

## Creativity: Harmony, Not Noise

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## **Creativity: Harmony, Not Noise**

### **Abstract**

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## *Creativity: Harmony, Not Noise\**

RICHARD J. CECH

A BREAK-PRESS OPERATOR boosted the output of crimped, formed machinery shields 10 per cent daily by changing the way he inserted the sheet steel.

A worker on the packing line of a chocolate manufacturer suggested hiring only ambidextrous people to step up the packaging rate. Result: 20 per cent fewer people needed to turn out 15 per cent more packaged chocolates in the same time.

A beer truck driver found a better way to wheel barrels off delivery trucks. Result: Less time per stop, more stops per day.

A farm laborer mounted a large tractor tire vertically in the feedlot so steers could walk through and scratch contentedly all over.

A home gardener welded a crosspiece on his dandelion digger so he could use foot pressure instead of hand pressure in digging dandelions.

A polishing machine operator in a casting foundry suggested the company could turn out special screws a lot faster and more efficiently by making the screws twice as long—with heads at both ends—and cutting them in half to make two screws at a time.

Were these people creative? You bet.

Yet, they're ordinary, unheralded people. Who would class them with a Picasso, or with the architect of Marina Towers or Houston's Astrodome; or with the inventor of the color TV tube; or with Christian Dior or Coco Chanel, the fashion designers; or with Werner von Braun, father of space missiles? Or with Carl Sandburg or John O'Hara.

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\* This is a condensation of the talk presented by Mr. Cech at the 1968 AAACE meeting.

But, these ordinary people found a way to express themselves creatively in monotonous, unlikely circumstances. They don't fit our stereotype of the creative person—which is part genius, part kook, eccentric, disorganized, impetuous, ego-centered, flamboyant, temperamental.

Is that what creativity's all about? Does it emerge from a stereotype?

The Research Institute of America explodes some of the better rumored and accepted myths about creative stereotypes:

**Myth #1: Creative people are eccentric.** This misunderstanding results from the fact that creative people have ideas, suggestions, work habits, problem-solving approaches that may be unconventional. Creative people may seem queer because they thrive on challenges. But they don't have to be wild-eyed at all.

**Myth #2: Creative people are disorganized loners.** Truth is, they usually are well organized. They have an exceptionally strong need to find order where there is none. They usually like and get along well with others. But they may want or need isolation and privacy when turning on their creative, productive steam.

**Myth #3: Creative people refuse to adjust to company rules.** Creative people may abhor red tape and resent it. But this merely is their reaction to trivia. They may well find ways to cut the red tape while working on important assignments.

**Myth #4: Creative people demand a lot of coddling.** It's usually just the opposite. Creative people place a great premium on independence. They can tolerate frustrating, ambiguous situations more easily than less creative people.

We can conclude that creative people are normal, well-adjusted, well-organized, gregarious, productive people. And that creativity springs more from that type than from the unbridled, undisciplined one.

Creativity is not reserved for a few inordinately talented individuals born under some lucky star or constellation.

Sure, it's generally believed that truly creative people are born with more of the assets that make them so. But there is no reason to doubt that anyone can increase and improve his creative output.

Yet, some people are likely to be more creative than others just as some people are more talented than others, some more intelligent than others, some prettier, some wittier than others. But

even the most creative people show varying degrees of creativity in different situations. Could Picasso have conceived an Atlas missile? Could Jack Nicklaus have designed the Memorial Arch in St. Louis? Maybe with special training and application. But the most creative people in one field are not likely at the same time to be the most creative in another.

### *A Break with Tradition*

Most simply stated, creativity is a “break” with the usual way of showing or saying something. It’s doing, seeing, explaining the ordinary in an imaginatively different way.

Creativity does not come in a blinding flash of light or spring effortlessly and automatically from a brainstorming session. Dr. Donald Taylor, Yale University psychologist, an authority on the care and feeding of creativity, tells us that 10 people individually can generate 10 times more good ideas than the same 10 people in a group brainstorming session.

Creativity does not come from an isolated or perfect environment, from an ivory tower where all conditions are optimum—spacious, quiet, private, mood-making atmosphere where one can give wings to his imagination unfettered by people, problems, time, or other extraneous, bothersome influences.

Creativity does not come from a rare class of uniquely gifted individuals who instantaneously, magically manufacture ingenious, innovative, imaginative solutions to thorny problems—who regularly wake up in the middle of the night and shout, “Eureka, I’ve got it.”

In the total population, we associate creativity in most fields with high intelligence. Probably more so in the physical sciences than in the arts.

But, with a given group of people, operating at roughly the same professional level, differences in general intelligence give us no significant clue to people’s innate creativity or creative performance. Some think better than others. But some work harder than the thinkers.

So, a discussion of “creative” vs. “non-creative” is academic, for creativity is relative. We are either more creative or less creative than others—at a given time, in given situations, in given professions.

Researchers tell us there are ways to identify the more creative. I touched briefly on some attributes in my discussion of the myths about creativity.

But here is a checklist if you're interested:

- The more creative usually can generate a large number of ideas rapidly on a given subject in a given situation—whether it's churches, charades, or choreography.

- The more creative are more nimble mentally. They're able to shift mental gears quickly, change approaches, discard one frame of reference for another.

- The more creative are original. They show a tendency to give unusual, atypical, and new responses and answers to questions, problems.

- The more creative prefer to find more complex solutions to problems, mostly because this presents a challenge. They find more challenges in ordinary working situations than less creative people and are more likely to look on work as a challenge rather than as something to just get done.

- The more creative are tenacious. They're more likely to stick to their guns in disagreements with others, are less easily swayed to change attitudes or decisions.

- The more creative think they're different from their peers—but not in a conceited or vain sense. Often their sense of mission, or acceptance of a challenge, may make them feel better. It may tend to isolate them occasionally.

- The more creative are more impulsive. They tend to follow their intuition; play hunches more; take risks, but not unnecessary ones.

- The more creative have a less dogmatic, more relativistic view of life. They show more independence of judgment, less conformity intellectually and socially. They tend to be—and want to be—freer, less rigidly controlled, but not less effective.

- The more creative may view authority as conventional rather than absolute, depending on the situation. They tend to make fewer black-and-white distinctions and judgments. They accept a normally unacceptable solution or situation if it is expedient. But they may not necessarily agree with the solution or like the situation or feel a moral obligation to accept them.

- The more creative have a good sense of humor. In fact, they

place a great value on humor; and are likely to see humor in exasperating, difficult situations.

- The more creative have broader, more universal, more cosmopolitan interests. They draw on these wide and varied interests for their judgments and their creativity.

- The more creative tend to be more mobile than less creative people. Perhaps it's because their fulfillment and achievement and independence are paramount objectives—and often these are not compatible with tenure development.

- The more creative tend to spend more time muddling through problems, broadly scan all the alternatives, methodically dispose of blind alleys, suspend judgment until they get the full picture, then confidently make a decision and stick to it. They don't just "get on with it." They don't just jump right in and start solving.

Most definitions of creativity describe it as the search for useful new and better solutions to problems. There are a couple I think more descriptive. One describes creativity as the blending of musical instruments into pleasing harmony, not the noise of musicians tuning their instruments.

But the best definition, yet, for communicators like you and me is this one: **CREATIVITY IS THE ART OF MINING AND REFINING.**

### *Work and Creativity*

This definition suggests there must be work associated with creativity—maybe not so much in digging out the facts as in finding imaginative, useful ways to tell them.

Charles Brower, author of the definition, is president of one of the world's largest advertising agencies—Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn. He reminds us that, "Most of us can't solve our problems merely by latching onto a small clutch of magic words, then hiring a whole group of people whose major job it is to see that no one ever drops them."

How sadly true. The state of TV today, a lot of pap we get in our daily print, the mediocrity we see in publicity releases, new-product stories, editorial features, the unimaginative photos, sales meetings, association conventions, trade shows—all are evidence that we have a generation of communicators busily concerned with using overworked, trite, pedestrian clutches of magic formulas, solutions, and words.

It's interesting about words. Most of us are too lazy to make words work hard—or too lazy to work hard finding powerful words that say what we really want to say. We are more interested in showing off our vocabulary than we are in communicating clearly.

### *Learn Powerful Words*

Learn the power of words, particularly short, short words. Carefully chosen, active, moving words communicate best. They bridge barriers to understanding. Powerful, moving, colorful words are often the shortest words and the most creative words—like clash, zip, thrust, zoom, smash, charge, bash, cringe, slash, hurdle, curdle, glower, leap, crimp, slug, hug, grab, gird, churn, grate. But so are sedate feminine, sophisticated words like tattle, prattle, tiff, squirm, squeamish, flutter, flit, prance, hop, skimp, meander, float, twitch, peek, amble, stride, stroll, faint. How you use them is creativity.

How do you go about finding this creativity? This art of doing and saying what's imaginative, expressive? Don't expect it to develop or demonstrate itself automatically, or in the same way in everyone. Some have to have the excitement of brainstorming—an electric environment, charged with group idea-getting. Some need to be behind closed doors, after hours, or on weekends, away from phones, people, meetings. Some can plan for and structure their time for creative production—set aside a time when they must and do create. Still others stew and fret, collect and sift over a long time. Then, when the clock's about to strike 12 on their commitment, furiously jump into a marathon of productive, creative activity that would kill a rhinoceros.

### *Discipline Important*

Creativity comes from hard, disciplined work. It boils up from a dissatisfaction with the pedestrian. Creativity often comes from burning midnight oil, filling wastebaskets with discarded attempts, from a succession of failures, from trial and error, from not giving up.

Lazy, uninhibited, and undisciplined people seldom breed creativity. Energetic, disciplined people do. Often they are most creative and most productive when they have heavy workloads,

or are up against tough deadlines. They are least creative—and most miserable—when they have time to waste.

Creativity comes from open, active, curious, challenged, fertile minds. It requires a full mental bank of information and experiences to exist and perpetuate itself—a reservoir of resource material that never runs dry, one constantly fed by new ideas and impressions.

You keep the reservoir full by watching, looking, listening, by being inquisitive. You go to an art gallery or a zoo, to a good play or movie, listen to the lines, watch the scenery, the photography, the conflicts that develop.

You drive out of your parochial environment into something different—maybe the countryside, maybe the inner city, just someplace you haven't been to before or for awhile.

Enroll in a class on architecture, cybernetics, psychology, or ancient history. Participate in a discussion group, dig into new hobbies.

You listen attentively to someone else's ideas without worrying about opportunities to get in your two cents worth.

You have a conversation with your wife—or husband—on something besides money, the kids, sex.

You look at graphics in magazines like McCall's, Architectural Forum, Institutions, Harper's Bazaar, Fortune, Sunset.

You read good writing that inspires you—poetry, good novels, the New York Times, Fortune again, New Yorker, Harper's, Atlantic Monthly magazines. You re-read the Gettysburg Address, the Declaration of Independence. Really read the words this time. Listen to them. Feel their power of communication.

### *Encouraging Creativity*

How do you generate and develop more creativity around you?

1. **Hire good people and pay them well.**

2. **Establish a stimulating working environment.** One that tolerates and develops a healthy competition for good ideas and good execution. You make excellence a goal. You encourage differences of opinion. You invite criticism from bosses and peers and subordinates. You let people work as long and as hard as they want, with as much privacy as they want. Sometimes this means closing openings with doors, raising partitions to the ceil-

ing. You establish an environment where one can argue with the boss, get a chance to fall on his or her face, where people can feed and thrive on others who make them think, stay on their toes, not vegetate or merely suffer an internship.

3. **Don't make demi-Gods of so-called creative types.** Have everyone observe the same disciplines, and have some. Don't ivory-tower anyone. Expect lots of good work, not just work, and demand it regularly.

4. **Set creative standards.** Give people creative goals to shoot for, pedestals to climb on, stars to reach for.

5. **Reward people.** Give them recognition for goals reached—rewards and incentives such as status, titles, promotions, rugs on the floor, free tickets to the opera or a good play, salary raises, publicity, public commendations, special honors and awards.

6. **Challenge minds** with such stimuli as creative reviews, mind-stretching seminars, even brainstorming sessions.

7. **Get and encourage empathy**—the ability to see things the way the other guy sees it.

### *Creativity Can be Destroyed*

How do you kill creativity?

1. **Use cliches.** Use clever innuendoes that only your profession understands. Use vague, general, tired, soggy, passive, limp words and expressions that take up page space, make noise on pages, TV tubes, radio airwaves, theater stages, screens, public platforms—like top profit, extra strength, highest efficiency, total performance, quality, integrity, value, rugged construction, extra strength—words and expressions that are almost useless. They are worn out. They melt into the crowd of words and few notice them. You pass them by in everyone else's copy, yet you want to edit them back into your own.

2. **Avoid criticism.** Or if you want it, get it from your subordinates who'll be nice and considerate to the boss. Or you can take criticism lightly, figure it came from a bunch of jealous cranks in the company. It's interesting about criticism. There is no better way to find out if you have communicated than to ask someone to play back to you what you have said or written.

3. **Prepare poorly** for what you're going to create. Jump in without planning and thinking first. Get mired in trivia or irrele-

vant detail. Spend your energies eluding as evasively as possible, or as easily as possible, the commitment you have instead of mining and refining, making music instead of noise.

4. **Get mentally lazy.** Don't make waves. Spend your time staring at the boob tube every night. Be a recluse. Read the sports pages, Playboy magazine only, sex novels. Constantly reminisce on the "good old generation," condemn "today's reckless youth." Let the other chumps think, worry, create.

5. **Abandon ambition.** Coast in to retirement, physically and mentally. Watch the world go by. Just put in time on the job, and on whatever else you do. And, don't do too much.

6. **Be a pushover for bizarre, seemingly clever ideas.** Lose your objectivity in evaluating them. Forget about the soundness and usefulness of what you evaluate. Label anything different as creative.

### *Great Ideas Serve a Purpose*

We all thirst for creativity to produce great ideas. But great ideas aren't much good if they're not useful. And what's the need for any creativity, or more of it, except to find better, more useful solutions to problems? People problems. Product problems. Service problems. Organizational problems. Communications problems. All kinds of problems.

There is a point to all of this. Ours is a business of communicating ideas, old and new. We have to make faceless organizations, associations, departments, companies, people, and things personable; make useful ideas, products, and services desirable; clarify and promote new ideas and concepts; create friendships for our service, our company, our group. It takes imaginative, creative communications to do this. It takes an awareness of all of the senses, and of all of the means and routes of communications to the images formed by those senses.

An awful lot of what you and I say and write winds up a total waste because of how we say or write it. It isn't imaginative, some of it (maybe much of it) isn't even good.

Creative communications gets through to people, finds their wave length, twangs their minds, hearts, emotions, even their pocketbooks. It makes music, not noise.