

CHAPTER

1

“But, I’m Not Creative”

Yes, you are. We all are.

You’ve just forgotten how to be creative. Or had it drilled out of you.

The truth is, we all have the ability to think in fresh ways and to solve problems.

A study of large groups of rank-and-file mechanics found that two-thirds of them rated above average in creative capacity.

Decades of psychological tests reveal that creative talent is normally distributed. All of us possess this talent to some degree.

What blocks the path to new ideas?

Sometimes, the blockage may build up because we lose the impulse to imagine as we grow up. Sometimes, bosses get in the

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way of original ideas. Sometimes, your own expectations are too high and get in your own way.

Kids Do It

We’ll start by describing a consultation with real experts on this matter: Children.

We have a group of second graders sitting around their classroom, looking at an empty tin can with both ends cut off. Then, we ask them what they could use it for. Whoa, Nellie! The ideas come flying:

- A bug keeper.
- An ant home.
- A bank.
- To play kick the can.
- A washing machine for small people.
- A hat for a doll.
- A telephone.
- Half of stilts.
- A toy for the cat.
- A hand-squeezer for my dad.
- Something to melt down and morph into a Power Ranger.

Now, take that same empty tin can and give it to a group of upwardly mobile middle managers at any corporation in the United States.

“Please give me all possible uses for this empty tin can. You have 60 seconds.”

Uhhhhhhhh.

What Happened?

For the most part, young people are open, trusting, un-self-conscious, and playful.

Parents, educators, and adults who want to become Idea-Wise, listen up. “Pretend” games are good. People should try lots of different things, without the pressure to succeed. Don’t expect perfection in all things. Color outside the lines.

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Picasso once said that, after he learned to draw on a level with Raphael, he had to discover how to draw like a child.

How come kids are so clever? Why are adults less so?

Because our imagination tends to contract as our knowledge and judgment expand.

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Because the older we get, the less original and more standard our answers become.

Because the stubborn rules of business tend to stamp out fresh thinking.

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What If?

When we were little kids, we all fantasized. We lived in castles filled with angels. A darkened room became a cave with knights and dragons. The legs of chairs became obstacles as we fought our way westward with the pioneers.

This is the “What if?” world of childhood.

If you retain that ability, or can regain it, you become what is typically called *creative*.

We’ve found that asking “What if?” becomes a lot easier when you attach that open-ended question to an existing idea. For example, What if we substituted an ingredient in this product? What if it were bigger? Or smaller? What if we combined something with the service we now offer?

Nahh, That Will Never Work

One big difference between children and adults is the level of criticism. Second graders usually don’t get comments like these (all of which we’ve overheard at ideation sessions):

- Our customers would never go for that.
- Our employees would never go for that.
- We’ve tried that.
- That would take too much time.
- That would cost too much.
- Why don’t you flesh that out in a memo?

- Maybe next year.
- That's not our job.
- Those people don't count.
- They'll never buy that.
- Who'd be interested in that?
- We don't have the time right now.
- That's not how we do things.

New ideas are fragile. They can be killed by a sneer or a yawn. But when we are children (or childlike), we don't harbor negativity. Instead, we wonder and explore simply for the joy of it. If you're in the business of encouraging new ideas, keep encouraging the people around you with a positive environment and avoid presenting worst-case scenarios.

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An Inborn Trait?

There's a misguided belief that the ability to come up with new ideas is an inborn trait and cannot be cultivated. In other words, either you are creative or you're not.

Baloney.

Too many people believe being creative is a gift limited to the very few and is associated only with uniqueness or artistry.

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That highly intelligent people are the most creative. That creativity declines precipitously as you age.

More baloney. Decades of tests for creative aptitude have disproved every one of those beliefs.

That sudden hunch, that creative leap of the mind that “sees” in a flash how to solve a problem in a new way, is something quite different from general intelligence.

Studies reported in *Scientific American* show that people with a high “Eureka!” ability all have at least moderate intelligence. But beyond that, there seems to be no correlation between high intelligence and the ability to envision simple solutions for complex problems.

So here it is, flat out: Anybody can be creative:

- The Wright brothers were bike mechanics and school dropouts, not aeronautical engineers. (Education alone isn’t the key to new ideas.)
- The ballpoint pen was invented by a sculptor. (Skilled people, trained in their field, don’t have all the answers.)
- The telegraph was created by Samuel Morse, a professional portrait painter. (Artists can be technologists.)

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So, Where Do New Ideas Come From?

Aristotle and Socrates pondered that question, without ever answering it. Since then, thousands of articles and books have been written about the creative process and the mind's inner workings. We have heard hundreds of theories and explanations, along with a large dose of mumbo jumbo.

Lateral thinking. Optimal visioning. Mind-brain interfaces. The neurophysiology of thought. Mental permeability. Conceptual fusioning. Whew!

An easy way to think about thinking is to frame it in three somewhat imprecise steps:

1. *Preparation.* Immerse yourself in the problem. Collect information, data, and opinions. Tell your brain to get to work.
2. *Incubation.* While you're busy doing other things, a part of your unconscious mind is swirling. Your brain juxtaposes thoughts and funnels concepts together.
3. *Illumination.* A new and reasonably complete idea surfaces, seemingly out of nowhere. Voilà! You've done it.

So, What's an Idea?

Those three steps are interesting—but they're not very helpful because they merely explain *what* happens, more or less. But, exactly *how* it happens is another matter.

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So, let’s consult another source of great wisdom in Western civilization—the comics. In the comic strip *B.C.*, two characters are leaning on a rock, discussing our subject:

FIRST GUY: “What’s an idea?”

SECOND GUY: “An idea is an inspirational thought.”

FIRST GUY: “Where does it come from?”

SECOND GUY: “I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Ahhh, but there are Big Thinkers out there who would take issue with *B.C.*

They are absolutely, positively prepared to show you how to summon an inspirational thought. Lurking in the soft underbelly of American business, they make up the Idea Industry—a collection of self-righteous know-it-alls, modern-day Robin Hoods, and outright quacks.

They want to turn the search for new ideas into a gimmicky science.

It’s a science, they maintain, that you will never fully master on your own.

But it’s a science you can “rent” from this covey of ideation experts, for a significant piece of change.