

We all want and need creativity in our personal lives and at work. But how can we nurture, encourage and use creativity successfully? **Patrick Harris** offers some suggestions

Creative thinking



Creativity is a skill; a talent. It can make the difference between failure and success. It is sought by many organisations but only a rare handful reach the Holy Grail of becoming creative exemplars – Google’s buzzing campus life, Apple’s super-cool products and Patagonia’s laid-back outlook are just a few.

Creativity in organisations should usually be directed at a specific problem or desired outcome. This could be to invigorate the workplace, motivate employees or to produce sought-after products and services.

But what exactly is required from creativity in organisations – and the people in them – to realise their aims? How can they apply creativity to avoid sterile working patterns, make the most of their collective talent and turn ideas into profitable solutions that delight customers? A few areas are key in answering these questions:

Developing a creative mindset

Having a creative mindset is like fuelling a car before a journey. Fuel is rarely the focus of the journey but you would not get anywhere without it. The situation is the same for a creative mindset.

It provides you with opportunities to have creative moments – occasions where two or more ideas are assembled in new and interesting combinations. Without a state of mind that is ready to explore and expand on creative ideas, you severely limit the journey that you can take.

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One way to stimulate a creative mindset is to avoid the typical focus of organisations on what is and to ask, instead, what if questions. Doing this regularly tests your ability to see things anew.

Over the long term a what if emphasis might involve learning a new skill. In the shorter term it could be something as simple as taking a new route to the office or reading a different newspaper for a few weeks.

Stepping away from your comfort zone – your natural thinking home – is also a powerful way to develop a creative frame of mind. Everyone gets stuck into routine so following an alternative line of thought is an ideal tonic to refresh your perspective. When stepping away from your comfort zone, try to avoid linear thinking. Change, after all, can be either evolutionary or entirely revolutionary. Try also to broaden your perspective by looking beyond traditional routes and beliefs.

There are other ways to develop a creative mindset, too, such as improving your listening skills, applying principles to guide your creative efforts or by using your left-brain, logical self to set aside more time for your right-brain, creative self.

Employing creative characteristics

If having the right mindset is the fuel that you need to begin your journey, creative characteristics are the engine that keeps you moving towards your destination.

Having a solid set of creative characteristics to depend on helps to convert creative moments into inventive solutions.

In many organisations, creative acts are usually expressed as brainstorming – sessions designed to generate lots of ideas in quick time. Brainstorming is indeed a wonderful activity with a successful track record but it is not the only creative technique in the cupboard.

Consider metaphors, for example.

Simply by drawing out similar aspects of seemingly unlike things you can uncover powerful explanation, see new creative linkages, unblock thinking and introduce a broader perspective.

The method that you apply to construct metaphors can also be creative. Metaphors are commonplace in language, of course, but can also be expressed in drawing, model building, or even in producing films and music.

Challenging rules is another excellent characteristic to employ. Many rules are necessary and are in place for good reason but others can be there because they are outdated, too difficult to tackle or are simply “the way that things are done around here”.

Other rules might be in place because the subject matter is seen as taboo in the organisation, even if no one can recall quite why this is the case. Challenging these rules can be a great route into exciting and highly rewarding creative solutions.

A tricky taboo topic emerged when I worked with Shakespeare’s Globe, the iconic theatre on London’s Bankside.

From the start, it was easy to see that entering the site was less glamorous than could be expected. Two entrances were used but the primary route was ignored. Worse, the primary route is a spectacular entrance through wrought iron gates that face the River Thames and its throngs of strolling visitors.

The entrance had been closed because site operational staff were afraid that the premises would be exposed to graffiti,

unscrupulous visitors and unhelpful traffic flow. Opening the gates was a taboo topic; one that no one believed could be challenged.

So, taking a gamble, I opened the gates one day. Staff condemned and praised the action in equal numbers. Visitors, however, walked into the place as naturally as if they had been doing it for years.

Afterwards, a trial opening period was held, proving that the open gates attracted more people. The result is that the gates are now open each year during the key visitor seasons. The previous 10 years of worries – vandalism, revenue and traffic flow – were solved, too, just by adding a short piece of red barrier rope and moving a security desk by a few feet.

Finally, when considering sources of creative characteristics, do not forget to look at failure.

So much of what we are tuned in to learn from is about success. Success teaches you how to be successful, sure. But failure teaches you what you still need to learn. There is always huge opportunity to learn from failure unless you fail to recognise when it has happened or if you choose to leave it unexplored.

Creativity at work

Creativity in the workplace should not be a completely free-form activity but it need not be a complex process either.

A little process goes a long way when undertaking creative activity in organisations. Even a small amount of order can ensure that you are investigating

causes rather than symptoms, which saves time and money while keeping your creative work on track. You can also set appropriate limits on otherwise limitless thinking.

These limits could be as simple as:

- Frame the topic you are interested in
- Name the type of challenge you want to conduct, for example, research, quest, competition, thought leadership
- Involve the people and resources that you need

Because your organisation will someday want to turn an idea into a fully-fledged product or service, you should be able to test the validity of ideas with quick, five-minute business plans.

Five-minute plans give some initial scope to ideas while highlighting major obstacles and opportunities. They provide some basis for early stage evaluation. Later on you can make



more robust plans once you settle on a few winning ideas to take forward.

Creativity at work does not have to be expensive either. The basic ingredients of a creative endeavour should include engagement, interaction, flexibility and visibility. By involving colleagues and then using some free wall space and a few sticky notes your creative effort can meet these four criteria, be shared with the whole office and you will have spent less than if you had bought lunch for the boss.

Teams that create

Creative teams are special. They are groups of people who are not afraid to ask difficult questions and to explore unknowns. How do they do this?

For a start, creative teams celebrate diversity in several forms – such as experience, nationality, perspective and thinking styles. Creative teams also read widely. They understand the value of reading (and other media) as a window onto the world and they share what they have read between them.

In creative teams, a shared purpose is usually present. More than this, the shared purpose was likely developed, or built upon, by the team members themselves. It is a belief that everyone in the team feels to be true and which is critically important to the overall success of the group.

But this is not all. Creative teams know how to build and sustain momentum. They recognise that creative cultures are not prescribed; they are instead carefully nurtured by supporting desired behaviours. The team members themselves are not afraid to bring glimpses of their private lives into the group as well. Personal passions – hobbies and interests – are shared and discussed.

And last, but by no means least, humour tends to thrive in creative teams. Humour that is well timed and aptly placed can counter stress, reveal personal qualities and help form new combinations of ideas.

Creative success

This is what it is all about. Having creativity in an organisation is not worth a bean unless it produces the results sought after.

In fact, the true value of an idea is a function of the quality,

acceptance and execution of the idea. Without these elements, the idea is valueless and can remain forgotten, stuck on a dusty shelf indefinitely. Furthermore, creative acts in organisations need to be recognised and rewarded. This could be for progress achieved, co-operation with others, successful outcomes or just for developing winning ideas.

As the world emerges from the Information Age and organisations aim to apply their resources in the best way possible, it is clear that managing the collective talent of firms will be key.

We are entering an age – the Talent Age – of recognising and utilising talent. This age requires organisations to think a little differently; to behave less like out-of-touch behemoths that force products and customers into artificial segments and, instead, to behave more like the tribes of customers that they serve.

At the most basic level, organisations need to observe the interesting and inventive things that people do and then boldly act on those observations. They need to be agile, adaptive and anticipative. This is a big step for some companies that are still getting to grips with anodyne business planning processes, flexible working and casual dress Fridays. But more than anything, creative success in organisations relies on individuals speaking out for changes that they want to see and to take responsibility for the development of their own creative spirit.

Creativity is a personal and timeless exercise, innate within all of us, waiting to be used. The question that remains is how will you nurture your creative spirit today in order to help your organisation build new and imaginative solutions tomorrow? **gf**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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