

Collaborating for creativity

by April Wilkerson

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People sit on the floor to attend Robert Sternberg's lecture "Creativity is a Decision" during the Oklahoma Creativity Forum at the Embassy Suites in Norman Tuesday. (Photo by Maike Sabolich)

NORMAN – A century-old utility company may be associated with entrenched corporate culture and no deviation from the way things have always been done.

Think again.

OGE Energy Corp. was one of the many faces of creative thinking Tuesday at the Oklahoma Creativity Forum in Norman. The event, which sold out at 1,200 participants, was a state follow-up to last year's hosting of the Creativity World Forum.

Ken Grant, managing director of OGE's Positive Energy Smart Grid program, said deliberate creative thinking is changing the face of an old company that is carving out its role in the future.

"In corporate culture, we have a tendency to allow people to become isolated – we don't create collaborative environments where people are encouraged to take risks and make mistakes," Grant said.

OGE has turned that approach upside-down in recent years, particularly with its Smart Grid program. Grant said he learned that the space people work in matters greatly when it comes to fostering creativity.

Because the Smart Grid program requires a diversity of employees from engineering to information technology to marketing, the company decided to lease new office space for the work. They landed in Leadership Square, but knew they had to make changes to the area that had been chopped up with walls.

Grant said they gutted the area and put in cubicles that allowed for enough privacy but still let in plenty of natural light. Other small rooms were created for meetings or "huddles." The result has been people thinking creatively together when their paths might not otherwise have crossed.

"Without the collaboration, there's no way you would have the creativity and the minds working together to overcome problems," he said. "In the past, I've seen teams come together to work on a major project, but when you get to a point of facing a major barrier, people panic or bail out. I really think we changed the dynamic because of the culture we put in place. People feel like we're one big team and there are no hierarchies of supervision. You can't tell based on where people are sitting."

Grant said he sees the change in how people respond to a roadblock.

"When we get up against a barrier, we kind of have this joke now where people say, 'What's plan B?' I can't tell you how many times that what we went with was plan B," he said. "Rarely was it plan A. I think we have a group of people now who don't panic when plan A doesn't work."

The thrust of Creative Oklahoma, the organization behind the Creativity Forum, is to infuse creativity into the state's commerce, culture and education.

Robert Sternberg, provost at Oklahoma State University, said it's a myth that creative thinking can't be better incorporated into education and measured. Today's system ensures that good analytical thinkers and test takers are rewarded while creative thinkers get left behind, he said. When questions like, "Imagine something," "Suppose something" or "Explore something" are included, students get the opportunity to flex that muscle instead of their test-taking ability.

"In today's society, what we need most is creative and wise leaders, but what we've ended up with is a society that's socially stratified by test scores," Sternberg said. "We end up with people in high positions who do really well on multiple-choice tests, but don't have creative skills. Then we wonder why banks like Lehman Bros. fail, and the reason is they're recruiting people from these top schools who are really good at answering multiple-choice questions, but when they get a real question, they can't answer it."

Gov. Mary Fallin announced the formation of the Oklahoma Innovation Index at the event. It will be a public-private partnership led by Creative Oklahoma to establish a measurement of the opportunities for students to engage in innovative work.

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