

Creating creativity

Some perspectives for Managers

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Creativity is about synthesizing knowledge and experience and the wisdom gained from it, as we go through life. The experience of our daily lives, the ebb and flow of our feelings, our own imagination, our dreams and the world around us are all sources of creativity.

Creativity is a somewhat elusive subject as far as the modern organizations are concerned. My intention here is not delving in to the intricacies, of the subject, but to share some of my observations and views with the readers, which will inspire them to look at creativity from different angles.

When I consider the organizations I have been associated and worked with over the past 54+ years, one salient feature seen is that creativity gets killed, much more frequently than it is supported and nurtured. This does not necessarily imply that the managers have a grudge against creativity and innovation. Creativity is undermined, intentionally or otherwise in everyday work environments that were established to maximize business imperatives such as planning, coordination, control, productivity and most importantly profits.

There was a common saying among the managers in Kenya where I worked in the 80s and 90s, that employees leave their brains in numbered lockers at the gate, when they enter the work arena. I suppose that this could be a universal feature. A notable example is the difficulties that most companies face in implementing 5S practices at the workplaces. Perhaps it could be our natural and inherent tendency about the resistance to change and shifting away from our comfort zones. The irony is that some of the same employees have won the household 5S competitions organized by their children's, schools. On a similar note, I have found, some employees running their own small scale businesses at domestic level with considerable business acumen supported by innovative ideas.

We cannot blame the present day executives for this apparent lack of innovative thinking at workplace, when we consider the demanding expectations placed on them by the top their managements driven by a product and profit oriented approach. Thinking out of the box and developing fresh ideas can feel like a lot of pressure, in

today's competitive and rapidly changing world. Do they have time for inspirational thought or are they driven by circumstances and grappling with the same issues, and problems almost 60% of the working life?

Under the context of the modern day dynamic business scenario, managers very often tend to consider creativity and innovation as having similar meanings. Although the two play key complimentary roles, the subtle difference is that while creativity is the more conceptual part or the "software", while innovation implies a more active role in accrual implementation of the creative ideas, to bring about a positive change.

Creativity is the ability to make or otherwise bring in to existence, whether a new solution to a problem, a new method or devise or a new artistic object or form.

Managerial creativity is the capacity of managers to develop novel appropriate ideas regarding managerial processes and managerial systems.

The Oxford Dictionary describes innovation as the introduction of new things, ideas or ways of doing something. From a business point of view, this implies, the process that an individual or an organization undertakes to conceptualize brand new products, processes and ideas, or to approach existing products, processes and ideas in a new way.

According to Joseph Schumpeter the Austrian political economist (1883-1950), Innovation is **the process and outcome of creating something new, which is also of value**. Innovation involves the whole process from opportunity identification, ideation or invention to development, prototyping, production marketing and sales, while entrepreneurship only needs to involve commercialization (Schumpeter).

We cannot undermine the grave importance of innovation as a strategic driver for business growth, in a world so drastically transformed by almost two years of Covid-19 pandemic. The word "new normal" that entered our vocabulary in the aftermath of the first wave in late 2020, seem to have generated the wrong

signal, as the words new and normal can sometimes be mutually exclusive. Naturally and understandably most companies are resorting to catching up the lost production and markets by focusing on capacity utilization, and improving efficiencies and innovation is skewed towards technology and product development.

What can we do that is different and needed? and how can we reinvent ourselves? These are some pertinent questions that can freeze our minds when trying to force the answers. Developing an “innovative mind” is a skill to have mental creativity, and to approach the world with a fresh and perhaps an unconventional way.

When considering the landmark innovative discoveries and inventions in the history of mankind, one clearly emerging revelation is that the concept of an “original idea” similar to the original sin itself could be a myth, because all new findings are based on the skill and ability to comprehend the cause /effect relationships of the existing information and generating new knowledge. Discovery of fire and the wheel, the inclined plane, steam engine, the conveyor system (with apologies to the other famous inventors and discoverers) were all based on interpreting the existing knowledge and information in a new way. Discovery of Gravity and the Laws of Motion by Newton, the famous equation $E=MC^2$ of Einstein and DNA by Crick and Watson, were all based on expansion of existing knowledge. On a similar note we can understand that the emergence of the great philosophers such as the Lord Buddha is the result of innovative thinking created by the observation, analysis and evaluation of existing knowledge and information.

This is the basic reality that the management and the managers should understand. Innovation is not magic or rocket science. It emerges through our own inquiring and investigating minds. Overlooking this basic truth is the reason for the majority of failures of Elite Groups, Brainstorming Teams, Think Tanks, Focus Groups and Task Forces and other hypes used by some companies today to bring forth productive innovation.

What we should look at when becoming creative? We cannot visualize a creative tomorrow. We learn from the past and look back at rearview mirror while driving forward, it is important to understand the causal relationship of the past and present to create a better future. Everything in Nature is relative. This applies to we humans and managers as well. Creativity is like a double edged sword, a good servant but a bad master. History is full of examples where creativity has been used and still being used for working nation against nation, race against another, company against a company and man against man.

We should always focus on the positive aspects of creativity, without allowing our likes, dislikes, greed, hatred and delusions to govern us in achieving desired positive outcomes, that are beneficial to the wellbeing of us, as individuals, our family, the employer, the society, our country and the mankind at large,

Anthropologically, it can be seen that the “creative mind” of the modern human as scientists would like to label them started with the evolution of Homo sapiens (Latin “wise man”) between 200,000 to 300,000 years ago. The invention of tools and artifacts out of stone, discovery of fire and the wheels at a later stage are all the outcomes of a creative mind, by using observations and the limited information available at the time. Creativity was a tool for survival to enable the human race to perform the vital tasks **faster, easier and safely**. We cannot see much deviation from these objectives even at this technological and digital age except that **cost effectiveness** has been added

Extensive scientific studies have been done in recent times on creativity of the human mind, covering the anatomical, physiological, psychological and social dimensions. According to a popular view, creativity is the product of the brain’s right hemisphere and innovative people are considered “right brain thinkers”, while “left brain thinkers are “. The frontal cortex of the brain has long been identified as the hub of creativity, as it seems to be responsible for many functions, that contribute to creative thinking (such as working memory or short term memory). Being creative can increase positive emotions, reduce depressive symptoms and anxiety and improve the functioning of our immune systems

Like in most subjects relate to management, an overwhelming array books, publications and research finding confronts the modern manager who might find it somewhat difficult to navigate. Creative problem solving, divergent thinking, lateral thinking, mind mapping and critical thinking to name a few. Managers should not fall in to the trap of getting carried away and become over defendant on any one of them as it has often happened with quality management, and ICT. ***They are good servants but bad masters.***

Some of the common reasons for the lack of creativity according to my experiences are:

- Fear of blame, ridicule and the fear of decision making.
- Too many inputs. Information overload. **Too many meetings**

- Not comprehending the “big picture” of identifying the forest and the trees.
- Chasing for perfection and stereotyping.
- Lack of resources and recognition.
- Lack of authority and complacency to stay in the comfort zones

A few practical ways of nurturing creativity at work are recommended as follows:

- Collaborate and draw inspiration from others.
- Focus on the task (**mindfulness**)
- Challenge conformity.
- Show comfort with ambiguity
- Paying attention to details. The PDCA approach,⁵ Why? And looking for the latent causes, which will finally end up with the human factor.
- Striving to eliminate feelings of greed, hatred

and delusion

The modern world needs creativity because problems are not getting simpler. With creativity we stop relying on what has already been done and open our minds to what might be. As problems get more complex, there are fewer examples of how to solve them.

“The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there; I just have to chisel away the superfluous material.”

— *Michelangelo*

In conclusion, it can be said that we have to look in to our own minds for bringing creativity to the surface to make it useful, to us as individuals, our families, employer or company, the society, the nation and the mankind at large, and we as managers have a key role to play .

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