

Creativity - The sex appeal of the intellect

Creativity - what is it? How do you get it? And how do you know when you have it? It is rather like sex appeal - much sought after, but mysterious. The word 'creativity' conjures up a process of making something out of nothing, giving something of yourself to the world. And like sex appeal, most people like to be seen as having it, but fewer think they actually have. Do you think you are creative?

About ten years ago an oil company wanted their engineers to come up with more innovative ideas; the industry was changing rapidly. They employed a team of psychologists to do a modeling project. They asked the question, what is the difference that makes the difference between the more and the less creative people? The psychologists did a thorough and worthy survey. They found the most significant factor was that the creative people thought they were creative. The less creative people did not think they were. So what, you may think- both groups were right. But beliefs affect behaviour just as surely as behaviour affects belief. They act as self fulfilling prophecies. The group who believed they were not creative did not pay attention to their ideas, play with them or take them further than the next tea break. A belief that you are creative seems to act as a permission to be so.

The word creativity is a noun, but the reality is a process - something you do and keep doing. It is also a value. It's prized. The results can be worth a lot of money. The creative person or team is the one that sells a million records, creates a great work of art, a new product or industrial process that makes a huge profit. Creativity adds an extra dimension to the wallet. Values have evidence, or criterial equivalents in NLP jargon, that they are achieved. How do you know when you are creative? The more stringent the evidence the less likely you are to define yourself as creative. One person's evidence might be a completely new invention that has never been thought of before and makes them a lot of money. That is extremely hard to achieve. When they do not achieve it, they may believe they are not creative and give up. For another person, evidence of creativity may be telling their children bedtime stories, or designing and decorating a room. It's the process that counts, and it may generate an interior design, a bedtime story or a major invention. People who define creativity by the results mistake product for process.

Often the most useful inventions are thought up by people in a different field. The experts in the field having decided that a problem was too difficult to solve. Children tend to be very creative. They will put words together in new and interesting ways, or find novel ways of combining objects. They don't know the rules yet, and this gives them a great deal of freedom. The results of children's creativity may not be practical, but the process certainly is. Perhaps play is the necessary start of creativity. Perhaps if we paid more attention to how children put their ideas together, we could use the same strategies to combine our ideas and make some practical and aesthetic applications. Creativity is playing with ideas, and play is free. Those who must play, cannot play.

We all dream every night, and dismiss the dreams in the light of day as trivial, but dreams are pure play. The chemist Kekule dreamed of a group of snakes forming a circle each biting the tail of the one in front. The idea of a group each joined to the next in a circle gave him the idea for the structure of the benzene molecule and a

breakthrough in the science of organic chemistry. The most useful ideas are often the most aesthetically pleasing as well. NLP is always asking 'Is it useful?' Perhaps it also needs to ask, 'Is it beautiful?'

I think being creative is playing with ideas, combining them, trying out many possibilities. The pieces that you combine may be mundane, it is the relationships between them that matter. Familiar pieces take on a new dimension when put in a new context. A car or an airplane is a heap of scrap metal until assembled in the right way. Western musicians all work with the same twelve basic notes, but the results they create are incredibly varied. I think the musical metaphor shows another aspect of being creative - a balance between freedom and structure. Creativity is not completely random. It needs an ability to see things in new ways, but there also needs to be a structure to the result. The conscious mind shapes the play of the unconscious. Totally free musical improvisation can be self indulgent and boring. Apply a structure, whether it is flamenco, jazz or classical and the result takes on a form that speaks beyond the individual musician.

How can we see the familiar in new ways? This is the essence of problem solving. We are all creative when we solve problems because we have to see the old problem in a new way. We need to generate different perspectives. Creativity, like problem solving, is a matter of changing perspective. Here are a few ideas.

Change perceptual position. How does the issue appear from first position? What do you think and feel about it? How does it appear from second position - another's point of view? This second position can be a significant other involved in the problem, or a mentor, a trusted friend, or a role model. There is also third position, taking an outside, systemic view - how the different elements in the problem fit together. Third position also puts some distance between you and the problem. Looking from a distance is a different perspective. The coastline from an airplane looks clear cut and neat, it is only when you get down to ground level that the detail obscures the structure. We reflect this in the language we use, saying things like, 'I need to take a fresh look at this', or 'we need to take a long view', or 'I'm too close to the issue to understand it'. We give clues in our language of the critical submodalities. We can shift the submodalities of our perception to give some new insight. And sometimes we need to get close up and see the detail.

Change your time horizon. What you do looking to the consequences in five years time will be very different to looking at the consequences for tomorrow. Strategic planning versus living for the moment. Neither is better than the other. Either may give a new insight. Subjectively, time is usually governed by submodalities of distance.

Break the habit. What's the greatest barrier to creative thinking? Habit - thinking in set ways, even when these ways are good. Creativity is continually reinventing the way you think How can you do that? One way is deliberately to introduce a random element. One that is 'obviously' irrelevant. This is the basis of oracles, dreams, and divination. They make us connect elements in new ways. I remember attending a training given by John Grinder some years ago. One of the exercises was about unconscious resources. First we identified a personal problem that concerned us. Then he sent us on a twenty minute walk in a nearby park, the only instruction was to be aware of what you were seeing, hearing and feeling as you

walked. I remember strolling aimlessly for about ten minutes, then coming to a fairly deep ditch with water at the bottom. It blocked my path, was too wide to jump, and would delay me unless I could get past it. I did not want to retrace my steps, nor plough through the muddy water at the bottom of the ditch. I looked for a way around to either side but there was none that I could see. Then I noticed a piece of wood to one side of the ditch. Just the right size. I pushed it down and it spanned the mud perfectly. A couple of quick jumps got me across in time to resume and with dry feet. Strange to relate, the experience seemed to map over perfectly over as a solution to the relationship problem I had in mind.

There are many other ways to change perspective. besides distance, perceptual position, time and 'appropriate randomness'. When you have several, you might use them to create more ways of being creative, a strategy for being creative can be applied to itself to get more strategies for being creative in a loop of creative recursion like a fractal pattern. Fractals are those beautiful, chaotic shapes formed by taking a very simple formula and repeatedly applying it to itself. Recursion creates fractals, but nature was there first. Anyone who has sprawled under a tree and stared up at the sky through the leaves knows what a fractal pattern is. Fractals are the structure of chaos - a fitting metaphor for creativity.

Finally it's just as easy to stifle creativity as it is to evoke it. Here are some sure fire ways to stop being creative, as well as the antidotes:

How to stop being creative

1. Be remorselessly practical.
2. Be logical.
3. Follow the rules.
4. Be serious.
5. Don't be curious.
6. Avoid ambiguity - jump to conclusions as fast as possible.
7. Believe that mistakes are wrong and will be punished.
8. Believe you are not creative. (It helps to have a narrow definition of creativity).
9. Believe there is only one right answer and you know it.

How to be creative

- Never mind if it is practical (for now).
- Logic can't be proved logically so it can't be much use whichever way you look at it.
- What rules?
- Have fun.
- Be curious.
- Bathe in ambiguity and enjoy it.
- Mistakes are feedback to get on track again.
- Believe you are creative.
- There are plenty of right answers to go around.

Joseph O'Connor, June 1997