

Stories of creation

Success in the new and noisy digital TV world will demand elastic thinking and beyond-the-box solutions. Easy, says Australian psychologist Dr. Chris Stevens. All you have to do is...

What is the first thing you do to explain that creativity is less the result of luck and/or genius than the result of an identifiable process that can be obtained by most people? Firstly, human understanding and thought generally is a creative process. While some of us are in practice more adept at creative processes, I believe we all have the capacity for creativity. When we understand the processes that lead to and underlie moments of creative insight, we can begin to practice and gain some mastery over them.

And secondly? Secondly, human thought is largely 'metaphorical' in that we constantly see events and objects as both like and unlike other events and objects. That is the essence of any metaphor. We are always creating individually unique and personally meaningful relationships between distinct things. I understand a film, for example, in ways that it is like, yet unlike another film or the way it fits and doesn't fit a genre of films. All thought is endlessly creative in this way.

And thirdly? Creative thought is a process involving alternating styles of consciousness that we can develop and get better at over time. We all do it intuitively when we are children, but tend to close the process down as we get to reliably 'know' more and more. A type of calculative, predictable thought process replaces a more open, experimental consciousness as we become more responsible and focused on results and getting things 'right'. By understanding the stages and processes of insight, and by being committed to creative endeavour, we can re-discover and further develop our 'childlike' modes of creative consciousness.

Anything else? Creativity as a process is very sensitive to the social environment. Anyone involved with the creative process, no matter what field of work, knows how sensitive it is to disruption, pressure and emotional upset. The truly creative workplace liberates its workers' creative potential. The right balance of structure and openness, of pressure and freedom are required for optimal creativity. Tolerance for mistakes and failures are necessary if we are to encourage risk-taking and long-term creative effort. Being validated as creative by others is enormously motivating. In such social conditions creativity is contagious.

Can you tell me more about your model of sustainable creativity? My colleagues and I have been working on a model of creativity that attempts to demonstrate and explain the 'typical' approaches to creative work in deadline-driven and high-pressure environments. Our model explains what we have called the "emotional roller-coaster", encapsulating the emotional and physiological changes that seem to occur when striving towards creative pursuits. It provides a great platform for informing people how they can adopt a healthier, more sustainable approach to their creative endeavours.

What's a worst thing creative people can do in an effort to increase their creativity? There are different ways to generate the alternating states of consciousness that reliably lead to creative insights. Some of these are fraught with danger such as driving oneself to 'hyper-arousal': to run on adrenaline, in an attempt to generate the capacity to hold enough in our mind at once to hopefully come up with creative associations. This can lead

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to an excess of stress hormones in the bloodstream making the person irritable and distracted, not to mention increasing cholesterol and blood pressure! It inevitably leads to a 'roller-coaster' effect where the person 'crashes' and has periodic 'lows', even depressive episodes, once a project finishes or a deadline is met, as the body struggles to re-establish its chemical balance.

And the best thing they can do? The sustainable path is to use the adrenaline pathway sparingly and to learn how to generate spread activation (patterns associated with creative insight) in the brain frequently throughout the day. This type of 'calm high' I call a 'meditative consciousness'. It is good for you, physically and creatively and is highly sustainable, as the brain is actually working



less hard than in normal, everyday consciousness. Resting the mind and body is crucial. Exercising regularly, eating well and sleeping regular hours all balance the body's chemical profile allowing for sustainable levels of energy and helping us relax when we need to.

There are other keys to sustainable creativity... Another key to sustainable creativity is to be intrinsically motivated by what we

understanding that includes the relationship between stress, the brain, the physical body, emotional awareness and creativity.

What suggestions would you make to management about boosting creativity? There are many techniques that are helpful in the creative process: many variations on brainstorming and mind-mapping; meditative or mindfulness approaches; Socratic questioning; concept and metaphor generating techniques; exploring opposites and absurdities; utilising creative mind states such as hypnogogic (when falling asleep) and hypnopompic (when waking up) states of consciousness; or just 'surprising' the brain after doing something entirely unrelated to one's problem. The key is knowing when and how to apply these. The critical point is that learning to increase and sustain creative output is not something where a half-hour presentation or inspirational speech to creative teams can make sustainable and realistic improvements. Having a mature workplace with the confidence and vision to invest time and resources in longer-term creative development and ensuring optimal conditions for a creative and innovative workplace is a key ingredient for seeing sustained and steady increases in creative output.

Do you think there are cultural differences involved in the definition of "creativity"? There may be cultural differences in the definition of what product or outcome is considered to be 'creative'. We do not believe that the reality of the creative process itself is culturally relative. We think that is universal. What a culture takes to be creative is a sociological phenomenon. Also it may be that there are cultural differences in openness to the creative mindset. To the degree a culture does not encourage outsiders, the questioning of orthodoxies and alternative points of view, then some cultures may be less 'creative'... this has nothing to do with the creative potential of any race or group of people.

And finally... knowledge is power. When people understand the various stages of the creative process and the different states of physical arousal and styles of consciousness required at each stage, they gain control of their creative process.

Affectionately known as 'Dr Chris', Dr Chris Stevens is Principal Psychologist of CommuniCorp Pty Ltd, an Australian company devoted to increasing creative potential

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