



The Secrets of Creativity

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Transformation is not possible without a touch of new ideas. So, when you walk through our headquarters you detect a lot of that. No? Some? A little bit? Well, I guess there will be some of it out there, although much less than what one could expect. Isn't that strange? Why is that?

For one, creativity and military culture are not good friends. It seems that the things we value are counterproductive to creating ideas. Not convinced? Let me take you on a journey through some features of creativity and you will discover why that is. I have not the intention to show you all the secrets of creativity. I'm not sure if I can even do that. But, if you cherish the following secrets, you will be far ahead.

There can only be 1.

I like the movie 'Highlander' wherein eternal warriors have to fight each other because there can only be 1. And that one will get the prize. Do I like it because it's about warriors? Or is it because as an officer I go with the 'only 1' theme? As military, we tend to stick to one idea and pursue its success with a superhuman perseverance. We give almost no time to the creation of ideas and we put a lot of effort in keeping an already dead idea alive. But that is not how it works.

To come up with the '1', we need to have many. A good idea is the result of a Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' competition. And the fittest is the result of weeding out the bad and even good ones starting from a big bunch, not the result of mastering the art of CPR for an idea. Quantity is a quality on its own, as the Russians used to claim. Coming up with one good idea is a bad excuse to not try to find better ones.

Ask yourself how would the lightbulb have looked if Edison 'perfected' his first good idea with a military perseverance? By the way, that is an exercise in creativity (see later).

The power of 10.

No, Edison failed more than 1000 times. To use his words, he discovered more than 1000 ways how not to make a light bulb. How many failures are we allowed to make? But failure is an option; no, it is a necessity for creativity.

It is all about math. Finding the 1 is all about the power of 10. To come up with 1 bright idea, you will have to test 10 very good ideas. To find those 10 very good ideas, you will have to explore 100 promising ideas. To find those 100 ideas, you will have to come up with 1000 ideas. One bright idea means 1000 ideas, or 10 to the power of 3. This is not exact, but you get my drift.

When was the last time you formulated 1000 ideas? That long? Most of the time we're happy to propose only 3. What are the chances that one of those 3 is 'the' idea?

The value of an idea has no relation with the rank of the beholder.

Some officers are sitting around a table. The purpose of the meeting is to come up with an idea to solve a problem. After defining the problem, the group starts generating some ideas to tackle it. When some first ideas, nothing out-of-the-ordinary yet, are on the white board, a general enters the room. Without saying much, he looks at the problem definition on the board and immediately formulates an idea to solve it. He asks something and is gone again.

What are the chances that the group will stop generating ideas and immediately accept the ACOS's suggestion as the 1? A near certainty. Why? It is the idea of a high ranking officer, so it must be a good one.

Dead wrong. Creativity does not come with rank. I'm quite certain that it is not on the list of requirements to get promoted. Agreed, generals need to support an idea before it can be turned into reality, but we are not there yet.

So, the owner of an idea is by no means an indication of the quality. Remember even Edison, and the many inventors working for him, came up with more than 1000 stupid ideas for something as common as a light bulb.

The Principle of Uncertainty.

I would take it even one step further. If you can determine whose idea it was, you may be quite certain that it will be a bad one. The best ideas are generated during the most turbulent moments of a session of a heterogeneous group. During such moments you have almost no time to note the ideas themselves, let alone the name of the one who proposed it. During such rare moments of bursts of creativity, members are stealing and developing ideas. Would the so-called owner have come up with the idea not being part of the group? So who's really the owner?

Like the uncertainty principle of Herzberg in quantum mechanics, the higher the quality of an idea, the less we can determine the ownership. Or expressed in another way, the better we can define the owner, the worse the quality.

You don't catch wild horses in the corral.

Somebody explained to me a few months ago that the proposals that leave this HQ must fit inside the framework of policies and directives. I cannot argue against this. However...

A cowboy cannot tame and sell horses that are not inside his corral. But he will never catch them there. He has to take his horse and go out into the wild to catch them. Once caught, he has to bring them home.

We have to do the same thing. We have to venture outside the safety of the framework to hunt for good ideas. Once identified, we have to bring them to our corral.

Think of the box. Yes, the second one.

The policy framework is not the only one limiting our thinking. There is an even greater obstacle, and that is our box. Our own limitations, our internal framework. This one is much harder to leave behind, because most of us are not even aware of it.

Yes, if we were fortunate, we learned some 'out-of-the-box' thinking. Who has said "take away their box and they will create another one"? That other one, the second one, is the one we have to leave behind. We have to jump out of that one. When was the last time you did that?

Conflicts breed creativity.

I know, you know this one. Our study of military history provided us with ample examples of great ideas in time of conflict. If we know this, why aren't we using this to our advantage? Why not create conflict to generate ideas?

If everything is peaceful, if all agree, if all think alike, the stream of ideas will stay dry. Add somebody who thinks completely different. Add people who have no idea what you do. Give someone the task to disagree with the group. Create a conflict. Disrupt homogeneity. Be violent, but fair, in your disagreement. Do not go for a compromise or consensus. Go to war (only a figure of speaking)!

Educate, train and exercise.

Some are born into the art of creativity. Most of us have to learn it. There are techniques that you can master. The more techniques in your toolbox, the better you will be at picking the good ones in a particular situation (yep, the power of 10 applies here too). Educate yourself in those techniques. Train with them and exercise them in real situations. Only then will you get better.

If we all get better at creativity, by the power of 10, some will excel in it and we will be better transformers. Or is that another movie?

Some suggested books to educate yourself in creative techniques

Galindo, J. (2012). *The Power of Thinking Differently: An Imaginative Guide to Creativity, Change and the Discovery of New Ideas*. Los Alto, CA: Hyena Press

Michalko, M. (2006). *Thinkertoys: A Handbook of Creative Thinking Techniques*. Berkley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

The Memory Jogger: A Pocket Guide of Tools for Continuous Improvement (Memory Jogger).