

37. Why No One Really Wants Creativity

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For years I have been among the advocates of creativity—the usual set of academics who decry the status quo, argue the merits of being different, and push for organizational innovation. Well, I've had enough. The term *creativity* has a nice ring to it and nearly everyone thinks it is a good thing; but few people or organizations really want creativity. When they think it through, when the processes involved and their attendant costs are made clear, people and firms tend to back away from creativity, perhaps with just cause. Let me elaborate.

CELEBRATING THE VICTOR

It is very common in both the creativity literature and the organizational world to trot out the successful entrepreneur, inventor, or business venture to show off the benefits of creativity. We celebrate the victor—the person or organization that has pulled off the major coup or taken the market by storm. Interviews are given, biographies are written, and success stories printed. Copying the victor is also common practice. Self-help books proliferate on how to make us more creative, often modeled on characteristics of people known to be creative. Consultants abound, selling programs designed to renew, reorient, revitalize, or reinvent organizations, usually modeled on the practices of firms that have recently experienced success with a major new product or service. There are, of course, serious questions about whether the correlates of creativity actually cause creativity and, for sure, much of the research on creative people and innovative firms has lacked adequate controls or methodological rigor. But even if

we take these correlates at face value, assuming they are the real factors driving creativity, this still does not mean that people really want or need creativity. Would people, given the chance, make the choices and enact the behaviors necessary to become creative? I doubt it.

WHY INDIVIDUALS REJECT CREATIVITY

Although there are a multitude of creativity theories, most researchers in this area do agree on a short list of characteristics shared by many of those who are creative. Creatives are risk takers. They are willing to take their chances on an unproven solution rather than go with the tried and true. Creatives are nonconformists. They are willing to defy convention and even authority to explore new ideas and to get to the truth. Creatives are persistent. They don't give up when they get frustrated or rebuffed by a problem, they keep at it. Creatives are flexible. They are able to reformulate a problem when facing failure rather than just give up or continue down the same path. Finally, creatives put in long, hard hours. They become totally absorbed in their work, often to the exclusion of their family or personal life.

The picture of the creative individual does not mesh well with the proclivities of the average person. For example, research on decision making has repeatedly found that people are risk averse, at least when it comes to possible gains. That is, when given a choice between a large but uncertain reward (e.g., 10% chance to win \$10,000) and a smaller and certain payoff (e.g., 100% chance to win \$1,000), people

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will generally choose the sure thing. Only when they are in losing situations have people reliably been shown to choose the riskier alternative. Likewise, when given a chance to follow the majority or minority point of view, most people opt for the prevailing view. This is, of course, an adaptive strategy in most situations. Yet, evidence shows that people often choose to follow others even when that means abandoning the truth, and this is especially the case when the conformist strategy is backed by an authority or someone who seems to be in charge.

In terms of decision style, most people also fall short of the creative ideal. They are satisficers rather than searchers for the optimal or most desirable solution. They follow a number of energy-saving heuristics that generally lead to a set of systematic biases or inaccuracies in processing information. And, unless they are held accountable for their decision-making strategies, they tend to find the easy way out—either by not engaging in very careful thinking or by modeling their choices on the preferences of those who will be evaluating them.

The overall picture does not favor creativity. Most people do not follow a life pattern similar to that of the creative, nor would they want to. The average person may become intrigued when the glories of successful creativity are hailed by the media. But when confronted with the bald truth that most scientists never come up with any earthshaking findings, most new businesses end in failure, and most whistle-blowers get demoted or fired, it is not surprising that people generally opt for a safer, more normal life than that followed by the creative.

In defending creativity one can, of course, argue that creative acts are not really rational decisions in terms of a full calculus of costs, benefits, and the probabilities of various outcomes. Perhaps creatives are altruists, people who accept personal risks and costs that will only benefit the larger collective, such as an organization or society. Perhaps creatives are

slightly tilted individuals who don't really mind the endless nights nursing a laboratory experiment or the social isolation that comes with taking the minority viewpoint. For a few, taking the creative route is something they must do, something that makes inherent sense. For some, the creative act is a bit like falling in love. Creative people can become so smitten with a project or venture that the simple calculation of costs and benefits seems downright inappropriate. My own father is a little like this. He frequently asks others what they think about his latest business deal. But when others look at the numbers and ask how he will turn a profit, he simply crosses out the offending figures, replacing them with more "realistic" estimates that are 20% higher.

So my point is this. Most people admire creative individuals, at least in retrospect. They admire the successful entrepreneur, scientist, writer, or musician. But this does not mean that the typical person would make the same choices in life, given the odds of failure, nor would that person really want to follow a pattern of social behavior and decision making that mimics those who are known to be creative. We should therefore consider ourselves lucky that there are a few people out there willing to take the creative route. We need them.

WHY ORGANIZATIONS REJECT INNOVATION

Much of the same logic pertains to organizational innovation. Although there is practically a cottage industry devoted to celebrating successful innovations and touting their characteristics as the "new solution," few managers really want to pay the price for innovation. To most managers, being innovative means that they have to do everything wrong.

First, instead of the normal recruitment process in which people are brought in who have the skills needed by the firm and the values it admires, innovative companies must let down their barriers. They must accommodate those whose skills are more peripheral and whose goals are suspect.

Second, instead of socializing new members of the organization to absorb the values and culture of the firm, the innovative corporation must encourage people not to listen, at least not too hard. There is nothing that kills innovation like everyone speaking in the same voice, even if it is a well-trained voice.

Third, instead of issuing directives and policy statements and hoping that they will be obeyed, innovative firms must encourage disobedience. In fact, those in power should go so far as to encourage active opposition. Innovative organizations are those that harbor multiple perspectives and objectives, not simply a variety of views about how a particular product should be designed and produced.

Fourth, instead of striving for lower costs and efficiency, innovative companies must opt for adaptiveness. They need to have excess capacity and personnel devoted to seemingly meaningless ventures. Because innovation requires investing in losers as well as winners, adaptive firms must be prepared to follow several competing designs simultaneously, and move through a sequence of product alternatives before settling on a single course of action.

Finally, to be truly innovative, firms must be industry leaders rather than followers. They must stick their necks out on untried products and technologies, not knowing if they will be successes or failures. They can't wait for other firms to launch the first products, only to come in late, making some adjustments to reap the profits. They must pursue projects that often appear to be more folly than wisdom.

Naturally, most organizations and their managers would hesitate in adopting these suggestions. They might consider a few items on the list interesting or worth long-term consideration, but that is a far cry from taking concrete action to accomplish them.

From what we know about organizations, they work very hard to recruit and select employees who look and act like those already in the firm. For those who might have slipped into the organization without the proper skills and values, socialization is usually the answer.

Creating clones of existing personnel is generally what management wants and gets. Those who deviate from the prevailing culture become dissatisfied and tend to leave the organization, leaving room for those who have been "properly socialized."

Research also shows that organizational power structures are difficult to change. Those in power set the agenda, they reward those who fall in line politically, who are willing to support the existing order. Power also begets power. Those who have power get the resources to maintain their positions, while others must struggle to survive. There are few known cases of those in power willingly giving up their influence or sharing it with the opposition.

Finally, almost by definition, the organizational world is populated by followers rather than leaders. Even the Japanese corporations currently touted as the world's most successful enterprises are not generally considered industry leaders. Though Japanese management is praised for its quality control techniques and novel inventory systems, little is made of the basic conservatism of Japanese industry. These companies generally let other firms do the innovating. Once a product has been developed and the market possibilities made clear, they enter the fray as efficient and effective producers.

In summary, organizations find it hard to see the logic of innovation. Being a creative organization may sound good, but when the details are described more fully, it is just not the path most corporations or their management want to take.

ASSESSING THE DAMAGE

Does the fact that few individuals or organizations really want creativity doom us to mediocrity, to a path without progress and hope? Certainly not. My point in writing this essay is simply to deflate the notion of creativity, to let the air out of some of the rhetoric usually seen in creativity manuals and texts. Creativity is not something we all strive to achieve, nor something we can all improve upon given proper effort and guidance. In my view, creativity

suffers from a large case of false advertising. The popular press, along with the collusion of many consultants and academics, has sold us the notion that we can reap the rewards of a Galileo, Edison, or Picasso without paying the full price. Likewise, managers are told that they can convert their own organization into a slick

Silicon Valley firm without losing something in the bargain. The reality is that only a few individuals and organizations really want to be creative, when all the details are known. We should appreciate the few takers of this questionable deal rather than scold the majority for its caution and common sense.