

## Tapping Creativity

When we want to think about creativity we have to dispel some popular myths. The first of these is evidenced when you ask people whether they are creative. Most people will say they are not, perhaps because they see no scope for creativity in their work, which may be humdrum or mechanical. A second myth is that creativity is the preserve of artists, poets and great people of one kind or another and, as people do not see themselves as great, they believe they must not be capable of creativity. A third is that, if they are to be creative, there must be a marketable product of their endeavour. People do not see that the very way in which we do things can be addressed creatively or that there is creativity in our daily manifestations – our smile, our disposition, our cheerfulness our daring to admit mistakes, are all creative acts.

The truth is, of course, that every human being is immensely creative and capable of performing many creative acts every day. Not only that, but there is scope for creativity all around. If you look at a young child, you see what you once were – immensely curious, exploratory, fast to learn, never taking no for an answer, never accepting 'failure' – in other words a very creative being! It is a fact that a child has huge redundancy of brain capacity, vital at that age, which enables the child's mind to tackle the complex world in which they find themselves. Unfortunately, loving parents begin to shut down the creativity in order to protect their offspring from danger: 'Do this', 'Don't do that' and so on. When the child goes to school, new constraints shut down more of the creativity. To progress in the education system the child has to let go curiosity and enquiry and just learn the 'right' answers. By the time he or she has graduated there is not much creativity left in use. Then the employer gets stuck in with control and command: "do it or else". Its knuckle down to conformity or get fired! When we ask this person if they are creative, is it any wonder most say "no"?

Yes, it is a caricature – but not wholly inaccurate! Education systems developed around the world in the last hundred years or so are all based to some extent on discredited theories about how the mind works and how we learn. As every currently practising educationalist is a product of the products

of those systems, most are blind to the faults. Like the rest of us they too are victims of a mechanistic and fragmentary mindset. Indeed most of us equate learning (some with fear and loathing) to the experience of being confined in a classroom, having to remember the answers the teacher expects. How far away that is from all that unbridled curiosity and exploratory instinct with which we began!

Because such attitudes to creativity and learning are so prevalent, they pervade the way we run our organisations. We tend to quash enquiry. We discourage independent initiative. Our control and command structures leave no room for self-determination and so on. We lay blame (ably aided by the media). We speak of failure and mistakes and then wonder why people don't take the risks inherent in creativity and innovation. The way we organise is anathema to creativity and so people lose what little of the knack they may have retained from youth. When we need that creative flare, we find we have to spend a long time blowing on the embers. Even as the flames spring up anew, we douse them in our fear of losing control. Most corporate cultures just do not support creativity!



Then there is what we call mindset – a 'set' of the mind that predisposes us to see things a certain way. As a matter of mental efficiency, our minds see in patterns. This means that we can recognise, say, a chair, without having to work it out from first principles. Equally we can recognise a car, a hospital, an argument, a conference, a thunderstorm and so on. It applies not just to things but also to processes and complex interactions. Mindset is valuable to us but it also limits what ideas we entertain, even the way our perceptions inform us about the world around us. What does not fit the familiar pattern is readily denied. Few of us, for instance, can see or recognise the full complexity of the living systems around us. Nature's rich tapestry of life is reduced to a series of things to be dealt with separately and independently and we pay little heed to relationships and interconnections. Our mindset is a product of 250 years of a particular reductionist and fragmentary way of thinking, overlain with our own personal specialism and limitations.

So, there it is. We have cultures that inhibit, structures that inhibit and inhibited minds. Small wonder that creativity is seen as a mystic art and the preserve of an elite. Small wonder that, when we send people off to learn creativity or problem solving, nothing much changes. Techniques that help break mindset, Synectics, Lateral Thinking, TRIZ, LogoVisual Technology, can be immensely valuable but only where they fall on fertile ground.

The truth of the matter is that we need to make changes at every level at the same time, from the individual to the corporate, from the social to the international. The human spirit is very resilient. The spirit of creativity is there just below the surface. It can be brought to life and thrive, if we allow everything else to change accordingly. Once we can allow people to influence the culture, the vast majority will come up with the goods.

This is scary stuff! Letting the genie out of the bottle is inherently dangerous – the genie will never want to return. Our only hope is that the genie will be benevolent and will want to achieve the ends we have been struggling to achieve as an organisation. Its not a bad principle on which to place our hopes. Most people want to be effective – to have the satisfaction of a job well done, to be part of something truly meaningful, to leave a legacy. How much more appealing that is than to have just done as one was told: to have been part of a well-ordered but dysfunctional machine.

If this is true, then how can we set about releasing our genie - this creative genius?

Creativity is a playful activity – a process of experimentation and discovery out of which new ideas and combinations arise. There is a trap, of course, because if we are competent, we know the way things are and may explore no further. If we are not competent, we do not know what is within the bounds or what is outside them, so we are unlikely to notice novel combinations or to make new possibilities work. It is only when someone decides to explore or 'play' outside the known that they might, even 'accidentally', bring some new possibility into being.

Can we create accidentally? For example, didn't Fleming famously discover penicillin due to the accidental contamination of a petri dish? Yes, indeed he did, but his creative intent was attuned to notice what had occurred and to make the connections. We call this serendipity. He had an intention that predisposed him to see the significance of the accidental occurrence. Chance favours the prepared mind – Was it Gary Player who famously said, "The harder I practice, the luckier I get"?

The word 'play', here, needs defining, as some people will see 'play' as the antithesis of work whereas it is only when we bring 'play' into work that creativity can occur. Let us call it 'serious play' so we make the distinction. Serious play is what sets the genie free.



**An illustration:** *We worked with people on a manufacturing site, inviting supervisory staff from across the site to a half-day interaction. In a facilitated process they surfaced all the things they knew impeded their effectiveness (everyone knows what is wrong). In a further stage they described what it would be like if things were sorted (everyone had ideas of what would help). From these two pictures they identified seventy 'projects' – things that could be changed. Given permission and a very modest budget (many projects cost nothing) 90% of the projects were implemented within three months and the fortunes of the site were turned around. All that was needed was a process to bring out what was already there and the permission to act. The managing director was bold in his commitment. The critical factor in this success was the crossing of divides in an atmosphere that enabled people to make believe about how things could be – and the knowledge that what made sense would get support.*

**Another illustration:** *A community workshop was convened to explore the future of a rural area in which the pressures of change were being felt – tourist pressure, rising property prices, falling incomes, agricultural change and out-migration of young people. The community was fragmented. Commuters, farmers, tourist businesses, professionals and so on, lived within their own worlds, each with their own concerns. The workshop brought all these factions together.*

*Once a playful atmosphere was established, people worked together to imagine how things could be if their concerns were removed. Connecting with an ideal future made it possible to identify key strategies for change. Groups were formed to further develop ideas and assume responsibility for making change happen on the ground. The challenge to break the vicious cycle of decline enabled people to tap their creative potential, making connections and re-integrating the whole. This seriously playful event provided a creative breakthrough which brought innovation in its wake.*

The process is one of cultural change. Having begun, therefore, it is vital we see things through and support the changes in every detail. People need to see their efforts bear fruit and that the risks they have taken are vindicated.

**A cautionary tale:** *A government organization arranged a high-energy one-day interaction for a large group of senior managers to develop creativity. The managers enjoyed being given permission to play – making sculpture, masks, collages, miming, storytelling and acting. However, play and work remained two distinct worlds of experience they could not connect. In the absence of top-level commitment to change, the culture asserted itself and the workshop was seen as an exercise. For these people, locked in their fragmentary thinking, a deeper process was required for change to succeed.*

If we are to let the genie out of the bottle, we need confidence that it shares our aims and purpose. We have to manage the consequences of giving it a life of its own! This means letting go of control. Control and command are antipathetic to creativity. This is not as alarming as it may sound, provided we tap into the principle that human beings are goal-seeking. People want to make sense of what they do. If we encourage common purpose and the desire for meaningful work, we harness a powerful force. This is a challenge to our leadership and even to the way we understand what leadership is about.

Creativity, learning and leadership are intimately connected. Our role as leaders is to lead the learning process. By helping people become co-creators of organisational success, we give a direction for their creativity. Then, with appropriate techniques, we can remove whatever inhibits it. We can build self-esteem and belief in creative potential: build a culture in which creativity is encouraged; build a society that values innovation. Creativity is a natural life force – a positive and welcoming attitude to challenge. Nurture this creative force and you will unleash huge potential!

**A story of strategy innovation:** *An international organisation wanted to develop a concerted approach to global innovation. Operating in many countries around the world, they were concerned that complex problems were being solved several times over and that good practice was not being shared between countries. We organised a residential development workshop at a venue north of Paris for top-level innovation managers from countries around the world. Interactive themes were pursued, using different media to establish an ambience of creative play. Into this a process of shared visioning was woven, enabling participants to develop a coherent picture of what could be achieved if information were to flow freely and people were properly attuned. With clarity in regard to their common purpose, they easily developed strategies to foster global collaboration. At the close of the event, next steps were plotted and participants committed to changing procedures and behaviours. A global team had emerged!*

In a creative organization, leadership is distributed to all. Your leadership role is to lead the learning by sustaining an **environment** for serious play – spaces that encourage interaction, visible displays of creative ideas, information and experiments, interlinking people, encouraging the sharing of information and ideas and taking risks.

Your leadership role is to create a **culture** of serious play in which taking time to discuss ideas is part of work; a culture with a buzz, in which ideas are bounced around and new possibilities cause excitement and admiration; in which not sometimes failing is seen as being overly risk averse. Create the ambience for serious play by encouraging people to break off from the routine and mundane to help colleagues solve their problems and to learn what others are up to, enjoying one another's successes.

Your leadership role is to remind people of their **human nature** as creative beings, to build their confidence and self-esteem, to awaken their potential. Let the genie out of the bottle and you release a magic power in your organisation.

When you have done all this, then it is worth asking about techniques for Lateral Thinking, Logo-visual thinking, TRIZ and problem solving – but by then the chances are that everyone is already using these and other techniques because they have learned them for themselves.

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October 2009