

FROM THE DYNAMIC TO THE DISRUPTIVE: DIFFICULTY IN DEALING WITH CREATIVE PEOPLE

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Introduction

Human beings like success but they "hate successful people", said Scott Thompson, the famous American stand-up comedian. Another variant of this, "organisations like creativity but they hate creative people", may often be heard in the corner rooms. Every organisation today

seems to be talking about creativity and innovation, at the same time practitioners report managers sharing horror stories about managing creative people (Levitt, 2002; Torr, 2011). Such horror stories get magnified when one comes across research studies (Kwang, 2001) which conclude "nice" people are not creative, and creative people are not "nice." Nevertheless, in

a 2012 survey of 1500 CEOs by IBM's Institute for Business Value, creativity was singled out as the most important leadership characteristic for businesses of the future (Leading through Connections, 2012) Apparently, letting creativity flow unrestrained and yet making it organisationally productive is a paradox many managers find difficult to resolve. As Kageyama (n.d.) puts it,

"We all value and enjoy the creative output of designers, chefs, and out-of-the-box thinkers in all corners of the market. And we celebrate innovative leaders and entrepreneurs and turn them into rock stars and celebrities. But interestingly, there is quite a bit of research which suggests that many of us actually have a bias against creative people. As in, we don't want them to be our leaders, we don't want them working for us, and most shockingly perhaps – we don't want them in our classrooms"

Instances that illustrate the unmanageable aspects of creativity in organisations are not hard to come by. They appear in classrooms, in the corporate workplace, or in the open market. Creative people often stand out for their sharp thinking and eccentric habits, but also for their disregard for conventional social norms. The exchange between the famous musician Frank Zappa and his interviewer illustrate the point well:

Interviewer: 'So Frank, you have long hair. Does that make you a woman?'

Frank Zappa: 'You have a wooden leg. Does that make you a table?'

— Frank Zappa (azquotes, n.d.)

Creativity - A Paradox

Creativity, or the phenomenon of arriving at thoughts, outputs or solutions that are both novel and useful (Czhikzentmihalyi, 1996), have intrigued humankind since

the ages – finding its application in areas as diverse as supply chain management, marketing, setting strategic goals of the firm and human resource management (e.g., Mumford, 2003; Sternberg, 1999; Zhou, Shalley, & Zedeck, 2011).

Creative people have been found to display positive qualities such as courage, openness and mental health (Cropley, 1990), and lead to positive organisational outcomes such as firm growth, customer satisfaction and employee engagement (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2015; Dul & Ceylan, 2014; Khedhaouria, Gurău, & Torrès, 2015; Kibbeling, der Bij, & Weele, 2013; Weinzimmer, Michel, & Franczak, 2011).

However, while creativity remains something widely desirable and valuable, it may not always lead to positive outcomes. The creative sparks of the employees may be directed against their own organisations – manifested in creative ways of shoplifting, dodging office work, or sabotaging the firm to show ones resentment. Secondly, even when creativity is not directed against the firm, creative people may be difficult to manage because of their enhanced need for autonomy, excitement and achievement – many of which may go against the organisation's existing structure and ways of people management (Levitt, 2002; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Failure to provide the creative employees a conducive environment may lead to frustration, reduced creativity and maladaptive behaviour (Cooper, Dewe & O'Driscoll, 2001). On the other hand, overindulgence might lead to trivialization of the organisational norms, and cause dissatisfaction among other employees.

Though the difficulties that may emerge with creative people have been spoken about, this aspect of creativity has received less than sufficient research or theoretical attention (James & Taylor, 2010). We provide a review of the major strands of research

that have come up in this context and possible solutions proposed to combat them.

The Unique Needs of the Creative Employees

While most researchers acknowledge the role of environment – past experiences, supportive supervision or job complexity (Amabile, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996) – on creative endeavours, many have also focused on the creative personality – a personality disposition that makes people more likely to think of novel or useful solutions to problems (Cheung & Leung, 2014). Csikszentmihalyi (1996) stated that the creative personality is characterised by divergent thinking, openness, sensitivity, passion, imagination, discipline and rebelliousness.

Davis (1999) observed that an understanding of the creative personality is incomplete without focusing on the negative characteristics that may appear disruptive to the environment in which the creative individual functions. He listed seven personality characteristics that characterise creative people that might lead to adjustment problems – hyperactivity, childish behaviour, egotism, impulsivity, absent mindedness, tendency to be argumentative and neuroticism (Issa, 2015). Other researchers too have associated creativity with negative traits like self-interest and non-conformity (Feist, 1999; Gough, 1979). These characteristics may make dealing with creative employees a complicated affair with unpredictable outcomes.

Following Mumford (2003), the work style of creative employees may be said to differ from that of non-creative employees in the following ways:

Intense focus on some specific interest, often excluding other life tasks

One of the core foundations of creativity is expertise (Sternberg & Lubert, 1999), and the expertise often builds up through substantial investment of a person's time and other resources on a particular endeavour (Feldman, 1999). However, due to this single-minded devotion to particular pursuits, the creative person may show apathy towards other tasks that do not interest him/her immediately, or towards dull, routine task that require non-creative solutions (O'Brien, Anastasio, & Bushman 2011). Vincent & Goncalo (2014) propose that an individual with a creative identity may respond to a non-creative task in one of the following ways:

1. Feeling demeaned at being asked to do such a task and therefore responding aggressively to others, or escaping the duty through some dishonest behaviour
2. Ignoring the duty
3. Withdrawing from the organisation

Driven by achievement motivation, rather than power or affiliation motives

Harrell and Stahl (1981) reported that creative people, such as scientists, tend to higher on achievement motivation while managers tend to be high on power or affiliation motives (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988). Hence the former may not be especially successful in people management or in team processes – as they tend to be less concerned about what others think of them or what is expected of them in social situations (Mumford, 2000). This lack of power or social motives makes creative people less likely to be perceived as leaders (Mueller, Goncalo, & Kamdar, 2011). Creative people also tend to be highly motivated by chances of professional achievement and recognition (Mumford, 2003). Hence team activities with collective outcomes may be demotivating for creative individuals.

Need for Autonomy

Creative people tend to have a strong need for autonomy and perform better under autonomous conditions (*Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Pelz & Andrews, 1966*). Hence, it may be difficult to keep creative people motivated in highly structured work conditions – such as the army – or where team-performance is valued over individual achievements. Lack of autonomy may promote negative reactions such as anger, distress and negative creativity in creative individuals (*Cooper et al., 2001*) – and thus disrupt organisational activities.

Aggressive Tendencies

Carson (2011) opined that creative people are characterised by cognitive disinhibition that makes them less perceptive to social restrictions and norms. Perkins (1993) stated that aggression is a major feature of creative students – since the absence of regard for social opinions and need for nurturance, which made students self-reliant and adventurous, also made them aggressive (*Kwang, 2001*). Creative people have been suggested to be more ruthless and aggressive than ordinary individuals (*Barron, 1968*) although other researches show the opposite to be true (e.g., *Ekvall, 1971*).

Response to Time Pressures

Time pressures are ill-suited for positive creativity and lead to negative emotions (*Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986*). Hence working on projects with strict deadlines for deliverables may not be conducive for the optimal functioning of the creative people.

Work style suited for conditions of ambiguity

Mumford and Gustafson (1988) proposed that creative people's approach to work is

exploratory and unstructured in a manner that is suited to find solutions to poorly defined problems. Hence creative people may not be comfortable in dealing with conditions that are structured, routine and directed – such as ordinary organisational activities.

Strict evaluative approach

Once the exploration phase is over, creative people tend to adopt a strict evaluative approach to test ideas for flaws and possible misrepresentations (*Feist & Gorman, 1998*). Hence, at times, the orientation of creative people towards their own work and that of others may be harsh, critical and highly evaluative – a stance that may not be conducive for team activities or for co-worker morale.

Work, rather than organisation, as a source of identity

Creative individuals are more likely to treat work and profession as a source of identity rather than the organisation for which they are working (*Bradway, 1971; Organ & Green, 1981*). Hence their organisational commitment is likely to be lower than that of non-creative employees. Further, it is difficult to motivate them by trying to enhance their commitment to their organisations.

Perception of injustice

Creative People have been found to respond to perceived injustice made by reducing their creativity towards positive goals and enhancing their creativity towards negative goals (*James et al., 1999*). Thus dissatisfaction in creative individuals may be potentially more disruptive for the organisation than dissatisfaction in non-creative individuals.

The Dark Side: Negative and Maladaptive Creativity

According to Cropley (2010), creativity itself almost always involves breaking rules, since by definition creativity is against restrictions and constraints. Frank Zappa said, "If you end up with a boring miserable life because you listened to your mom, your dad, your teacher, your priest, or some guy on television telling you how to do your shit, then you deserve it." (*Goodreads.com, n.d.*)

In describing deviant creativity, Salcedo-Albaran, Kuszewski, de Leon-Beltran, and Garay (2009) distinguish between statutory rules (laws) and customary rules (norms). When statutory rules are violated, the product is seen as illegal, but breaking norms is more likely to be seen as positive and creative. Thus, often what is creative for one person may border on the offensive for another. Malevolent creativity is defined as 'creativity that is deliberately planned to damage others' (Cropley, Kaufman, & Cropley, 2008, p. 106) – such as terrorism, deception or trolling or aggressive humour (Cropley *et al.*, 2008; Harris, Reiter-Palmon, & Kaufman, 2013). Negative creativity is creativity with an undesirable effect, which however is accidental or unintended (James *et al.*, 1999)

Certain personality traits are found to predispose one to the dark aspects of creativity. Cropley (2010) mention the Dark Triad (Machiavellism, narcissism and psychopathy) that enhance predisposition to malevolent creativity. Other factors that appear to predict malevolent creativity include aggression, perceived victimhood (Clark & James, 1999; Cropley, 2010) and conflict related cognitions (De Dreu & Nijstad, 2008).

In a series of innovatively designed experiments, Gino and Ariely (2012) demonstrated that creativity is a stronger predictor of dishonesty than is intelligence.

They also demonstrated that creatively primed people are more likely to cheat, owing to greater likelihood to spot and adopt unethical solutions to problems and greater ability to rationalize their dishonest behaviour as justified (Mazar & Ariely, 2006).

Vincent and Goncalo (2014) demonstrated that it is not creativity *per se* but a sense of being creative (creative identity) that leads to the dishonest streak in people. People with creative identity are likely to engage in creative behaviour at work (Jaussi, Randel, & Dionne, 2007) although they may not actually be more creative than others (Lemons, 2010). Such people believe themselves and their solutions to be creative – which in turn creates in them a sense of entitlement – since creativity is usually seen as something rare and valuable (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004; Goncalo, Flynn, & Kim, 2010). This encourages them to go to any length in order to promote the ideas. In his book on Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple Inc., Isaacson (2011) pointed out that Steve Jobs drove his car without a license plate and frequently parked his car in spot reserved for disabled people.

The sense of entitlement that is associated with a creative identity has also been associated to other unproductive behaviours. Vincent & Goncalo (2014) argue that, because of its disruptive or counter intuitive nature, creativity often leads to disappointments and stalling of ideas. However, while an employee with a non-creative identity is likely to accept the disappointment, the sense of entitlement is likely to lead to a sense of victimization in the person with creative ideation (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). This in turn is likely to lead to aggressive response to a criticism (Campbell *et al.*, 2004; Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004)

Ways of Managing Creative People

Over the decades, researchers and practitioners have investigated and enumerated the ways to enhance creativity and create a work environment suitable for creative endeavours. The important factors that emerged are democratic, considerate, and participative leader behaviour (Hage & Dewar, 1973), supportive non-controlling supervision (Oldham & Cummings, 1996), quality leader-member exchange (Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999), and transformational leadership style (Oke, Munshi, & Walumbwa, 2009). Among the environmental factors that enhance creativity, researchers identify uncritical work environment that lets employees try out different approaches without being worried about failures attracting negative outcomes (Amabile et al., 1996), rewards for creative performance through compensation and other HR-related policies (Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003) and an organisational climate and culture that nurtures creativity and facilitates diffusion of learning (Yukl, 1989).

Representative rules are often considered the best way to ensure conformity. Goffee and Jones (2007) mention Alvin Gouldner's classification of environment in terms of rules – mock bureaucracy (where everyone ignores the rules), punishment-centered bureaucracy (where one group imposes rules on another), and representative bureaucracy (where everyone accepts the rules). Clever people respond best to representative rules.

Research is, however, relatively silent on how to counter the negative aspects of creativity at work (James & Taylor, 2010). Suggested interventions usually take one of the two ways: identifying people with vulnerabilities and arranging for appropriate placement and customised personnel interventions, and scanning situations for vulnerabilities to negative

creative approaches and applying counter measures to prevent the harm of negative creativity (Clark & James, 1999).

Self-awareness has often been found to be an effective solution against dishonest behaviour (Carver, 2003). However, the same may not hold true for the creative people, since self-awareness may further enhance the feeling of entitlement (Westen, 1990). Vincent and Goncalo (2014) suggest that to curb the negative effects of a creative identity – organisations should strive to lower the employee's sense of entitlement, by indulging in exercises that build awareness about why one does not deserve more than others. Also, organisations should strive to enhance group creativity rather than individual creativity, by making creativity a formal job requirement (Unsworth, Wall, & Carter, 2005) and providing creative goals and creative role models (Zhou, 2003).

Illies and Reiter-Palmon (2008) showed that malevolence in the problem construction phase can spark subsequent malevolent creativity. Organizations may curb tendencies to negative creativity by encouraging employees to conceptualise problems within the ethical and legal boundaries – which may discourage subsequent straying into deviant creative solutions.

Speaking in the context of engineering creativity, Fleddermann (2004) lays down four criteria to offset tendencies to maladaptive or negative creativity (Cropley, 2010). These are as follows:

- Compilation with applicable legal standards
- Compilation with acceptable standards
- Exploration of alternatives that are potentially safer
- Predict ways in which the product may be misused by consumers and design ways to avoid the problems

Finally, conscientiousness and emotional intelligence have been found to relate negatively to maladaptive creativity, rebelliousness and disregard for collective well-being (Lee and Dow, 2011; Harris et al., 2013). Organizations may invest in providing training to enhance these qualities in creative employees so that their creativity is channelized to productive ends.

Managing Other Employees in the midst of Creative Employees

In the quest to promote creativity, organisations should not ignore the contribution of conformists. “When you’re building an innovation team, it’s a given that you need creative people. But they’re not enough” argue Miron-Spektor, Erez, and Naveh (2012). According to them while about 50% of people tend to display mixed thought patterns – the rest tend to fall in one of the following categories – creatives (sourcing radical ideas but not usually attentive to usefulness), conformists (supporting creatives and enhancing teamwork) and detail-oriented people (ensuring adherence to regulations). Miron-Spektor et al. (2012) found that teams with the greatest levels of innovation typically had 20-30% of creatives, 10-20% of conformists and upto 10% of detail-oriented people.

Nurturing creativity sometimes goes against many things that the organisation stands for – an eye on the bottom line, adherence to norms, teamwork, and equity in output and rewards. This may create bad blood among other employees, and even supervisors, who feel that the creative employees often get unfair advantages or non-commensurate rewards and recognition. Such feelings alienates the so called non-creatives, without whose labour innovations may not see the light of the day. Further, it may disrupt the well-being

of the creative individuals at the workplace (Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012).

Miron-Spektor et al. (2012) showed that having a mix of creative and non-creative people in work groups facilitates innovation. Firms may combat possible jealous feelings by building teams of people with various creative and non-creative competences and providing group rewards for innovations, in addition to individual rewards. This facilitates idea-implementation and at the same time drive home the notion that creativity benefits all. Pin & Stein (2014) suggests that humility and generosity are two important qualities to ward of workplace jealousies. Generosity makes employees prioritise the well-being of others ahead of their own, and humility ensures that the employees have a realistic perception of their skills and limitations (Owens & Heckman, 2012).

Vechhio (2005) reports that employee’s machiavellism and position as an in-group member in leader-member exchange may subject him/her to co-worker envy (also Kim, O’Neill, & Cho, 2010). Organisations may combat this by establishing distributive justice, through clear norms for rewards and learning opportunities.

Other important ways to balance reward programmes focused on creativity is to recognise routine operations and their value to the firm – through rewards and promotions, and giving everyone the opportunity to be creative – through choices for job rotation or taking up creative projects. This helps the company tap hidden potential and builds awareness in employees about their own creative abilities – making them see the logic of rewarding creativity more quickly.

Envy can sometimes also facilitate creativity, particularly when it is benign and when employees feel self-improvement is possible (Van de Ven, Zeelenberg, &

Pieters, 2011). Managers may utilize this by projecting creative employees as 'outstanding but attainable' role models and by providing scope for development of creative potentials (Van de Ven et al., 2011, p. 792).

Conclusion

In his article 'Creativity is not enough', Levitt (2002) distinguishes between creativity and innovation – saying that the latter is what the organisation needs. Innovation comes with a lot of responsibility, willingness, and ability to not only generate but also implement ideas, discipline, and readiness to put up with the mundane everyday organisational activities that cushion the creative sparks. While organisations fear killing the creative spirit in the employees with too much of the routine, research on the dark side of creativity also show how firms struggle to make room for the creative thinker – in a business world where competence

comes with structure, standardization and systematization. Understanding the dynamics of the creative mind is imperative in understanding how to best utilize it to suit the need of a dynamic environment. Appreciating that the dynamics of creativity may range from the desired to the disruptive, may be the first step to it.

In a fast changing, highly turbulent, ambiguous, and complex business environment, organisations need people who are game changers. Creative people can be an organisation's greatest rain makers. However, they may also make you need a pace maker. But who said management was for weak hearted? Psychologists like Shannon L. Alder can come to one's rescue, who would tell that "If you think people in your life are normal, then you undoubtedly have not spent any time getting to know the abnormal side of them" (Goodreads, n.d.).

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