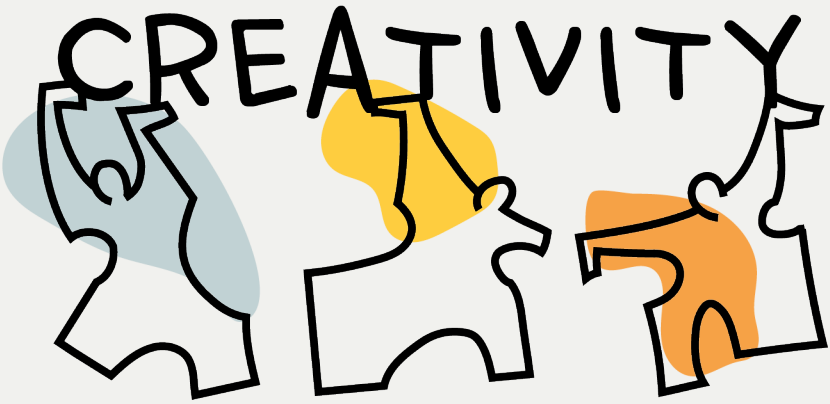
THE CHARACTERS OF CREATIVITY



Activate Creativity By Understanding Your Colleagues

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This book is a practical guide for managers and colleagues of creative people. It is my attempt at deepening the quality of creativity at work whilst diminishing the amount stifled at birth by poor management or insensitive colleagues.

The analysis and subsequent advice offered here is based on my own long experience of working with creative people, first as a colleague, then as their manager and latterly as head of the organisation. The research that underpins this book is therefore qualitative rather than quantitative, and, just like the creative process itself, indeterminate, chaotic, divergent, non-instrumental and all just a bit random. My audacity in suggesting that I might be able to help you in working with your creatives relies simply on the fact that if I learnt how to do it, you can too. And, with my help, I trust you will accumulate the necessary skills rather more quickly than I did.

The practical nature of my aim and my 'research' means that the starting point for discussing creativity is not the brain's chemical peculiarities that those people labelled 'creative' are said to possess, nor is it the psychological origins of the many and various distinctive characteristics that creatives frequently display through their work. No, my observations kick off where those investigations into the origins of creativity end. They started for me at the same point at which they probably start for you: the

moment you meet a new colleague at work who turns out to be rather creative. Perhaps he or she was explicitly employed to be creative; perhaps not.

'He or she'. I'll get this out of the way right now. In my view there is no relationship between gender and creativity, nor is there between any particular style or focus of creativity and the gender of the creative person. However, in this book you will see I do allocate a gender to creative caricatures. The allocation is random and undertaken simply to avoid the tedious 'he or she', and the only mildly better 'he/she'. Additionally, my justification for assigning genders as well as names to the caricatures – Playful, Molotov, Solo, Artiste, Monk, and all the rest who are woven through the book in chapters of their own – is a desire on my part to breathe some humanity into these bloodless ciphers in the hope that you will recognise their characteristics having seen them displayed every day at work by colleagues who do indeed have names and probably genders.

The structure of this book alternates between sketches of creative traits – the named and gendered caricatures – and more conventional discussions of creativity. All end with advice on how the colleague or manager keen to promote creativity might act. The more conventional chapters inevitably rely heavily on the work of other scholars. A short list of sources cited is provided, but it is only fair to identify Gordon Torr's magnificent and very readable book, *Managing Creative People*, as the origin and prompter of many ideas here examined. The chapters that introduce the

creative caricatures are however my own dangerous innovation. I'll tell you how I came to invent them before explaining how to avoid their dangers.

My career started in earnest as a lecturer in music at a university in the middle of England (I'm glazing over my stint as a deliverer of newspapers and a disastrous spell misunderstanding computers at Oxford University). As an academic musician working within a faculty principally concerned with the practical making of music, I was among creative colleagues whose ways of working seemed all just a bit chaotic to me – albeit a delightful change from the algorithms of Oxford. I set about trying to insert some of my conventional order into this disorder. I now regret this, for I was attempting to dismantle a key characteristic of creativity: apparent chaos. Anyway, universities are big organisations run by serious people with conventional ideas of 'good' management, so I was rapidly promoted to increasingly senior levels in the music school. But I wasn't totally blind to what my colleagues were actually trying to do and the ways they were doing it. They were hard working, obsessed – sorry, that's my conventional interpretation – no, they were dedicated to guarding the long-evolved pedagogy and practice of their art from intruders, like me. Their other characteristics often included: fears about their own ongoing abilities as creatives; a sense of playfulness; a protective attitude to the products of their creativity; a mistrust of evaluation and other manifestations of 'management'; a blind eye for deadlines; and a common

preference for working alone reflected in an awkwardness in teams beyond the perceived boundaries of their discipline. Course validation events were therefore not popular; rehearsing string quartets, fine.

I was then asked by the head of my university to negotiate the entry of a local private drama college into our organisation. My musical colleagues warned against the plan: "They're so different from us!" You've guessed what I found: fears about ongoing creativity; playfulness; protectiveness; mistrust of 'management'; the same blindspot for deadlines; and a common preference for creating alone. I was learning…

Next, as principal of a drama college in London, no longer working with musicians but amidst the same preoccupations. Then, as president of Singapore's major international arts college. Lots of different disciplines, all unique in their practice but linked by the same characteristics of creative people. You can see now how the births in this book came about: Solo (works best alone); Molotov (fights against management); Wobbly (insecure); Playful (fun but a bit annoying); Artiste (hyper-protective of the objects she creates); and all the rest. They are the common characteristics of the creatives I have been privileged to work with time and time again but now distilled into fictional distinct caricatures of creativity.

This distillation has the advantage of being able to focus on a single characteristic leading to specific comments on how

colleagues and managers might best react. The name with which I have awarded each caricature is, of course, suggestive of the creative characteristic being examined. But it's a dangerous method, and I suspect its advantages only just outweigh its negative elements. I've noticed that friends testing the caricatures often say things like: "Oh yeah, I'm definitely a Solo...", or "Bill's certainly a Wobbly." Fun, but contorting real life, for all my caricatures are single aspects abstracted from multifaceted human beings. I stress therefore, despite my friends' assertions, that Picky, Wobbly, Molotov *et al* do not exist, and although they have names and genders, have never existed. But they might, I hope, remind you of certain behaviours that your own creative colleagues display from time to time. And, because you understand Picky, Solo or Monk, you will be able to assist your colleagues to deepen their own creativity yet further.

One more danger of my approach: don't mistake the arrow for a boomerang. Whilst many creative people are worried about their own inventiveness, are often playful and chaotic in the ways they work, and are frequently sceptical of management, the reverse is not necessarily true. Many of your colleagues may possess unremarkable powers of creativity but still hate the boss. Having a deep mistrust of management does not therefore mean you're highly creative.

It's important that I acknowledge a tension between creativity itself and my analysis of creativity. This book, in line with the thinking of other writers, observes the process that humans

go through to produce an output that might be regarded by others, as well as perhaps themselves, as 'creative'. This process varies massively from one creative person to the next and seems steeped in uncertain psychological and physical influences and unpredictable external and internal factors.

The process may be quick or slow, painful or pleasurable, the solution to a known problem, or an irrelevant stab at a totally disconnected subject. Not surprisingly, for such an indeterminate and uncertain process, creativity seems to thrive best in divergent, even chaotic, environments and to wither when constrained by rules, customs and tradition. Organisations are organised; creativity isn't. How can they possibly work together? And yet, here is a book that champions chaos in organisations and claims it can work! An organisation is structured, measured and usually has agency to define and pursue goals; the creative colleagues it employs are using largely unstructured methods and unmeasurable processes with uncertain agency, apparently in pursuit of those organisational goals. I am not, by the rigour of my 'solutions' attempting to dismantle the inherent spontaneity of creativity or undermine the necessary structure of the organisation. I'm simply trying to get the two working more easily together for the benefit of both. And the conduit for the balm that I'm trying to massage into this interface is the people: the creatives, their colleagues and their managers.

So, that's the first tension that worries its way through this book. A second, linked concern is that I might be attempting

to mechanise creativity. No, I'm simply suggesting how organisations can work effectively and happily with their creative colleagues. I set about this by teasing apart certain characteristics of creative people while making no attempt to control, systematise or teach the process of creativity. The book's goal is the release of more and better creativity, and thus a deepening of our respect for creativity as a hugely valuable and mysterious attribute of humanity. An attempt to mechanise creativity would not only undermine the essential humanity and spontaneity of the process, but also, I hope, be doomed to failure.

In a book about creatives, it's obviously more than a little useful to identify who it is we're actually discussing. Chapter 2 *Are we all creative?* goes into the details, but it's worth pointing out here that creatives are not identifiable by the job they do but by how they do the job. So, this book is not simply focused on 'creative' people working in the arts or, more broadly, within 'creative professions' (architects, designers…), but instead casts its gaze still wider to invite all people who bring a sniff of creativity to the way they work.

And the reason I've written this book? I'm a creativity fan. I know that creativity provides solutions to problems and delight to the soul, optimism for the future and fun for today. Who wouldn't be a fan of creativity? Well, apparently lots of people and companies judging by the way creativity is stifled by organisational protocols, well-meaning yet misguided management and colleagues' insensitivity. It is a goal of this book to broaden and deepen

humanity's pool of creativity by contesting its suppression and neglect through enriching management and interpersonal practice to the benefit of all.

One final, bathetic apology: 'creative' as a noun rather than just an adjective. I don't like it, I railed against it, but well, language has its own creative and innovative process too, I suppose.

PICKY

"HANG ON A SECOND, THERE'S JUST ONE MORE THING..."

You'll find Picky in many organisations. She's great, works hard and is determined to produce the finest quality creative product she possibly can. She'll say, whilst rushing lunch at her desk: "Well, yes, I suppose I am a bit of a perfectionist." And that's her reputation in the organisation: nothing duff gets past our Picky. Excellent, Pickys are vital for quality. Okay, sometimes she can be a bit annoying when a deadline is approaching, for there's always, always just one more thing that Picky must put right, although the rest of your team knows it's good enough already. But, most of the time you can put up with that.

Picky picks not only at the end of a project but all the way through from conception to delivery, and it's this observation that makes you wonder if 'perfectionist' is really quite the right role-label to pin on her psychological lapel. It's not wrong exactly but not quite the whole story. For Picky is engrossed in the process of creativity more than the product of creativity. To her, the engineering, craft and intellectual challenge of creativity is profoundly satisfying and Picky doesn't want it to stop. Picking at problems – real or invented – is her way of prolonging the fun. So, her title 'perfectionist' isn't wrong exactly – because near-perfection is often the result of her work – but it's a kind of mask she wears over her true identity: Picky.

So, she insists that all contradictory opinions be exhaustively debated, and you notice the way she loves to analyse and critique others' work, to pick at existing problems she's found and predict new ones that haven't yet emerged, if they ever will. For Picky