

catalysts

UNLOCKING
THE
INVENTIVENESS
WITHIN

“Everybody born comes from the Creator trailing wisps of glory. We come from the Creator with creativity. I think that each one of us is born with creativity.”

—Maya Angelou

BY JULIE JACOBS

for creativity

Just what is creativity?

“My definition is the ability to produce different and valuable results,” says Lynne Levesque, author of *Breakthrough Creativity: Achieving Top Performance Using the Eight Creative Talents* (Nicholas Brealey, 2001). “I think when you look at the lives of the people who in history are considered to be great creatives, such as Thomas Jefferson, Claude Monet, Mozart, etc., they not only come up with the idea, they also execute and create some work out of that idea.”

Creativity and innovation expert Michael J. Gelb, who wrote *How to Think Like Leonardo Da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Every Day* (Delacorte Press, 1998), adds, “The key is it’s something new. It’s actually a solution to something and it proves useful or valuable. That’s how we know it’s creative as opposed to just different.”

For years, “different” described our brain’s right and left hemispheres and their role in thought. After neuropsychologist Roger Sperry won the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine in 1981 for his split-brain research in epilepsy patients, the belief that the left side manages analytical and critical thinking while the right controls imagination and free thinking mistakenly became a scientific rule of thumb. More recent studies have focused instead on the whole brain—and all thought processes—as catalysts for creativity.

“There’s no evidence of brain localization for creativity,” points out R. Keith Sawyer, professor of educational innovation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and author of *Zig Zag: The Surprising Path to Greater Creativity* (Wiley/Jossey-Bass, 2013). “Creativity, like most higher cognitive functions, is diffused and distributed throughout the brain. And we haven’t learned anything new about creativity from brain imaging technology that we didn’t already know from experimental cognitive psychology laboratory design.... The secret to creativity is not visible in the brain.”

While there’s also no clear-cut evidence that creativity has a genetic component, many experts argue that there may be a predisposition that is nurtured by interests and hobbies handed down from generation to generation, as well as by the environments in which we are raised and educated.



Mind the Myths

Not surprisingly, misconceptions have grown around the idea of creativity. Consider these:

- *Creativity is only about being an artist.* Not so. Lacking the skills to paint, sing, or produce art in any form doesn't mean you can't be creative in other arenas. You can be creative in the way you develop a team or lead an organization, or even in how you generate ideas and execute them. Levesque cites Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King Jr., who dealt creatively with political problems.
- *Creativity is linked with mental illness.* To the contrary, investigations studying thousands of people have found the incidence of mental illness among creative people is not higher than among the general population. In fact, research shows that engaging in creative pursuits is associated with mental health and positive psychological outcomes.

- *Creativity is all about having a big idea and then simply executing it.* Not so, says Sawyer. Creative people actually have small ideas that may or may not be good ones. And they don't know which are which until they go through the process of getting their ideas out into the world.

Creative people typically are alert, with a heightened awareness of their environment. They continually ask questions, generate ideas, envision possibilities, and externalize their thoughts.

TAPPING YOUR PERSONAL CREATIVITY

“Creativity is inventing, experimenting, growing, taking risks, breaking rules, making mistakes, and having fun.”

—Mary Lou Cook

Want to cultivate your creativity? Try the practices below to help realize the possibilities.

- ▶ **Ask yourself questions to determine what your creative talents are and how to mine them.** For example, what kind of environment is best for you to be creative—quiet with soft music, or surrounded by others? Do you have enough time to pursue your creativity? Are there obstacles you can identify and overcome? What processes can you use to develop ideas?
- ▶ **Balance intensive work with relaxation.** This is called incubation, which creativity researchers report aids the creative process. “The ‘ah-ha,’ the breakthrough, comes in the receptive or relaxed state,” says Michael J. Gelb, an expert in innovation and creativity. “It’s interval training for the mind.” So shut off the electronics, go for a walk, listen to music, or exercise.
- ▶ **Get as many ideas out into the world as you can** and then decide which ones aren't feasible or relevant and which ones you want to and can explore further.
- ▶ **Keep a notebook wherever you go** to jot down thoughts, doodle, and draw. Later, review and analyze them.
- ▶ **Find role models who inspire you** and have transformed themselves or their field, and study what they do. They can be historical or contemporary figures, or individuals in your own life.
- ▶ **Talk to a lot of people.** Network not with a specific self-serving agenda, but rather for the fun of hearing about the interests and experiences of others.
- ▶ **Be a “dabbler” and expose yourself to new and different sources of stimuli.** Learning is very important to keeping your creative edge and growing your creative confidence. Take a class in something you know nothing about. Read a how-to book about a hobby you've never tried before.



Creative to a T

Creative people typically are alert, with a heightened awareness of their environment. They continually ask questions, generate ideas, envision possibilities, and externalize their thoughts. And they explore new activities to broaden their horizons. Individuals who tend to be creative are sometimes referred to as T-shaped people: The vertical bar of the “T” represents their domain-specific (or professional) expertise, while the horizontal bar symbolizes a basic working knowledge of a wide variety of subjects, which allows them to make connections that frequently lead to creative insight.

“The creative process is not linear, and it’s impossible to predict where it’s going to go,” says education professor and author R. Keith Sawyer. “Creative people don’t know what they’re doing until they start doing it. And what it turns out to be surprises them.”

Passionate, curious, committed, and open to new ideas and feedback—these are the characteristics often attributed to creative people. Still, says Sawyer, there isn’t a whole lot of scientific proof that certain personality traits are associated with creativity. “I think of it as a set of behaviors that can be learned. If you’re talking about traits,

that implies you’re stuck with them... Behaviors anyone can learn, anyone can engage in them.”

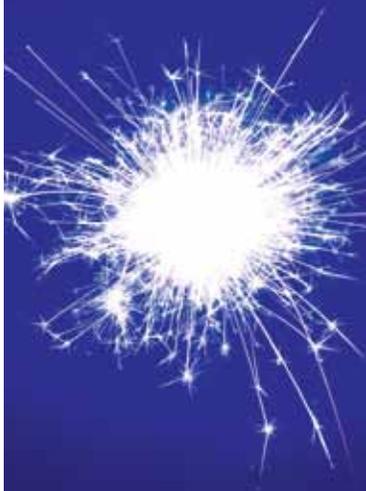
The good news is that we all are capable of unlocking our individual storehouses of inventiveness. That’s certainly the philosophy at the International Center for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo State University, the “first and oldest degree-granting program in creativity in the world.” Yes, with creativity based on cognitive functions and structures possessed by every human being, the potential to be creative is universal—as long as we don’t constantly underestimate ourselves. Such think-

ing becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that doesn’t render creative solutions, says innovation guru Michael Gelb. Author Lynne Levesque agrees, noting that our concepts of ourselves as uncreative can be one of our biggest obstacles.

Why some of us are more creative than others may just be a matter of behavior. “I think it’s because [highly creative people] have learned how to engage in a certain set of practices that consistently lead to successful creative outcomes,” Sawyer says. “We all have the same cognitive capabilities as the most extremely creative individual. It’s a positive, life-affirming message.”

“Everyone who’s ever taken a shower has had an idea. It’s the person who gets out of the shower, dries off, and does something about it who makes a difference.”

—Nolan Bushnell



CREATIVITY AT WORK

Creativity takes work and typically involves many starts and stops. If a business is too fearful of failure and maintains a culture of risk avoidance, creativity can be stymied, with negative consequences.

When it comes to creative teamwork, in particular, experts say leaders need to promote an atmosphere of openness while simultaneously defining welcome behaviors, setting parameters, implementing processes, and employing tools for constructive feedback, decision making, and conflict resolution. Managing a team’s creativity also calls for recognizing each member’s strengths and personalities and playing to them.

“You need to respect some people’s need to let some ideas incubate and other people’s ability to generate ideas at the drop of a hat,” notes Lynne Levesque, a consultant in business creativity, innovation, and leadership. She also emphasizes the importance of asking questions that promote input, such as “What are some other possibilities here?” and “Tell me more why you think this is going to work or not work.”

Creativity and innovation specialist Michael J. Gelb recommends mind mapping to generate and share ideas in the workplace. A mind map is a nonlinear diagram that sprouts pictures, colors, and keywords from a central concept. It’s a fun way to express thoughts and structure information both logically and imaginatively. Mind mapping “is a more networked, organic model, as opposed to the outline top-down hierarchy,” Gelb says. “It’s a thinking tool for a more collaborative world.”

Award-winning writer **Julie Jacobs** cultivates her creativity in Scotch Plains, New Jersey.