fascinates me how you can create in a team that they never had this culture of team building, or they didn't have team culture, but the only thing that they have they were working on in the real world in an office and how people socialize is like, what we call in my team kitchen time, what I call Oh, I didn't want to sound that old... I call it kitchen time. And what I would love a slightly you're going to grab your coffee and they are you running to someone, even if not in your department. And we'll chat a little and that's how you get to know people or when you go in for

lunch if you bring your lunchbox or whatever. And now in the digital world. How do you do that? How do you create a space for kitchen time?

Van Lai-DuMone

It has to be intentional, right is because before we were in the office and you ran across someone in the kitchen or by the water cooler if we are that old then

Lara Schmoisman

why did you say that? We don't even know what the water cooler is.

Van Lai-DuMone

Yeah, Is there like a rotary phone? We don't know what that is either.

Lara Schmoisman

Yes, no, no,

Van Lai-DuMone

the idea of team building was always important, it becomes that I think you and I both believe even more important now because now we have to be intentional about it because we don't have those moments we're running across each other. So the way I suggest clients do it now is incorporated into any any interaction you have any especially meetings instead of getting right to work. Tell people to come 15 minutes early to chat open up the room early so people can talk. Do a couple exercises in the beginning. They're just fun. Get to know each other exercises that you facilitate or Ask someone on your team to facilitate, right it doesn't have, you don't always have to be in charge, make it a group project, the things that you told me, or that you do with your team, like these monthly challenges. They're funny, and they're fun. But what you're really doing is getting people to know each other.

Lara Schmoisman

Absolutely, that's a goal that we know each other. And we have a lot of fun, because now we can teach others about what they did. And many times we found out something that I completely encourage is maybe a meeting ends, but we've lived this summer open, Oh, I wish I say our and someone said are so hot here. And, and the conversation starts. And then we have two minutes that we talk about nothing. And also, there is something really important is said leadership, if they feel like the leader is not allowing those spaces, people, it's never gonna happen. Oh, my team knows that I encourage that's those spaces. When someone new comes they're like, walking on eggshells. What's happening here? I don't know.

Van Lai-DuMone

Like, I really act like this.

Lara Schmoisman

Yeah, and we piece each other a lot. And we we have fun with each other. Because otherwise, it's you cannot stay there working by yourself in a room. I have worked like I think 46 now in the team. And I

can tell you that. I feel like I know those people so much. I've never seen them face to face. But if I see them, I just need to hug them because I know them for a long, long time. And I know them really well.

Van Lai-DuMone

Right. And that's it's because of the leadership style you use, right? You use a very inclusive, and engaging leadership style that allows for that behavior, because you model it. So I think that's the lesson here for leaders is if you're if you're expecting your people on your team to connect and be involved and be engaged, you have to show it and you have to create the space for it. So what you said earlier about now they're all virtual, and and now they're all virtual, we have to conscientiously be say, How do I create that space for connection? Because people, like you said, If you give them the space, they're going to connect, we all crave that. Even more now than probably ever, like we crave that connection. So if you as a leader create the space, that's pretty much all you have to do, they will fill it.

Lara Schmoisman

Yeah, something that I always say is that I design my company culture. And you as a leader, you need to put like, I'm all about strategies, everyone knows that. But you need to put a strategy to your work culture, I learned from jobs that I like, and from jobs, that idea like that much. So you use all that experience as a leader, and you can create what you need, things don't happen, just because absolutely, you need to put a plan like we have in our calendar, that is a team challenge every last Friday of the month, or there is every day. So everyone has a birthday that they will have the last 10 minutes a happy hour, and it's in the colander in everyone look forward to those spaces, then there are a lot of spaces that they are improvisation. And you cannot bring the whole thing together. But there are a lot of departments in my company, at least that they don't work so much one with each other. But in this community places there are way that they get to know each other as well

Van Lai-DuMone

But... and they can and they can connect that and what you said there this in your calendar, every Friday, every month. I think that's a very important point to make, too. Because you can't be the leader who says we're going to value creativity and connection today, but then not do it again. Right. So do you to build the trust of your team? They need to know that it's going to be consistent.

Lara Schmoisman

Yeah, there is something else. I mean, and I was mentioned this, a lot of people think that information is power. And information is only power if you know what to do with the information. So I think that it's important also to inform everyone in the team where the company's at

Van Lai-DuMone

Absolutely, yeah, the transparency of that, right?

Lara Schmoisman

Yeah. And there is a lot of companies like you work somewhere, but you really don't know what do you do? What's going on in the big picture? Absolutely.

Van Lai-DuMone

And even worse, where they miss inform you.

Lara Schmoisman

Exactly. So how do you change that part of the culture, starting with the leaders because I mean, I am sure that if a leader or boss call and say guys, we need to do this activity. People will come but if you don't transform the beliefs of the leader or the leaders. It's not important to start there first, to work just with the leadership style and then bring it back to the work culture.

Van Lai-DuMone

Yes. Well, it's, it's interesting, because when you think about company culture, you think of the whole company and the and the ever needs to be involved in that culture. A lot of my work is based on bottom up, right? I love like, your the the ideas, the innovations, it doesn't have to come from the top down. But I do believe that culture, if there's going to be a shift in culture has to come from the top down. Because how can people change it from from underneath, if they're getting resistance from the top? So I do believe that and when I do go into organizations, and work with leaders, it's all about mindset shift first, right? So what is your I do a project with them? And depending on the topic we're talking about, is called like a possibilities matrix. So when you think about what are your limiting beliefs about your team, right? So think about what are your limiting beliefs about your team, and then turn that limiting belief into a possibility. So maybe my limiting belief about my team is, no one really wants to get involved, you know, no one knows, proactive enough, and then turn that limiting belief into a possibility. I have the, you know, I have the I wanna say the word power, or I have the influence, to get people involved. Right. So like, if you start with that, that that impossibility, like, no wants to get involved, you're not gonna go anywhere, but you can just shift that thought to something positive, and something that has to do with possibilities, and say, I have the authority and the influence to help people get involved, then you clearly now have possibilities that you can come up with,

Lara Schmoisman

yeah. But also there is a belief that the only way to grow in a company is by accepting leadership. And that's not it shouldn't be true. It's like leadership is not for everyone. Leadership is a skill or a talent, like you have, you're good at drawing, or you're doing good at math, or something else. He says she has a scale. So then you can learn is what you're saying. You can learn it or not, you can be not interested in being a leader. But you need to know in the company that you have the space to grow in a position that doesn't require leadership.

Van Lai-DuMone

So So you're saying that, that most companies, when you're when you're talking about the like people who are working in a company, companies assume that they want to become a leader,

Lara Schmoisman

exactly. That's the only way to grow, to grow in the company. In order to like, for example, let's say you are a graphic designer. In order to become a to grow in the company, you need to grow to be a manager and have people be under you. Otherwise, you cannot grow. And what I do believe if someone can have in the career of graphic design, and be a top designer and make as much money as

as a coordinator or as a manager, but because they chose that path, not because they're maybe not interested in being in a leader or a manager,

Van Lai-DuMone

I love that idea. Because I do find in the work I do that oftentimes, when you're good at a skill, you get promoted to manage people to do that same skill, except you've never had management training, or maybe even management interest.

Lara Schmoisman

Exactly. And because management also includes a lot of paperwork, and other other things that is not interesting. So I am trying to see how we can separate those two values, how people can grow in a company with their skills, but not necessarily taking a leadership position.

Van Lai-DuMone

Mm hmm. Well, yeah, I think that's, that's a that's a larger question, clearly. And I think, I think that's a that's an interesting question to ask and look into your own personal company. And, and your if that seems to be an issue to other companies for that company look at and be like, Okay, well, we're losing people. Right? We're losing people with these skills and talents, because we're pushing them to move up this ladder, that they don't want to move up. So what can we, you know, how can we be more innovative? How can we be more creative and come up with different ways for them to grow? And that really speaks to me in the sense I just had a, one of my clients, I was on a call with her the other day, and she said, She's now she's a VP of Marketing, but she's doing no marketing, and she loves the creative part of marketing. Yeah, she's lost. I think she got into marketing, because she wants to be creative. She wants to come up with the ideas.

Lara Schmoisman

Oh, believe me, it happens to me. I own a company and I found myself doing so many things, instead of doing the things that I'm really good at that strategy, and I tried, now I'm in a position I can separate myself and put other people to do certain things. But also, you need to know, those are my real skills. Those are what I'm good at. So I feel like culture is pushing you to do certain things. Instead of and because company like you said, they are losing talent, and they are losing people, because so those people that there have no interest in managerial they, they get burnt out.

Right. The other aspect of that is, I do feel like there might be room for improvement. Because, again, I, I feel that a lot of companies, they promote people, because they've been really good and successful in their position in their skill, that they get promoted to manager, and just get left in that role with no support, and no training. And I'm wondering if even if you're extremely good skill, and you value that skill, you love that skill, if there be more interest in, in moving into a managerial role, if you actually learn how are you actually supported in it,

Lara Schmoisman

that's something I work really hard. I have six coordinators in the company, area coordinators, and we work a lot in these leadership skills in this design of the work culture, and we come out with problems

that they can come to me how we resolve it. And I think a lot is in the communication. And you as a leader. And like you said, have training is about having mentorship that if you want to put someone in this coordinator position on manager position, you need to mentor them and breed them to be into that position.

Van Lai-DuMone

Yes, what? Yeah, absolutely. It can't just be because you're good at your skill, you get to move up. And that goes back to what we were talking about earlier that performance review.

Lara Schmoisman

Mm hmm.

Van Lai-DuMone

It's interesting, where a performance review is, I remember in my when I left work for a large pharmaceutical company, the performance was like, so you know, senior position low level one, then the the next thing for me was senior position level level number two, like, but what am I like? Isn't there more to it? Right? Like, couldn't that be up to me? At least should have a say of?

Lara Schmoisman

Exactly, exactly. That's my point.

Van Lai-DuMone

Of what my growth Yeah, of what my growth should look like. So it'd be it's, so I think that there is space for for that within companies where were in the before, maybe it's something different, like, so what are your personal goals here? Like, what what would you if you could design your next level? What would that look like?

Lara Schmoisman

Well, that's what one of the questions that the way they did is like, what are you interested in learn, and we found fascinating things that people are very willing to learn new software, because they feel like they can apply it somehow at what they do bring an added value and growth in their position. But there may be their position, it won't fit in the box anymore, they will become a hybrid. And I think corporations have a problem with not being able to put positions in boxes.

Van Lai-DuMone

Yes, and I think the bigger they get, it's easier to have these boxes, right for it. So it's easy for the company to have, like, let's just leave these boxes and fit people in. Versus let's look at the person first.

Lara Schmoisman

Exactly. And that's where you come in and bring you the creativity I'm bringing those connections back.

Van Lai-DuMone

That's right, that's right. And, and even if it is, so I look at when I bring creativity into an organization, the value of it is on an individual level, and on a higher, you know, company, company return on

investment value value as well. So I go into organizations and teach these skills, these tools, how to think more creative, how to solve problems with creative tools. And what I find oftentimes, individuals reach out to me reach out to me and say, I love that I'm more creative at home now. I was on the beach, I picked up rocks and and brought them home and painted them with my kids, which is something they wouldn't have done before. So even the smallest level bringing creativity makes makes a difference in individual lives. And then ultimately, in the corporate life. What I would like it would like to be seeing is companies valuing the fact that every person in the organization is creative, how can come up with good ideas, and that they're now looking across sectors, across divisions, across levels of their organizations, for ideas to solve problems, and that really solves a lot of the a lot of the the retention problem as well because what I find is all those things like now are virtual but I've gone to so many comes with a whole floor of no video games, ping pong tables, kitchen with free food, which I think are all great perks and gives people the space to connect and play. But that's not going to, that's not going to keep a person there.

Lara Schmoisman

Absolutely not. I mean, I remember working in this company that I had to stay until crazy hours every single day because it was bad planning. But they will give us a perk, bagels once a week, and they will give us dinner if we stayed late, which it became like everyday thing. For me a perk was going to my family everyday in a normal hour.

Van Lai-DuMone

So I think those posts are nice to have. And they're the easy go twos, right? They're the easy go twos for companies, because they see, like you're saying before they see the example of Oh, what's Google doing? Oh, they've got a T room. They've got this, let's, let's replicate that for our company. But, but what they also see is that Google is strongly invested in professional development. They value the ideas that come from their teams,

Lara Schmoisman

they go together, they the ping pong table is the only thing that people see. Because that's an easy fix. Just put the people table but the other parts of the world creativity development, that's work.

Van Lai-DuMone

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. I agree with you. We're on the same page about this.

Lara Schmoisman

three tips for someone who wants to bring creativity to the work life

Van Lai-DuMone

Three tips for people who want to bring... individuals you're talking about?

Lara Schmoisman

Yes.

Van Lai-DuMone

Okay. So I'm just like, very simple, because I think creativity doesn't have to take a long time. So. So one thing is put markers on your table.

Lara Schmoisman

Okay.

Van Lai-DuMone

Right. Put markers on your table. So rather than just writing down those are using your computer sketch ideas, right? Yeah, I'm sure you. I won't be surprised if you have paints on there, too.

Lara Schmoisman

No, no, no, no paints here but several colors

Van Lai-DuMone

is the idea that...that creativity can create more than you can more than you consume. And when I talk about consumption on time, but when I have time during my work day, or if I have time, I have a break, I usually pick up this, I'm scrolling through Instagram, I'm looking at news, that's consumption. And that doesn't do anything for me except me build on my anxiety and my uncertainty. So I always give people a couple things to do. So rather than picking up your phones, spend a couple minutes doing something creative. So again, if you think about a problem you're having, or a challenge of having at work, sketch ideas. Another way to do it is a challenge you're having at work, something you want to innovate on. Oftentimes, we're just sitting here like staring at a computer, trying to come up with new ideas, pull out a picture in a magazine, you know, look, look up any image on the computer and look at that image and ask yourself, how does this image how what characteristics of these images, remind me of the challenge I'm trying to face I'm trying to solve, and then ask yourself again, and then write down your ideas. And then ask yourself again, looking at this image, what characteristics of these images helped me reflect on a way I can solve for my problem? So now you take putting a visual cue to it. And then I guess the last one would be? Yeah, one more, I think, what I like to do is give yourself a challenge. I know you guys like challenges, and simple challenges, like grab five things off your table, and then challenge them, like build something as high as I can build something that moves. Right so that you're getting that quick because I think of creativity as a capacity and not a skill. oil painting is a skill.

Lara Schmoisman

Yeah, everyone can be creative in different ways.

Van Lai-DuMone

In different ways. Yeah, your creativity is gonna look different than anyone else's creativity. Yeah, so since creative is capacity, we can all expand on that create that capacity. So you give yourself these little moments to stretch that creative capacity. You're going to become more creative.

Lara Schmoisman

I love it. Well, Van, thank you so much for being here. This was an amazing chat. And we'll keep we'll keep chatting.

Van Lai-DuMone

We say this is just our first connection for sure. Thank you for having me.

Lara Schmoisman

Thank you for joining us. If you liked the show, remember to leave a review. I would really appreciate it. If you want to know more about marketing and and myself, follow me on Instagram. My handle is Lara Schmoisman. Was so good to have you here today. See you next time. catch you on the flip side. Ciao ciao.