

## *Creativity might be the New Black but where can we buy it?*

We live in an era where an ever-accelerating pace of technological innovation and forces of globalisation are producing a business environment that demands higher levels of competitiveness. Handy (1996) argues that we have moved from an era where prices were set at a price the market would bear to an era, in which prices are set at a level that the competition will permit us to charge.

An organisation cannot downsize its way to eternal profitability. At some point, a human has to create something that another human needs. Machines can play chess and spit out manufactured widgets but they cannot replace real thinking. They cannot decide what widgets need to be to spit out or whether the world even needs another widget. What humans mustn't do is abdicate their ability to think.

Finally, a 'new' thought process is being called by its rightful name. In the past, we have disguised it as lateral thinking or the business of paradigms. The new nomenclature sweeping through organisational literature is Creativity. There are countless articles and reports on the new 'creative economy'.

Richard Florida's book on the new creative economy has persuaded many government organisations that creative industries are the way to revive regions whose traditional manufacturing industries have watched their orders suddenly evaporate in favour of industries in India and China.

Numerous management authors over the last decade have announced the need for innovation. "Innovate or perish," said Drucker "Get innovative or dead" stated Kiernan. However, as anyone who has worked in the creative industries for years knows, "creativity" is easy to say, hard to do.

Perhaps that is not entirely true; it is easy to be creative if you are willing to be unprofitable. None of the businesses that we deal with at Creative Economy want to starve in an attic while writing odes to the art of commerce. This is why at Creative Economy we define innovation as creativity applied profitably. This difficult tension between new ideas and risk surprisingly is not the key reason that keeps most companies marching like lemmings towards the cliff of obsolescence.

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The reason is this.

No one has figured out a way to do it.

We can all talk about creativity. We can all write reports on creativity. What these articulate but often dull papers can't do is reveal a simple system for creating innovation at every level in the organisation. I receive at least one or two new reports a week constructed by well meaning souls. I frantically look for the 'how-to' and then discard. It is a short search because it is never there. Creativity might be the new black of organisational fashion, its advertising is everywhere, but the racks are empty. The designers have still yet to design a fashionable how-to-think-creatively methodology.

At Creative Economy, we undertook the journey to benchmark the workplace practices of creative organisations against traditional corporations in order to establish how to enable innovation at every level in an organisation. In the end, we believe we have created a successful how-to methodology but the results along the way were very surprising indeed.

One would imagine that major broadcasters such as CBS

who ignited the reality TV phenomenon must be experts at this. The following story is illuminating.

Survivor, now a very significant worldwide financial success was created by Charlie Parsons but eventually developed by Mark Burnett who took it to every one of the major USA television networks and was rejected outright. Eventually, as we all know, it was purchased by CBS who initially rejected it. For USA TV this was a major turning point in both the profitability of the networks and the rankings of the networks. It completely changed CBS' business and damaged their competitors. However, it nearly wasn't bought by CBS either. It was rejected several times. Carter (2006) discusses several locked mindsets that dominated the corporation. Firstly TV programming executives wearied from receiving continual pitches would approach most shows with the attitude "Ok so what's the reason I'm going to pass on this one?" They were looking for flaws not opportunity. Bypassing other executives, one development assistant was so convinced of the show's value he went straight to the top and pitched to the CEO, Leslie Moonves. Moonves saw it as something "more suitable for cable". At other networks, Burnett had been told a similar story. "We only do drama, news and sitcoms". The saving

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grace for the program was that one young executive within CBS persisted. Moonves, to his credit, always took time to get to know young executives because he felt they were in touch with the market in a way that older more jaded were not. The convoluted road to getting Survivor on the air shows that even creative organisations get locked into traditional paradigms.

However, one of the keys to looking at how to teach people creativity came from studies into creative production teams. We studied people in teams who had to create new ideas, not in a moment of inspiration in the bathtub, but rather day after day. John Cleese insists that creativity is not about talent and it is not about IQ. He says, “ It’s a process, a way of doing things”

My own personal experience of creating new programs for TV networks concurs with Cleese’s experience. It is not about putting people in a room and encouraging them to have random thoughts. It is about going deeper not wider. Traditional brainstorming is deeply flawed and dangerously applied. It is only superficially similar to the creative process. I had learned this from the experience of relying on teams to brainstorm in order to meet creative deadlines. It was only

this year that I learned that there is considerable research to support my intuitive distrust of this methodology. Nijstad, Stroebe and Lodewijx (2006) demonstrated that, contrary to what most people believe, brainstorming is less effective in groups than that which is performed alone. They also find that groups are too easily satisfied with their own achievements even when they have produced fewer results.

What we also know is that every aspect of the creative process, from the things that organisations value in leaders - decisiveness, urgency and absolute dogged loyalty to a common code, are anathema to the creative process. Yet, these characteristics have a value. We could not do business without them. It is the marriage of these two disparate values that makes a successful innovative organisation. There are two modes. There’s the Let’s get on with it mode of everyday business and the let’s solve problems creatively mode. They are entirely different ways of operating, both necessary. Leaders and workers have to be taught when and how to move between them. Permission and support to operate in these modes is essential. There’s a joke told by writers, “It’s hard to convince your wife you’re working when you’re staring out the window”. It is even harder to convince the boss.

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I stated earlier that brainstorming, as it is almost universally practised, is deeply flawed in the creative process. This is seriously heretical thinking to most corporate beliefs about creativity and many of you will be tuning out about now. I'll dig an ever deeper hole for myself. Brainstorming is often based on our worship and sanctification of the idea of TEAMS. Teamwork, as it is generally practised in most organisations, is also deeply flawed as a tool in the creative process. Until you can adequately define the difference between teams and committees, you will never be able to establish creative processes in your organisation. Most breakthroughs come from individuals who are often distinctly unpopular with and uncomfortable within teams.

It's easy to criticise everyone else's view of creativity but that's cowardly. At some point one has to place one's own cajones on the line.

The first stage in our view is similar to what most commentators have identified. The organisation and the people within it have to be persuaded of the need for innovation at every single level within that organisation. Where we differ, is that

we believe it has to be measured. People only do what is measured.

Amabile and a number of other authors have researched some common organisational culture issues that are necessary. These include freedom, permission to fail, time and many more. We support all these ideas of course.

Where we do differ is that we have a model for the process. We agree with Cleese that its not about talent but rather a way of operating. We have designed a number of techniques. These do not involve the traditional consultants' methods of placing dopey match puzzles on the whiteboard or giving them optical illusions in order to convince them that they are completely uncreative and perhaps dozy as well.

These methods include a combination of solo work and group work over an extended period of time. There are no theoretical games, only real problems. If your people are dragged away from the production lines and encouraged to stare out the window it had better be productive for you.

There are extended techniques that include research,

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narrative work, severely modified brainstorming, templates, random juxtaposition and responsibility for results. No hiding behind teams or committees. We teach people the tricks of small successful teams in the creative arts. Most people find this fascinating and are deeply gratified to know that they too could write a sitcom or a symphony if that was their job. However, its not and what they do leave with is enhanced self-esteem and confident in their ability to contribute positively to the organisational goals.

There is one lesson from the arts that may not be palatable. Sometimes the most creative solutions come from employees that you would never invite for a beer, never introduce to a client and certainly not your family. Can you live with this? Fortunately, you may not have to. If creativity can as we assert, be generated in anyone, you can, as the old 1940's song says, have your Kate and Edith too.

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