

Building Your Creativity

By BNET Editorial

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We all have creative talent, but many of us lack confidence in our own creativity. “I’m not very creative” is a common lament, even from people who manage their careers well and succeed in bringing real value to the businesses where they work. In fact, developing a more efficient approach to your own workload or introducing a time-saving project management system requires considerable creativity. So the term *creativity* has a much broader meaning than simply possessing artistic talent. It is the ability to use our imaginations to come up with new ideas.

What You Need to Know

I think creativity is born, not made, and I’m just not naturally a creative person. Can I overcome this?

Creativity is certainly born—in all of us. Developing it depends on finding a channel for its expression. Try doing something you have always wanted to do or pursuing an interest you have had for some time but have never explored. Even if until now it has been only a vague idea, if you focus on it and keep at it, your creative talent will begin to blossom. Many people start to paint or write in this way: it starts as a whim, becomes a habit, and—with practice—ends with some wonderfully inspiring works. Most important, newly discovered creativity can bring you personal joy and a belief in your own creative powers.

I think that some of my coworkers are incredibly creative but they don’t seem to make anything of it. How can creative expression be actualized in the workplace?

Some people love to explore ideas but have neither the interest nor the patience necessary to turn ideas into action. But ideas in themselves are valuable—in fact, ideas drive research and development. Instead of dismissing your coworkers as dreamers, see if you can find a niche in your organization where their creativity can be encouraged and nurtured. Employees with innovative ideas can be valuable members of a product or service development team.

Organizations can't afford to spend time on self-indulgent, "creative" thinking. Is there really a business case for letting creativity loose?

Even the most logically derived thinking comes initially from a creative impulse. In today's business environment, good ideas are the only way you can differentiate yourself from the competition, making this creative impulse incredibly valuable. Some physicists believe that the smallest particle of matter is a thought, that we literally create our own reality. Surely organizations can use this force to generate the innovation that will enable them to excel.

My children are naturally creative. How can I be sure that this quality isn't lost as they grow up?

Preschool children do not yet comprehend the adult rules that tell them to conform. Try to keep their imaginations alive by allowing them to express themselves in their own way. Let them challenge the acceptable, and give them a framework for making independent choices. Have them ask questions of their rule-breaking activities: could doing this hurt me or anyone else? What else could I do with this idea? What might happen if I really do this? Giving your children tools for analyzing their actions will help keep them safe and, at the same time, may help them to broaden their thinking.

What to Do

Look at the World Around You

Developing creativity requires the same amount of thought and attention as developing any other skill. Although some people do seem to be more innately creative than others, it is wrong to think in black and white—that people either are or are not creative. Creativity is a natural form of human expression.

Look at the world you have created around yourself. Your home and workspace are a creative expression of who you are and so are the social networks you have created for yourself. What about the gifts you give to the special people in your life, or the hobbies and activities you like? Think about your role at work; what have you done differently from others who have held your job? What kinds of relationships have you developed with your coworkers? What positive impacts have these had? Your activities, surroundings, and relationships are all evidence of your creativity. All any of us needs to do is to recognize that creativity takes many forms, become aware of the creative process, and make developing our own creativity a conscious activity.

Make Use of Creativity-stimulating Techniques

A number of conscious techniques have been shown to promote the flow of creativity.

- **Brainstorm.** The brainstorming process generates a free flow of uncensored ideas, associations, and concepts, many of which may seem foolish at the outset. But the energy generated by a brainstorming session is contagious, fostering creative leaps and jumps. The speed of the process bypasses the logical circuitry of the left side of our brains, allowing imaginative ideas from the right side—the creative side—to emerge freely, often with the germ of an idea for a solution to a problem or an especially innovative possibility for a new product or service.
- **Find the Zone.** Artists, athletes, and craftspeople often experience the phenomenon of being in the creative zone, a state in which it seems they are running on automatic pilot. This usually happens when people are so completely absorbed in an activity that their creative energy takes over and generates its own momentum. Such total concentration seems to trigger a switch in the brain that enables pure, unrestrained expression. Science has confirmed that chemical and biological changes accompany this state.
- **Stimulate the Creative Side of your Brain.** Your imagination and your intuitive and creative abilities reside in the right side of your brain; logical thinking takes place in the left side of your brain. A number of techniques exist that allow you to switch consciously from left side to right, thereby enabling you to tap into your reserves of inspiration and innovation. One activity that can trigger this ability is to write or draw with your non-dominant hand, simply allowing your instinct to direct your muscles. The result is a product of the creative side of the brain. Visualization can also be helpful. Close your eyes and draw what you see in your mind's eye. This is your imagination at work.

Writing down a few pages of your thoughts each day—whatever comes into your mind—can also open up channels of creativity. Do not get in your own way as you write—just let ideas flow without judging or filtering them. You may feel awkward at first, but if you keep at it you will find your ideas flowing more freely and your expression more fluid. While your ability to formulate ideas, think abstractly, and make decisions improves, your counterproductive tendencies such as having tunnel vision or being judgmental will diminish.

- **Relax/Meditate.** Logical thinking generates beta waves in the brain. Meditation and relaxation techniques produce alpha waves, whose many positive effects include creative thought. With practice, you can meditate even when surrounded by chaos—in a train station or on a city street, for example. There are breathing techniques that can help clear your mind and change your brain activity from beta to alpha waves. The alpha state has been found to be an exceptionally good way to enhance learning, as it clears the path for new thoughts and inspiration. Listening to soothing, uncomplicated music is another way of tuning your brain to a different wavelength.
- **Do Something Out of Context.** Being creative is about being open to new thoughts and experiences. Try breaking away from your habits by doing something that you have never done before—something undemanding like attending an event that you would normally not attend, or taking a new route to work. You may be amazed at how such simple changes can open the creative channels.

If you are struggling with a particularly difficult problem, try asking a child or elderly relative to help you solve it. The child, without the clutter of knowledge, or the elderly relative, with the wisdom of experience, might bring something fresh to the problem and trigger insights that will prove helpful.

What to Avoid

You Aren't Receptive to New Ideas

People who do not have time for, or do not value, creative talent often miss out on the idea that just might contain the germ of the next big thing. Allowing creative energy the freedom to express itself without restraint or censure is the best way to reap its benefits.

Sometimes ideas are dismissed simply because they threaten the status quo or challenge long-held, never-questioned values. Bottled water is a good example. It came on the market at a time when drinking water was considered to be a commodity freely available to all. What originally seemed like a commercial nonstarter has become a major sector of the beverage market. Always ask yourself "On what basis am I rejecting this idea?" If your dismissal is coming from habit or old assumptions, step back and think again.

You Forget To Do a Reality Check

Just because an idea is exciting, does not mean it will be useful! Organizations looking for a unique product may be tempted to pick up on ideas that really have very little mileage in them. Build in a reality check—do your market research—to ensure that only those ideas that are viable actually end up on the market. If you get the timing or context wrong, you can make big, often expensive, mistakes.

You Give Up Too Soon

Do not expect too much of yourself too soon. Our "do-it-now," bottom-line society is sometimes slow when it comes to valuing the creative process. Taking steps to develop your own creativity may feel awkward to you and seem odd to others. But be patient and give yourself time to explore, free from judgment, before abandoning the effort. Rewards can be, but are not always, immediate. If you feel you need support, find a mentor who can help you to unleash the latent creative power of your brain.

Where to Learn More

Books:

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White, Shira, and G. Patton Wright. New Ideas About New Ideas. Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 2002.

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Creativity at Work: www.creativityatwork.com

Creativity Web: <http://members.optusnet.com.au/~charles57/Creative/index2.html>

Mind Tools: www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_CT.htm