

The emergence of creativity as a serious business tool

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Many still think of Creativity in terms of design, dance, music and painting but it is being widely used within a business context.

At a high level, the use of Creativity simply means that we are employing alternative modes of thinking and using new ways of looking at, and finding answers for our business problems. In the current economic climate we can find new ways to beat our competitors and to ensure the sustainability of our organisations.

Some traditional business processes must still continue such as business and strategic planning, but what if you could create a better strategic plan in just an afternoon?

The world's current economic crisis has partly arisen because a lack of vision about what the future might hold. Much scenario planning relies on a series of 'what if' questions and fixed percentage increases in costs and resources. This assumes a strong relationship between the present and the future. In order to put a man on the moon, NASA was forced to create an appropriate model.

Using a mix of traditional and creative techniques we can predict the future up to 30 years in advance and then base our strategic plans upon this vision. This seems to be much more satisfactory than simply increasing our budgets and headcounts according to inflation estimates.

Creativity is also a key component of Innovation. Here we are thinking more than just

shiny new gadgets and high technology. The key advantage here is that because we are creating an advantage that is knowledge or behaviour based, it cannot be easily copied.

So what can we do with these new ideas? We can create sustainable 'innovation machines' rather than use traditional company structures. We can improve both organisational and personal creativity in a targeted and measurable way and we can transfer these new skills much more cheaply than traditional skill sets and training methods.

The flip side is that as Leaders and Managers in a global economy we must be prepared to live with a degree of ambiguity as well as adopt new ways of thinking and working. If we can accomplish this then the world really will be at our feet.

THOUGHTS FROM UNDER AFRICAN SKIES

During my recent visit to Malawi I had the pleasure of speaking at seminars and workshops to a large number of very interesting people. I used the 'How do you get a giraffe into a fridge' test on my audiences and was pleasantly surprised to find that answers were richer and more numerous than elsewhere.

One of the central themes of Creativity is play, and education systems are designed to help us pass exams and be less creative. We then have to undergo a degree of 'unlearning' to be playful in the workplace. In our so called developed countries we have extensive educational systems, whilst in developing

countries the systems are often constrained to keeping young people in school and teaching basic skills well. Yet there has been an explosion in many developing nations within Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. In Cuba, trade embargoes have meant that motor engineers have created substitute brake fluid from shampoo and sugar.

This natural creativity is present in us all when we are born but seems to remain only in countries where there are 'light touch' education systems. In young people the two main drivers of Creativity are an education system that does not stifle or judge and a culture that allows play and lets 'children be children'.

As we grow up, different factors come into play which are mainly cultural. This often means that in developed countries we are keen to be creative and innovative but we have lost the tools to work this way - our solution is to undertake even more training. In developing countries, people have the natural tools but social pressures sometimes inhibit the ability to be critical or express radical thoughts openly - some people are just too polite.

In my view, the developing countries could have the edge but it will be a close run thing. The situation is obviously more complicated but these points should give us all food for thought.

Derek Cheshire specialises in developmental activities, managing innovation, team building and cultural change. He focuses on the use of creativity as a business tool and the measurement of innovation.
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