

# What do you Think Creativity is and Where can We Find it?

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## Abstract

Creativity can be defined as an art, the art of finding new solutions to old and emerging problems. Creativity's driving force may be a structured or a non structured process, though in either case intuition plays a major role. This particular art in this field is the product of employees' thought processes. By its nature, thinking is a free process. In the world of business, creativity is best able to express itself where people do their work with pleasure. Everybody is capable of being creative but organisations can stem the tide of creativity by putting various obstacles in its path. Creative organisations are characterised by particular values, organisational forms and a conducive internal atmosphere.

**Key Words:** Organisation, Creativity, Improvisation, Leadership

## 1. What is creativity?

When the word creativity is aired in the Economics faculty it is often met by blank looks on the faces of colleagues, followed by polite dismissal and a general feeling that the concept is something of a trespasser in the familiar world of business and enterprise. This has much to do with the meaning the term has acquired in common usage. The word "creativity" conjures up ideas of "the productive capacity of reason and imagination" (1), the production of ideas, words and therefore not of facts, which are the real stuff of business.

The term is automatically associated with art and its various manifestations. Artists are creative persons par excellence in that art is the expression and celebration of man's inventive talents (2). And, as we all know, artists inhabit a world apart and one that business would do well to avoid for fear of getting contaminated.

So it is that for a long time now the extension of the concept to productive organisations has been somewhat problematic, with the exception of those businesses whose stock in trade is creativity itself, as in the worlds of advertising and image management.

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The truth is that the above definition of creativity invites conceptual separation between those who carry out a creative activity and those who assess the feasibility of the idea itself. The prevailing view of creativity seems to consider the creative process as over as soon as the idea itself is produced. It is almost as if there were someone with the job of “being creative”, providing an input service, while the processes of development and realization are in the hands of others. All this is however shows a general misunderstanding of the concept of creativity, since creativity also implies the material action that gives form and substance to the idea generated.

The field of music provides us with examples, specifically in this case with the production of a new song. A song may come into being in one of at least two ways, i.e. through the collaboration of many people, or it may be an individual effort. In the former case there may be someone who writes the lyrics, another who writes the music and another who interprets or performs the song. In the latter case the text, music and performance are all by the same artist. In the one case there is interaction between three different creativities, which could be variously described as poetic, musical and interpretative. In the other case there is a global creative process embodied in a single individual. In either case the song starts out as an idea and is then turned into reality. It cannot be said that one path is a priori likely to be more effective than the other. What can however be said is that in group creativity there are more potential risks and obstacles for the simple reason that it depends on interaction between different people. It should nevertheless be added that for this very reason, the collaborative effort is potentially more productive than the former process, while it being well understood that any generalisations in the particular field of music would be out of place.

This simple outline of the artistic, and therefore creative, process of producing a song illustrates a key factor in creativity that the opening definition tends to gloss over. That is, that creativity also implies the accomplishment of that which the reason or the imagination have produced; first the song is not and then it is, there as something new in the world.

The word creativity itself comes from the verb “to create” which means “originate, cause to arise, stir up” (3). In short, the word creativity means the capacity to create something new out of disorganised elements in which the creator perceives and observes possible connections (4). In this sense, creativity can be a part of all human endeavour and may thus also find a home within every process in a business enterprise, where being innovative is now more than ever a fundamental requirement.

A parallel can therefore be seen between the creativity of the artist and the workings of a company and the people in it, particularly the entrepreneur himself, even though there are

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evident differences between the two worlds.

The artist applies his creative force in the first instance for himself and only secondarily for others, (5), while the businessman seeks in creativity a possible response to competition and the need to meet the expectations of his customers.

Business creativity could thus be further defined as the art of finding new solutions to old problems and new forms of action in engaging the market.

This enterprise interpretation of creativity permits us to highlight two aspects. On the one hand, there is the evident focus required for company application of this concept (the solution of problems), and on the other hand there are the restrictions creativity encounters in the market. Creativity must be employed to solve problems more effectively than competitors are able to do.

The enterprise's creativity takes as its starting point the problem, goes through a process of reflection on possible solutions (incubation), comes to the idea (illumination) and concludes with a feasibility study for this idea. This mirrors the classic creative path, with the proposal formulated by creativity having to meet the challenges of the competition, time scales for meeting customer needs and recovering costs in the market.

This definition of creativity would seem to satisfy the requirements of a concept's suitability for use in the world of enterprise economics. More detailed consideration sees a further expansion of the usefulness of the concept for guiding us through business processes.

On a close look, the above definition implies a specific approach to creativity that is inextricably linked to the standpoint of the formulator of the definition. Such an approach can be called logico-rational.

The paths that lead to the execution of the creative performance are however varied, since expressions of creativity follow different paths, depending on the knowledge, experiences, character and attitudes of the persons that carry them through.

In the context of a company or other organisation it is useful to be able to understand the types of creative approaches embodied in the individual persons, since these end up being pooled in such a way that creativity stems from the confluence in a single project of a multiplicity of individual contributions, each of which will, to a greater or smaller extent, affect the final result. The situation is alike that of the artisan who carries out the whole of the business process alone. These contributions cannot be type tested to conform to single standard as that would lead to the loss of much of the creative energy of the individuals concerned.

In this search for types, the definition of creativity once again comes to our assistance. Each creative person possesses, to a more or less explicit degree, a definition of creativity

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that reveals the nature of his own particular creative attitudes.

Different creative approaches emerged from an analysis of definitions of creativity gathered from a working group organised after a seminar with a successful female singer and a successful author (6).

The title of the meeting was a quote from the screenplay of the “The Dead Poets Society”, a movie by Peter Weir: “words and ideas can change the world”. It was proposed to “see” creativity in action from the artistic point of view, without directly engaging in any dialogue regarding possible definitions that could be given to the concept.

Afterwards, in the light of their experience of the film, a discussion was held with the students on the critical points in the creative process as they emerged during the presentation-interview. At the end they were asked to formulate a definition of creativity based on their experience and the emotions they had felt.

From an analysis of the definitions produced, it was possible to divide them into three separate categories, to each of which was then associated a denomination associated with the features of three typical creative attitudes.

The students described creativity as they saw it as:

- a) giving vent to passions, emotions and beliefs;
- b) seeing the sky in a room, beyond the fence, beyond the horizon;
- c) the breaking of logical strings by intuition and emotion;
- d) interpreting and moulding reality according to one’s own thought;
- e) seeing something that others cannot see;
- f) reading with eyes that see beyond what is visible;
- g) the ability to respond to everyday stimuli with imagination;
- h) realizing something new and making it appreciable;
- i) carrying out a bright idea in a new way;
- j) creating something useful;
- k) a way of dealing with life and everyday challenges while building something new;
- l) creating new things even where that means going against the grain.

Accepting the methodology which sees human action influenced by the rational side (left hemisphere of the brain) and the intuitive and imaginative side of reasoning (right hemisphere) (7), the definitions given can be ordered into three categories that identify three expressions of and approaches to creativity:

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1. the imagination approach;
2. the action approach;
3. the ingenuity approach.

The first emerges from the definitions a) to g) and emphasises the moment of production of the idea, the second derives from a reading of definitions h) to j) and emphasises the problem-solving stage, while the third, coming out of k) and l) emphasises the search for what is rationally possible.

In everyday reality, to find solutions to problems that arise, the organisation has to combine and variously recombine these creative attitudes in the search for the new.

There is no hierarchy of importance existing between the possible approaches to creativity. These are complementary rather than alternative paths. It would be unduly restrictive for a company to prefer one over another and could result in a loss of creative potential. By placing excessive emphasis on imagination there is the risk of elongating time scales, while conversely, by accentuating action could result in the company “forgetting” better alternatives when going through its thought processes. Similarly, putting too much weight on the search for a rationality-based solution could lead to a distancing of the company from the complexity of the real world and the threats and opportunities it contains.

It is within these three approaches to creativity that diverse aspirations can be balanced as they arise out of the abilities to produce new and exciting ideas, coupled with the skills to transform them into reality through the structure in which they will be implemented (8).

The creative success of the enterprise therefore depends in good part on the willingness of individuals with different creative attitudes and management abilities to generate the organisational conditions for these to harmoniously interact. There is a very delicate balance to be achieved between these approaches, each with its own ability to escape from and re-enter the constrictions of the real world.

### **Suggestions for reflection**

How do you define creativity?

Does your organisation acknowledge the creative approaches proposed above?

What do you feel is your own creative position vis à vis those of your competitors?

Words and ideas can change the world. Do you agree with this statement?

In which areas of your organisation can you witness creative energy at work?

When you hire a member of staff do you assess his/her creative potential?

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## **2. Where working creativity is to be found and what drives it**

In the business's constant process of becoming, creativity is present in its every action, to greater or smaller extent. It is present in the determining of the company vision and in its "reprocessing" of the future. It drafts the company's mission and it outlines the strategy to be employed in pursuing it. It lives within the processes of radical innovation that from time to time redefine the company profile, as it does in those processes of continuous improvement (9) that are capable of shaking up established and sleepy company routines. It informs the relationships between individuals, contributing to the creation of a communications network that unites them in the search for mutual accords to respond to mutual expectations. It unearths the most suitable systems for depicting and disseminating the company's identity, this in a world of communication characterised by increasingly intense levels of cacophony and confusion that are most difficult to handle.

It is fair to say, therefore, that creativity may be found in every part and every action of the enterprise, provided that is that you are looking for it.

It would be a long way from the truth to suggest that this is something new for academics and businessmen to analyse. Creativity has always been an active part of enterprise, as it has in all human endeavour. What is new, if it can be called that, is that productive organisations are starting to accept that within their own corporate body there is this potential tool to be exploited, thanks to an improved understanding of its nature and function.

The fact is that academic recognition of the subject as it applies to business management is so recent that the issue is very rarely broached. Anyone raising the argument is regarded as something of an eccentric. Competitive market forces have a way, however, of pushing research forwards in all possible ways where improvements in performance may be obtained, and are discovering more or less rapidly the critical value of creativity. To a large extent this can be seen as a reworking of some of the organisational principles typical of total quality management.

The novelty is therefore academic recognition of the fact that creativity is fully-fledged member of the productive process family, standing shoulder to shoulder with knowledge and trust (10).

Other new signs of novelty can also be seen in the field of company creativity, thrown up largely by the changing environment enterprise inhabits.

The subjects of environmental change and the characteristics of this environment have by now become so much subjects of general interest that we can safely leave to the reader's own experience and imagination a general overview of the context in which companies are

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called upon to act.

For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to make reference to three details that have a special bearing on the physiognomy of this environment:

- *ambiguity*, it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand the real motives behind the conduct of the people who populate the company's environment;
- *indecipherability*, rationality's tools are increasingly inadequate for taking readings of and interpreting the environmental development;
- *unpredictability*, it almost logically follows from the previous two points that the company or individual is likely to be increasingly confronted by unpredictable situations.

In a similar context, alongside what could be called *structural creativity*, there is also extemporaneous creativity or *improvisational capacity*.

The real difference between the two lies in the fact that, in the case of structural creativity, there is – where possible – use of a logical rational path, albeit integrated with lateral thinking (11). In this situation the thought phase and the action phase can be considered separately.

In the latter case, that of improvisation, we have the logic of intuition rather than of rationality (12), because in this case thought and action are simultaneous, like variations on a theme in a jazz jamming session.

“The word improvisation has its root in the word “*proviso*” which means make an advance agreement, or do something that is premeditated. When the prefix “*im*” is added to “*proviso*”, as where “*im*” is added to “possible” to give us its opposite, “impossible”, *improvised* means the opposite of *proviso* or premeditated. Improvisation thus concerns what is unpredictable, not agreed in advance and the manipulation of the unexpected” (13).

“Popular definitions of improvisation however stress only its spontaneous and intuitive nature – characterised as the creation of something out of nothing – and are in this respect extraordinarily incomplete. A simplistic evaluation of improvisation overlooks the discipline and experience on which the improviser relies, and obscures the real practices and processes that are engaged” (14).

This last comment, reflecting on the experience of a performing jazz band, suggests a specific focus on certain aspects of improvisation that are relevant to a discussion of organisations:

- improvisation is an immediate response to a change as perceived by a member of the organisation;
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- this change must take place harmoniously, that is to say it must be introduced into the melodies that have come before it – which in the case of an organisation, could be its vision or mission – and must take place in syntony with the group action of which it makes up a part;
- for this to happen, the whole of the group must have a full working knowledge of the language that is being used, as well as the rules of the organisation that permit a re-definition of the order that preceded the change state;
- all of this must happen according to a rhythm capable of capturing the attention and interest of the public or audience concerned.

Improvisation, like structural creativity, thus has its roots in the memory of what has been acquired and tried in the past and what will be modified on the basis of input from the environment or even of errors that occur in the proceedings.

With structural creativity, some kind of sense is sought within a predefined intention, to the extent that thought can be separated from action. With improvisation, on the other hand, sense is sought a posteriori in relation to that which is being redefined.

Having shed some light on the nature of these two faces of creativity, it should be said that both structural creativity and improvisation arise from the action of persons operating within the organisation.

Everybody can be creative, provided that the organisation does not prevent them from being so, or that the experiences or events in their lives have not distanced them from their creativity.

Creative persons, however, display over time a series of characteristics that tend to typify them. Therefore, while taking account of the fact that the rule may fail to apply in individual cases, it could be said that creative persons are:

- unassuming;
  - curious;
  - tolerant of ambiguity;
  - confident;
  - tenacious;
  - courageous;
  - sensitive;
  - good listeners;
  - blessed with a good sense of humour;
  - able to dream (15).
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The variety of creative persons that can come out of any combination of these characteristics is practically infinite. It is not necessary to have them all and each one can combine with others in different ways and to different extents. This list of qualities can nevertheless be useful for the purposes of assessing the creative potential of any given person and therefore also assist in the selection of staff on bases other than the all-too-frequent recourse to sterile technical criteria and qualifications that often the only tools for sieving access to the corporate ranks.

Irrespective of the characteristics themselves, the source of creativity is the thought that precedes action or runs simultaneously to it in determining that action.

Thought by its very nature is free. Thought cannot be "forced" to be creative.

It follows from this observation that at the basis of creativity lies the desire of the person to apply his or her knowledge and awareness to the search for what is new.

This desire is in turn directly connected to the individual's wellbeing, as component member of the organisation.

In the final analysis, an organisation's actual creativity depends on the character of the individuals that work within it and the levels of organisational wellbeing to be found within the organisation itself (16).

### **Suggestions for reflection**

Do you agree with the proposition that knowledge, creativity and trust are an enterprise's true productive factors?

How many new ideas have you evaluated in the course of the last month?

Do proposals for change stem from all parts of the company?

Describe how you feel about the future on the basis of the your enterprise's history.

What is your organisation's capacity to improvise?

What for you constitutes organisational wellbeing?

## **3. What do you think about creativity in your organisation?**

As stated in 2., creativity is to be found in the individual, just as it is to be found in the organisation. The former is intimately linked with the characteristics and attitudes of the individuals concerned. The latter is associated with the structure's capacity to bring together the individual creativities to a shared project that is able to stimulate and sustain possible creative proposals generated within the different groupings that make up the organisation as

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a whole.

A creative individual who is a member of an asphyxiating organisation incapable of adequately sustaining the processes of innovation could thus find that his own creativity is suppressed. On the other hand a person whose potential had never been developed or brought out could be creatively reborn when located in an organisation that makes change a central feature of its own tradition. This discussion will shortly return to this apparent paradox whereby tradition and change form a united front, after firstly exploring the creativity of the organisation; the typical form of creativity to be found in an enterprise.

With this in mind, it is worth seeking to understand whether, and in what way, there exist in the organisation's system, any strictures to its creative energies. The aim of such investigation being to make policy decisions that encourage the spread throughout the organisation of these creative processes.

The typical decision-making processes of a company are replete with blocks to creativity, despite the fact that corporate organisations are increasingly called upon to express themselves in innovative ways in order to create or consolidate their market position. How can this be? For one simple reason – creativity is associated with innovation which is in turn associated with change will an organisation is by its very nature inclined towards order and routine (17). An organisation will tend to prefer involvement with the known rather than with imponderables (18), both for reasons of security and as a question of power.

It can be seen from this simple observation that creativity theories have to overcome many obstacles before they can truly affirm themselves inside the organisation.

Such obstacles may result from the way in which an organisation interprets its own role or the mechanisms by which working groups within its own structure act.

The first of these derive from a set of *cultural inhibitions*, while the latter are the product of *emotional blockages*.

There are numerous obstacles that could be described as being cultural in nature. The following are but some examples of these:

- *success* itself acts as an obstacle to change through a conceptual mechanism which seeks to distance doubt from the decision-making process on the assumption of operating under conditions of structural and sustainable force;
  - *habit*, which opens up many avenues for the establishment of routines (19);
  - *general opinion*, which may lead to typically conformist behaviour, i.e. conduct that seeks to be in line with dominant thought and assured general approval (20);
  - *carpe diem* that could mean that the entrepreneur sees everything from the limited view-
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- point of how things stand today while failing to seek to build for the future;
- *fear* that spreads through an organisation in which mistakes are not tolerated, where errors are punished, or where there is the constant tension of an atmosphere created by a rigidly hierarchical system;
  - an *autocratic management style* that stifles the entrepreneurial talents of individuals or groups acting within the corporation;
  - *affection*, which may result in a resistance to change and an instinct to preserve a particular situation in place of renewal;
  - an *inability to see beyond the obvious objective of profit*, which may lead to an uncompromising emphasis on efficiency and a rejection of dreams as the instigators of change and where the whole organisation becomes increasingly stuck in a rut (21);
  - an *excessive trust in the experience of the past* (22) with a consequent failure to pay attention to leaps of the imagination.

Numerous blockages are also to be found of the type indicated in the second category, i.e. that of emotional inhibitions at work within the mechanisms of the organisation. Some of the most critical of these to the creativity of the business include the following (23):

- *hasty judgements of facts or ideas*, dictated by too much attention to time competition;
- the *fear of being thought odd or eccentric*, which may freeze an individual's contribution in the form of ideas at the source;
- an *anxiety to find any solution to a problem* leading to the tendency to accept the first solution identified or proposed;
- the *fear of going down a new road* and thus finding oneself in a minority;
- *automatic rejection* of new ideas, rather than an engagement in constructive discussion;
- *seeking a scapegoat* rather than seeking a solution to the problem;
- an *inability to work as a team*, where everyone is a *prima donna*;
- *low self-esteem*, leading the individual to feel that what he or she has to say is not important;
- *fear of being judged by others or of being thought of someone who just wants to be the centre of attention*, with the consequent isolation of the person;
- *running away from the real problem* to concentrate attention on irrelevant details.

While it is clear that creativity alone is not enough to make a business competitive, in that it must be associated with proposals of quality and efficiency of performance, it is equally true that an enterprise can at best survive in today's competitive environment when

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its creative energy is low, and cannot truly prosper.

Widespread blockages to creativity of the above kind, to which others related to an inadequate understanding of the techniques involved in the creative approach should be added, may very well represent a serious threat to the development of the organisation.

We are also now well aware that threats are themselves the principal source of innovation, when properly analysed with a view to discovering the opportunities they conceal.

For that to happen, a management team is required to be provided with *creative leadership* based on a set of characteristics that this concluding part of the paper will attempt to summarize.

It can be maintained, in other words, that the above-referred to blockages to creativity can be overcome where the organisation's leadership takes on certain clearly defined characteristics in relation to three variables, namely values, the organisation itself and the atmosphere within that organisation.

#### **a. The values**

It is well known that the principles underlying the choices made both by individuals and by organisations are their values. There are four principles in particular that greatly contribute to creating the conditions for the development of a creative organisation:

- a.1 *listening*, i.e. the aptitude to be able to pick up signs of change as they arrive both from inside and outside the enterprise;
- a.2 *change*, i.e. an awareness that tradition is generated by persistence over time and that this is only possible where the enterprise is endowed with the capacity to harmonise with the continuous changes that take place in the environment in which it operates. For this reason, tradition and change are two concepts that are in fact intimately linked (24), with tradition not being a synonym for conservation;
- a.3 *exotopia*, i.e. a recognition that each individual is different from every other individual and as such has his or her own special potential. It is through the interaction between this diversity that creativity acquires its greatest strength (25);
- a.4 *trust*, i.e. the credit given to people who work in the organisation, as a result of which they individuals feel themselves to be free to contribute their own thought to its continued development.

#### **b. The organisation**

In its most succinct form the concept could be summarized by saying that the organisation must be characterised by organisational wellbeing (26). In more detail, within this

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model, it could be said that the main conditions of wellbeing necessary for sustaining a creative approach are the following:

- b.1 the adequacy of competencies and professionalism ensured by constant updating and training;
- b.2 the perception by each individual of his or here role in the system of the enterprise in which they work, and a generalised team spirit throughout the company;
- b.3 the availability of time for thinking;
- b.4 tolerance of mistakes, insofar mistakes too add to experience (27);
- b.5 recognition of efforts even before results;
- b.6 equity in the rewards process and career prospects.

### ***c. The atmosphere within the organisation***

The atmosphere created by the characteristics of the relationships that form within the organisation should be characterised by high levels of:

- c.1 serenity;
  - c.2 harmony;
  - c.3 fun
- and
- c.4 enthusiasm.

It goes without saying that in order to move in this direction the creative leadership must base its efforts not so much on technical know-how as on its ability to listen, observe and pick up on and deal appropriately with its own emotions and those of others. It must therefore be based on emotional intelligence, i.e. “the totality of skills that enable people to harmoniously interact with each other ” (28).

But that is whole other story that will be gone into in a future paper.

### **Suggestions for reflection**

Are there blockages to creativity in your organisation?

Do people have fun when working in the company?

Are there dreams within the enterprise?

How did you last react to a mistake made in the company?

What do you think about paid pauses from work to make space for creativity?

Did you hear Change knocking on you door yesterday?

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