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The Necessity of Creativity

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Creativity has become one of the new buzzwords – you hear about it in government, in business and now in relation to education. The question that comes to mind when we hear the word ‘creativity’ is: what does it mean and what difference does it make? As with other buzzwords that had come and go – words such as ‘community’, ‘partnership’, ‘social capital’ – it can mean different things to different people and it is one of those ‘hurrah’ words that are tagged on to policies or programs to make them seem innovative. We’ve heard of ‘creative nation’, ‘creative leadership’, or even ‘creative management’, but deep down inside we are sceptical of such policies and programs because, for most people, the idea of creativity is tied up with a bundle of myths and misconceptions.

First of all, there’s the myth that creative people are either a genius or slightly mad. In other words, creativity is either a gift that people are born with, or a consequence of some mental abnormality. The idea that people can *learn* to be creative is something we seldom consider.

Secondly, in the public’s mind, creativity is associated with *great* artists and scientists – the Picassos and the Einsteins, the Great Masters and the Nobel laureates. Anyone with lesser intelligence or achievements would be regarded as a mere craftsperson or technician. So, once again, we believe that only brilliant minds can be creative.

Thirdly, creativity evokes ‘Eureka’ moments and quantum leaps – discoveries and breakthroughs that are *dramatic* or even earth shattering. There is little acknowledgment of the creativity involved in the incremental and plodding works that precede the final breakthrough. Since Eureka moments are rare in the history of science, breakthroughs are seen as a matter of luck or accident, rather than persistent hard work.

Finally, creativity is assumed to be an *individual*, rather than a group achievement, following a tortuous process that involves long periods of hard work and incubation, ending in sudden (flash bulb) insights or inspiration. In this view of creativity, all the perspiration and ultimate inspiration happen to an individual – it has nothing to do with anyone else.

In short, our cultural myths tell us that creativity is something you’re born with; it has nothing to do with ordinary people; and it is definitely not something that can be learnt or developed in a group situation.

I would argue, however, that the opposite is true: creativity is something that can be nurtured and developed among all of us. In fact, I would argue that we no longer have a choice – for individuals as well as for organisations, learning to be creative is now a *necessity*, not a luxury. The world is changing faster than in previous generations. Information and communication technologies have transformed the workplace in less than two decades. Markets and regulations are in a constant state of flux. Environmental and security crises are part of everyday realities. Very few people and organisations can afford to stand still, and yet most of us and our institutions are not well equipped to meet the challenge of a changing world.

Take the global problem of terrorism. It is a threat that has justified pre-emptive wars, draconian laws, intrusive surveillance and tight border controls. It has fundamentally challenged our political system that values national autonomy, democracy, privacy and the rule of law. Australia is pouring millions of dollars into increased surveillance, tighter security, smarter equipment, and – what is of most interest to me – a doubling of the number of spies. No doubt this will enhance the job prospects of our criminology graduates, but the track record of our intelligence community does not inspire confidence. I read with interest that the US 9/11 Commission Report identified the ‘failure of imagination’ of the American government as ‘the most important failure’ that led to the success of the terrorists (US National Commission Report 2004:356). The Commission thought it was crucial to ‘find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination’ (US National Commission 2004:361).

Having spent the last 15 years studying the police as an occupation, I can only applaud this new initiative to make governments and security experts more imaginative and creative. The crucial issue here is the almost medieval organisational culture that exists in many law enforcement and possibly other government agencies that penalises mistakes and discourages innovations.

The organisational theorist Edwin Schein (1985) has written about two different ways of learning in organisations. First, there is *problem-solving* learning which encourages exploration, imagination, experimentation, in other words, creativity. Secondly, there is *mistake-avoidance* learning which is just the opposite and has the opposite effect. In my research, I found that most police officers are socialised into a culture that fears mistakes – they know that with literally hundreds of rules in the rule book, the ‘boss’ can get at them very easily. So the best strategy to survive is to keep their head down, not to make waves, do as little as possible, and above all, ‘cover your arse’. Sadly, ‘problem-solving policing’ has mostly been a slogan in most police forces because a bureaucracy that discourages creativity among its members is stuck in a reactive mode. As the renowned physicist David Bohm wrote many years ago, in order to be creative and original, a person must be able to try something new without being afraid of making mistakes (Bohm 1996:5).

How do we nurture creativity among students and workers? – this is one of the questions that is the subject of my current research on creativity among artists and scientists. It is often thought that rewards, support and freedom –

the standard behavioural drivers – are all we need to encourage creativity, but that assumes that teachers and leaders of organisations are capable of recognising creativity and knowledgeable enough to know who and what to reward and support. It is safe to assume that most teachers and leaders have spent most of their career either coping with the daily grind or managing crises. Creativity – if it enters at all in their work lives – is rarely recognised as such and often does so by chance rather than by design. Most think of creativity as a luxury they can't afford, or something that is flighty and lightweight, suitable for artists maybe but not for serious professionals. And yet, we all recognise the importance of 'chilling out' or taking a break as a way of reinvigorating our mind and body. Such a break is often an opportunity for creative ideas to incubate or for the unconscious mind to process information, but we have not been trained to recognise it as such. We are so worried about losing time when we take a break that we never take full advantage of its benefits. So it takes creative teachers and creative leaders to truly nurture creativity – any one less would merely see creativity as another mechanical tool for generating learning outcomes or company profits.

I want to conclude by talking about the relationship between happiness and creativity. At a time when fear and insecurity seem to dominate our consciousness, when depression has become a national and international problem, and when affluence has not improved our sense of well-being, the question of what really makes us happy is intriguing researchers around the world. We need to put away the idea once and for all that creative people tend to be crazy or suicidal or that it is *pain* that provides the fuel for creativity. There is research evidence that being absorbed in the creative process is an extremely satisfying experience – engaging in creative activities can result in a higher feeling of happiness and improved self-esteem (as suggested by the eminent creativity researcher Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's [1990] flow theory). On the other hand, inducing positive emotions (through something as simple as giving subjects free lollies) can make people think more creatively and feel more satisfied about their work (Estrada, Isen and Young 1994). So, we can see that creativity and happiness can reinforce each other. There is now good evidence that creativity does not decrease with age, and creative activities are just as important for successful ageing as physical exercise and a healthy diet (Fisher and Specht 1999). As our life expectancy increases – most of us are expected to live to be 85 or even longer – our happiness in those twilight years depends on our capacity to maintain physically and mentally active and creative.

In conclusion, I have argued that creativity can be developed and nurtured. It is essential for the survival of individuals and organisations in a changing world. It is a crucial ingredient for generating and reinforcing a sense of well-being, especially among an ageing population. And, most important of all, we need leaders and teachers who are themselves creative in order to recognise and develop a nation of creative workers. In my view, then, creativity is no longer a luxury we can't afford, it is a necessity we can't afford to be without.

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