

Creativity requires a combination of personal and organizational attributes.

Inventive Minds, Groundbreaking Finds

Joan Marques

Unless we just returned from a multi-decade trip to outer space, we are probably aware of the quest for creativity that drives today's professional performance. Terms such as creative, motivated, innovative, and problem solving, are so clichéd that coaches have advised deleting them from LinkedIn® profiles. There may be good reasons, however, to keep these terms in curriculum vitae and professional profiles.

With the shift from the industrial revolution to the knowledge era, the emphasis on qualities and skills transitioned, too. Although the United States became a manufacturing giant during World Wars I and II, this trend reached maturation in the late 1960s and then gradually spun into decline. Consequently, manufacturing and product assembly shifted from industrial nations to upcoming economies such as China and India. Education became the focus point in Western nations, causing productivity there to move from hands to heads. Meanwhile, the eastern nations have

made significant strides and now are marching vigorously toward a shared leadership position in cultivating creative resources. Although we now may have arrived at the brink of yet another era, our affiliation with creative thinking and innovation will most likely remain critical—even if the way we refer to these skills changes.

This article considers two levels of nurturing creative minds—personal and organizational—to emphasize the importance of both and highlight their common areas as well as the different approaches needed to bring them to fruition. Finally, there is a discussion reflecting briefly on the interdependency between creativity and innovation.

Personal Aspects

The following areas are critical components that support an individual's ability and willingness to think creatively:

- *Source of motivation.* When reflecting on individuals' creative skills,



we are dealing with a wide variety of levels and manifestations. Whether we consider ourselves creative or are seen by others as such is closely related to motivation levels. There are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated people. Those who are intrinsically motivated are self-starters and more focused on their passions and purposes. They have a higher level of self-understanding and detect early in life what they want to do and what they would rather avoid doing. Extrinsically motivated people, however, are mainly led by incentives created by others. Money, promotion, material gain, or other advancements are their main drivers; without external stimuli, they often lack the willpower to engage in a given activity.

Whether there are more intrinsically or extrinsically motivated people in the world is uncertain, as are the reasons why one group might be more dominant. A person with high intrinsic motivation is more likely to display a greater level of creativity because he/she becomes so involved in what's being done, according to Mihaly Csikszentmihályi in the pioneering book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*.¹ On the other hand, this notion has been questioned by others who theorize that intrinsic motivation may lead to new insights and ideas, but insights and ideas are not necessarily creative! Yet, even though there may still be doubts on the exact levels of creativity in intrinsically motivated people, we do know that these people are more engaged, and engaged people are more likely to be creative.

- *Meditation*. Meditation has long been shunned by various groups as an Eastern-originated practice. Fortunately, meditation is gaining wider acceptance—even in business schools and corporate workplaces. Those who meditate regularly understand that it calms the mind and enables the practitioner to tap into areas of the psyche that were previously inaccessible due to the noise of everyday life.

Although we don't need meditation per se to access the silence of our minds, it is one of the easiest ways to do so. People who meditate regularly develop a deeper sense of contemplation, reflection, and perception,

which may give rise to increased creative mental activity.

- *Art endeavors*. If this article was written 30 years ago, this section probably would not have been included. Fortunately, there is increasing awareness of the positive interplay of a balanced diet—whether physical or mental. For our mental diet, exposure to artistic expressions or engagement in artistic endeavors may have a very fertile effect on creative thinking. Business schools increasingly weave music, drawing, film, and poetry into their courses to restore the imbalance that the education system has tended to create related to using the left and right hemispheres of the brain.
- *Pursuit of different paths*. Tom Peters, author of *The Brand You 50*, recommends doing something different on a regular basis—asking an unlikely colleague to lunch; stepping into an unlikely corner in the bookstore; or exploring different types of books, magazines, or media programs.² Doing something outside of the routine will open our eyes for other things and may expand our mental horizons.
- *Confidence and optimism*. The worst enemy of creative thinking is lack of confidence because it breeds fear, and fear restrains any project. In a previous issue of this journal, Jean Dickson shared that scientists who are confident produce more output; even if all their output isn't as good as desired, their confidence drives them forward and they keep producing.³ Dickson concluded that creative geniuses produce good and bad results, and mentioned Thomas Edison and William Shakespeare as two famous examples of people who are known for great, timeless contributions to humanity—despite their immense number of unacceptable creations. The key is to keep up a positive spirit in spite of failure because the more failures we experience, the greater the chance that we will strike gold in the end. This supports the power of positive thinking. Edison is particularly famous for his numerous failures, which he preferred to label as “ways in which the concept did not work.” Edison's incurable optimism led to his amazing track record of inventions and patents.

Organizational Aspects

The organization's approach to managing the workplace environment also has a significant influence on employees' creativity, as described below:

- *Workplace spirituality.* Not to be confused with religion, the application of a more spiritual mindset lies at the foundation of fueling creative thinking. Spirituality in the workplace is about employees and workplaces seeing work as a spiritual path rather than just a way to earn paychecks. Spiritual workers see work as an opportunity to meaningfully connect, grow, and contribute to society rather than advancing at the expense of others. In an environment where people feel appreciated and where managers nurture mutual acceptance, respect, and understanding, there will be less inhibition and more ownership. This sense of ownership stimulates workers to share ideas with greater enthusiasm and less fear.⁴ Workplace spirituality is no longer a new trend, but some managers still are reluctant to foster it because of confusion about the topic and outdated notions that spirituality should be kept outside of work. Unfortunately, these also may be the managers who find their workforces increasingly disgruntled and their organizations continuously struggling. A workplace that engages in spiritual practices is one in which every employee and each department is equally valued; so great ideas come from more than a precious few.

In a 2011 article, Emmanuel Perakis presents a common and widely overlooked organizational problem; most companies limit their creativity and innovative efforts to the product and service areas because these are directly related to the bottom line. By doing so, states Perakis, these companies disregard "powerful indirect leverage opportunities, such as differentiating business models and internal organization."⁵ Limiting creativity and innovative efforts to certain departments while excluding others creates a sense of alienation within the excluded departments; therefore, this approach is not in line with the connection-based, mutual growth nature of workplace spirituality.

- *Recognition and rewards.* Recognition is another no-brainer when it comes to creativity; when we

are aware that we are properly acknowledged for our accomplishments, we become more proactive in our work and feel more encouraged to share creative ideas in the workplace.

If managers want employees to become more creative, they must understand the cycle of interrelated notions that can nourish or kill creativity at work. In spite of all the theories—from Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to Frederick Herzberg's motivation-hygiene theory to Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Y—there are still too many managers who capitalize on extrinsic rewards and ignore the value of intrinsic recognition. Different strokes are needed for different folks, so it is critical for a manager to know what drives the members of his/her workforce.



In 2010, Christine Robinson noted that organizations cannot create intrinsic motivators for their employees; they can only try to discover and harness them.⁶ Why should managers do this? Because motivated employees are more achievement oriented; therefore, inclusion, accommodation, accessibility, acknowledgment, and other measures should be put in place to help facilitate employees' desire to achieve. Managing is not a one-size-fits-all activity because employees align with different levels of the personal motivation scale. It is wrong to assume that external motivators, such as a raise or a larger office, will lead to greater levels of engagement and creativity.

- *Multiple frames and mental models.* During the last decade, Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal have published several iterations of their book, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*.⁷ The authors discuss four frames through which managers and their workforces can review workplace issues in order to perceive the situations from multiple angles and try to solve them in the most appropriate way. The authors introduce the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. Although these are a great basis for reviewing any corporate concern, they are not the only ones. Creative juices should also flow in, identifying which frames are most appropriate for the unique experiences of a given workplace. It may very well be that, for instance, an IT frame or an emotional intelligence frame, are more suitable for approaching a specific problem.

Peter Senge introduced mental models, the notion that we all have a unique way of perceiving the world around us.⁸ Awareness of different mental models—especially in the workplace—can be a great boost to creative output. This awareness has to start, however, with accepting that we do have those differences in seeing the world. Jones emphasized this notion by explaining that he, too, had to learn that there are multiple answers to issues. Gaining that insight helped him achieve a creative attitude so he could reframe problems into opportunities. At the same time, he became more comfortable with making mistakes.⁹

Indeed, once we lay to rest the tendency to assume that our reality is the only one that exists, we can start engaging in a highly rewarding exchange of perspectives with our co-workers. This leads to a number of frames for viewing any issue and an increased level of creativity for addressing the situation.

- *Revival space.* Almost two decades ago, Edward de Bono wrote an article in which he referred to the importance of providing time and space to stimulate creative thinking. He warned that brainstorming sessions were highly overrated, and usually didn't deliver any serious creative output. He also cautioned that creative thinking should not be considered the virtue of a special breed of people; everyone should get the opportunity to engage in the creative mode.¹⁰

A few years ago, I interviewed a couple who operated a high-stress marketing company. With a keen awareness of the threat of burn-out in their creative-thinking environment, the wife prepared a “revival room” where employees could get some “me” time during the workday. They could visit the revival room any time for meditation, prayer, a nap, silent contemplation, or just to space out for a while. The leading couple of this company found that this room increased the creative input and output of employees. Enabling employees to rejuvenate during the workday was not only appreciated but was very effective for overall morale and productivity!

- *Trust.* The reality of today's workplace demonstrates that there is still a great lack of trust in workforce members. It may be that some workplaces require a greater level of employee scrutiny, but companies such as Google, Atlassian, and the SAS Institute have proven the astounding effects of allowing employees time for themselves and investing trust in them. Employees who work for companies that garner trust are more likely to share creative insights because they know that their ideas will benefit the workplace and gain recognition. Providing employees with an opportunity to do their work without micro-managing them is the best way to increase creative output of the organization.

Furthermore, a common denominator in all of the above is broad inclusion and our general perception of the corporation; no effort toward more inclusion and creative output will succeed when there are silos in the organization and some employee groups sense that some are treated in a more privileged way than others. Similarly, no effort to establish a creatively contributing workforce will pay off when we hold a negative perspective of our company's reputation, strategies toward stakeholders, and distribution of profits. The time that employees were ignorant about these strategic matters is history. Today's employee is well-educated, harbors a healthy dose of intellectual curiosity, and has access to many resources. Smart managers keep that in mind.

- *Fit.* If we hate our jobs, we only will be creative in finding ways to avoid them. If we love what

we do, however, we are more likely to bring creativity to our work. It is critical, therefore, to have the right fit between an employee and his/her work. Feeling that our work matters, that we are appreciated, and that there is a proper fit between our talents and our work is crucial for releasing our creative juices.

- **Communication.** In work environments where there are good communication flows, we feel more involved. When we are treated as if we matter, when we feel valued, and when we find that there are ample ways to convey opinions and ideas, most of us will feel encouraged to become engaged. Communication, therefore, is a very important aspect in making or breaking creativity levels in contemporary workplaces, where knowledge sharing is a critical foundation for creative performance. Carla O'Dell and Cindy Hubert emphasize that a knowledge-sharing culture will result in increased collaboration, faster yet more thorough output, and mutual recognition.¹¹

Connecting Creativity and Innovation

All creative thoughts may not lead to innovation. In their 2012 article about the correlation between creativity and innovation, Özge Çokpekin and Mette Knudsen confirm that creativity does not necessarily lead to innovation; we can only make creativity useful if we know what type of innovation we aim to achieve.¹² In addition, they state that the organization also should demonstrate certain characteristics that will support this relationship, such as being aware of mental models; facilitating review of issues through multiple frames; and establishing a trustful environment where communication, recognition, and motivation are cultivated.

It seems safe to assert that a workforce consisting of creative thinkers, who feel encouraged to share their insights because they receive space and are trusted, will find the path for innovation unlocked. This clarifies the need for organizations to provide a supportive climate, as a means of driving innovation and improving business performance.

References

1. M. Csíkszentmihályi, "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience," *Harper Perennial Modern Classics*, 2008.

2. T. Peters, *The Brand You 50: Or: Fifty Ways to Transform Yourself From an "Employee" Into a Brand That Shouts Distinction, Commitment, and Passion!* Knopf, 1999.

3. J. V. Dickson, "Killing Creativity: How Unspoken Sentiments Affect Workplace Creativity," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Vol. 26, No. 2, p. 40.

4. J. Marques, S. Dhiman, and R. King, *Spirituality in the Workplace: What it is, why it Matters, how to Make it Work for You*, Personhood Press, 2007.

5. E. Perakis, "How to Grow Creativity and Innovation in Your Company," *Global Focus*, 2011, No. 5, pp. 32-35.

6. C. Robinson, "The Keys to Turbo-Charging Intrinsic Motivation," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 4-8.

7. L. G. Bolman and T. E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 4th Ed., John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008.

8. P. M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization*, Doubleday, 2006.

9. D. Jones, "Creativity Makes a Difference," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Vol. 22, No. 1, pp. 58-63.

10. E. de Bono, "Serious Creativity," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Vol. 18, No. 5, p. 12.

11. C. O'Dell and C. Hubert, "Building a Knowledge-Sharing Culture," *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 22-26.

12. Ö. Çokpekin and M.P. Knudsen, "Does Organizing for Creativity Really Lead to Innovation?" *Creativity and Innovation Management*, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 304-314.



Joan Marques

Joan Marques serves as assistant dean of Woodbury University's School of Business, chair and director of the BBA program, and associate professor of management. Her teaching focuses on leadership and organizational behavior, and her research interests pertain to the same areas with specific focus on workplace spirituality and leadership awareness. She has been widely published in journals such as *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Management Development*, *Business and Society*, and *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, and has authored/co-authored more than 12 books on management and leadership topics. For more information send an email to jmarques01@earthlink.net.

Copyright of Journal for Quality & Participation is the property of American Society for Quality, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.