The Creativity Continuum and Some Organisational Implications

Ray Clapp, Ph.D.
Visiting Professor, University of Hertfordshire, UK
Research Fellow, Occupational Research Centre, UK

Abstract

The current managerial preoccupation with Innovation is addressed by way of a discussion that illustrates that creativity comes in a range of different styles from the Adaptive (incremental adjustments to the current ways of doing things) to the Innovative (new ways of doing things). Thus creativity in an organisational context to be successful needs diversity rather than a single style. The pursuit of a single style without diversity leads to a diminishing organisational performance

Key Words: *problem-solving, creativity continuum, adaption, innovation, diversity, organisational performance*

Introduction

Many people in their place of work will have experience of situations where managers, some very senior have extolled the need for their organisation / staff to be more creative. When these demands are further analysed it is not clear what is meant by 'being creative'. Is it being used **Adaptively** to improve the general day-to-day working arrangements, or is there a need for a more **Innovative** solution (say, to introduce a change in performance beyond what is seen as possible using current solutions)? This lack of clarity usually comes about for three main reasons which are the following:

1. Problem-Solving Context

To be creative we need a problem to solve as well as the motivation to solve it. Our lives are spent solving problems, how do we save 10% from this quarter's budget? At home, where the air-con fan has burnt out for the second time should we buy a new fan or have the old one repaired again? Thus we cannot just be 'creative', first we need a problem to solve. But before we can solve the problem, the context and expected outcomes need some definition. To help in this description we build mental models of possible solutions and use the results to articulate an improved description of the problem. It is a description that we are able to share with others either as part of a project team or from an individual perspective with like-minded colleagues. This opens the way for both synergistic solutions as well as organisational learning. The diversity of views brings different skills and knowledge to bear on understanding the problem and its context, as well as helping to build a shared understanding of the issues involved.

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2. Creativity Continuum

The second difficulty stems from Adaptive outcomes not being recognised as being part of a creative continuum that ranges from at one end, the 'Adaptive' where outcomes are substantially within the current paradigm, through to the other end, the 'Innovative' where outcomes are substantially outside of the current paradigm. These are the polar markers of the creative style continuum. These polar outcomes are opposite in nature. Aspects such as: Organisational Disruption (skills structure and competencies), Supply Chain disturbance, Costs, Profits, Time-scales and Risk, all tend to be lower for Adaptive outcomes and higher for the Innovative. However, irrespective of these differences, it is crucial that both styles of outcome are recognised as being able to provide creative solutions that match the problem-solving context. Often creativity is erroneously described as relating only to the Innovative end of the continuum casting all of the Adaptive contributions as being non-creative.

3. Range of Solutions

The third reason for misunderstanding is that for each problem that we attempt to define and solve there can be only a narrow range of solutions that offer an effective answer. If the constraints of the problem definition are sound and require solutions that lay at the Adaptive end of the creativity continuum, there is little to be gained by the manager insisting that the solution should be more Innovative. Similarly, if the problem is defined such that Innovative solutions are required then all Adaptive solutions will be seen as inadequate. It is not that the ideas associated with these differences in required style are inherently poor; they may have significant intellectual merit but still not meet the constraints of the problem context. In problem solving, intellectual merit (elegance) is seen as being more concerned with the quality of the solution (idea) and as such is cast as largely independent of creative style.

Creativity and the Individual

The degree to which we construct our mental models using either algorithmic thinking or heuristic thinking determines the degree of structure used to form the concepts employed. This preference for the different forms of thinking is amply described by Kelly (1963) in his Modulation and Fragmentation corollaries and by Kirton (1976; 2006). The Adaptive-Innovative (A-I) dimension as Kirton defines it, describes preferences where the individual given free rein will at one end of the continuum as concerned with efficiency and rule/group conformity (Adaption). While an individual at the other end, will be more concerned with originality and be indifferent to (even unaware of) rules and conformity (Innovation). These two different sets of preferences describe the two poles of the creative style continuum and also offer a link to transactional transformational styles associated with Leadership (Bass ,1998) and Values (Swartz, 1999).

These preferences have also been related to the personality domain through the dimensions of intuitive/sensing (Myers-Briggs 1985), as well as the open/closed-minded (Costa and McCrea, 1992). Contemporary descriptions of individual personality suggest five pervasive dimensions involving different factors and contrasts of characteristic

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behaviour. These dimensions can be used in varying combinations to explain the more complex aspects of behaviour associated with learning, leadership, problem-solving and communication, etc. (Von Wittich, 2011).

The Creative Individual -Social and Organisational Culture

Culture consists of a set of constraints and demands that influence the structure of an individual's mental models. The structure of culture is built from salient perceptions of 'expected' behaviours that stems from interpersonal relationships with significant organisational stakeholders. These behavioural expectations stem from both social traditions, as well as organisational settings where the activities of similar jobs attract people with similar stylistic preferences (as well as similar skills). While style (and its associated personality dimensions) has a normal distribution in the general population stylistic islands can appear in both large and small organisations where the job tasks demand particular cultural 'expectations' of behaviour (e.g. the differences between Research, Production and Marketing etc.)

The contribution of personality (with its roots in biology) and tradition (with its roots in process and structure) generates a cultural composite that effects employee selection as well as the dominant form of creative outcomes.

Conclusions and Managerial Implications

When considering any organisation, central to the view is the need for people to work together. Such a view promotes efficiency and synergy as well as the need for individuals to adopt interpersonal behaviour that minimises conflict. At its heart, this means individuals must understand each other to a level where issues that are going to promote conflict can be avoided or resolved to enable the pursuit of the task in hand. However when individuals, with a wide separation between either their personal preferences or their cultural traditions come together to discuss any particular issue, their mental models may be so different that that they will see each other in relatively pejorative terms. Thus, much of their energy will go in trying to resolve their differences in outlook rather than progressing the problem or issue to be solved. So individual style diversity in teams, while adding richness to problem solving outcomes, also involves a necessary management overhead to resolve style/culture differences in order to progress and maintain interpersonal relationships. Because of the need to optimise the balance between diversity and efficiency only sufficient diversity of style and other resources should be used to obtain the situational outcome desired. When diversity is more than what is required to respond adequately to the demands of different situations is best viewed as an organisational investment as it is not sustainable without additional management costs.

Should the investment in diversity be limited then, the team or the organisation's cultural norms act as an attractor around which acceptable personal preferences settle (due to both attrition and recruitment profiles). This commonality limits the response to varying situational demands both from the style of options proposed as solutions, as well

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as the choice of solution from among the options proposed. While socio-cultural systems have the ability to generate intentional variation through idea selection and decision making, any lack of diversity means options and decisions are inclined to follow the current path, (be it Adaptive or Innovative) rather than service the wider demands of the situational context.

In most commercial organisations there is always a search for more profitable ways of using the resources and competencies available. Some of these ways will be through the more Adaptive change concerned with 'doing things better' (Drucker, 1969). These ideas mainly address improvement to existing systems. If they offer significant value these improvements are quickly adopted. However as they can be easily copied they diffuse quickly into competitor organisations and do not offer lasting profitability or differentiating competence to the originators. Over time much of the profitability variance between organisations in the same business sector is eroded leading to a convergence of productivity and profit. This sets the context for a different style of creativity if further improvement is to be achieved.

Other routes to more profit will be through more Innovative ideas concerned with 'doing things differently' (Drucker, 1969). These changes offer a longer-term vision of how the organisational competencies (or variants of them) can be used to provide goods that are of greater value to the customer than are the current offerings and so increase the profitability of the originating organisation. These ideas are less easily copied. They involve higher costs and more risk due to the nature of the competencies and technologies involved. Furthermore, the way these characteristics are combined by cross-functional processes and involving all members of the supply chain adds to their uniqueness. After recovery of the implementation costs, these ideas lead to a widening of the profitability gap between organisations in the same sector, potentially eliminating the less profitable organisations. After such a period of successful organisational innovation, consolidation is required to preserve the profitability variance between organisations for as long as possible. The change of context calls for low risk adjustments to improve the efficiency of the Innovative changes.

While innovation and adaption have been described in rather polar forms, innovation can be placed anywhere along the A/I continuum. All that is required is that the proposed change breaks the existing paradigm. Such a change is always followed by more Adaptive ideas aimed at consolidating the change so as to provide the maximum of economic benefit to the organisation. If innovation is followed by evermore innovation, costs tend to rise and the organisation moves towards a more chaotic form. The opposite occurs where innovation is avoided and Adaptive ideas predominate. Here the organisation moves towards a more predictable form with low differentiation between competitors.

By continuing with either style to the point where medium term profitability is affected, the organisation moves towards the lower end of performance ranking for the sector albeit by different routes. To avoid this position, it is necessary to have sufficient diversity available to the team or the organisation so as to generate options and make decisions that are advantageous to the situation. Without such diversity a diminishing organisational performance can be expected.

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