

Organizational Creativity, Why It Matters to Future-Proof Your Organization and How to Systemize It

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Abstract: Our aim in this article is to provide a point of reflection on the role of creativity as a precondition for all future-shaping activities in organizations. Not only across disciplines and hierarchies but also across industries, public sector, and civil society organisations. In the article we challenge the existing paradigms of organizational design by introducing creativity as a systemic and fully integrated component of the organization's day-to-day operations and interactions. A system-thinking model of organisational creativity is presented which incorporates four essential components to boost the organisation's ability to apply creativity effectively and systemically. These components are: 1) Creative Climate: We present a framework what organizations can do to nurture a conducive climate and lower the barriers that get in the way of optimising people's creativity. Not only in the physical work environment but in particular on a social and psychological level. 2) Creative Operations: Here we'll discuss what is needed to effectively set up and operationalize creativity. We present ways to ensure effective collaboration across multi-functional teams and how to prioritise and channel opportunities to turn them into future realities. 3) Creative Capabilities: Next, we share insights how people in the organization can be trained to think more expansive, flexible, and connective to create a workforce of future explorers.

Creative Leadership: Finally, we will explore the creative leadership characteristics that enable leaders to inspire people to adopt a creative mindset and embrace strategies towards new futures.

Practical Implications: The Organizational Creative Capacity Model works as an eye opener and as an inspiration for development of Creative Climate, Creative Operations, Creative Capabilities.

Keywords: Creative Climate; Creative Leadership; Creative Capabilities; Creative Operations; Organizational creativity

1. Introduction

1.1. Preparing for Possible Futures in a VUCA World

A VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world affects nations, cities, communities, individuals and everything else under the sun. No organization, be it in the private or public sector; no civil society organization, be it an NGO, a union, a cooperative, a foundation, or an association, can retreat from it or be indifferent to it.

Gone are the days when change just meant a minor shift at the periphery or just a new set of industry rules or structures. Ongoing change turns 'old ways of doing' into ineffective and suboptimal practices. A business-as-usual mindset gets



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rapidly overwhelmed in a VUCA environment. It tends to project a singular future based on an extrapolation of the past through the present.

Under such conditions, organizations need to envision multiple “alternative futures to the status quo.” (Gidley, 2017) and imagine the multiple possibilities that rise with it. The proposition that the future must be pluralized has been pursued by critical and academic futurists for decades. (Boulding, 1988; Slaughter, 1998; Hurley, 2008 as cited in Candy & Potter, 2019) It suggests that people should develop and become comfortable with non-linear thinking and nurture an openness and curiosity for ‘what can be’ instead of hanging on to a narrowing perspective of ‘what ought to be.’

Leaders, therefore, need to establish the best possible conditions to future-ready their organizations so they can operate effectively in the present to work towards ‘what’s next’. Based on these considerations the central question we like to answer is:

1.2. How Can Leaders, Through Organizational Design, build a Deep and Enduring Capacity to Better Prepare for, and Create Possible Futures?

Over recent years, a growing number of organizational leaders, leading experts and global organizations stress the importance of creativity as a key factor to prepare for and create possible futures (Puccio, 2011).

According to a Global CEO Study, which surveyed 1,500 CEOs from 60 countries and 33 industries worldwide, Executive leaders believe that: “More than rigor, management discipline, integrity or even vision — successfully navigating an increasing complex world will require creativity” (IBM, 2010).

A Deloitte survey involving 1,015 CMOs shows creativity has a positive impact on an organization's growth. Not only are higher-growth organizations more likely to view creative ideas as essential to long-term success, they are also more likely to create an environment that supports creative thinking. Having the right mindset and processes in place allowed creativity to flourish as they “foster new ideas, encourage risk taking, and promote creative collaboration” (Deloitte, 2023).

The above surveys show that creativity in organizations is much called for, and that there’s a need for “institutionalization of imagination” so organizations can develop strategic foresight and navigate the unknown (Scoblic, 2020).

2. Organizational Creativity, the Critical Factor for Organizations Who Want to Stay in Control of Their Futures

Creativity is moving from the fringes to become an essential skill across roles and functions. Initially creativity was being perceived as a competence solely needed in advertising, design, or marketing functions and other ‘aesthetic’ functions. Many companies used to divide the workforce into two groups: the ‘creatives’ and the ‘suits.’ (Robinson, 2001). But as mentioned earlier, there is a shift in how creativity is viewed. Creativity is turning into a valuable workplace skill across functions and levels. Applied creativity to solve problems and to engage in breakthrough thinking can and should be integral. In fact, as all organizations are subject to a VUCA environment, creativity is “a skill needed in all organizations whether it be government or industry, public or private, for-profit or not-for-profit” (Puccio et al, 2011).

The imperative for organizations is to build and institutionalize creativity as a systemic capacity and to actively start tapping into their workforce’s ingenuity and resourcefulness. In fact, in our view organizational creativity is a business discipline like Total Quality Management or any other functions or operations that are crucial for successfully running a business. It requires the combination of leadership, practical management, processes, procedures, and discipline to deliver the results people are after and navigate the organization to new futures. As Mumford concludes in his seminal ‘Handbook of Organizational Creativity: “Thus Creativity may hold more importance to organizations now than in the past, and more in the future than current times”’(Mumford, 2012).

2.1. What Exactly Is Organizational Creativity

To better understand ‘organizational creativity’ it is important to first explore the question ‘what is creativity?’ The act of creativity is often defined in terms of a desired outcome: “the production of original, high-quality, and elegant solutions” (Mumford et al., 2018). In the context of developing creativity in organizations, we define creativity as both a thinking process and a skill:

‘The ability to apply non-linear thinking for the sake of pursuing originality. It’s a skill that can be trained and developed.’

Non-linear thinking is a skillful process that’s at the heart of our creativity. It is central to our ability to shift perspective; to recognize patterns and break away from them where needed; to go off the beaten path and challenge rules or standards. This quality is based on our uniquely human capability to explore, imagine, interact, co-create, and reflect on our thoughts and ideas.

While many scholars seek to understand creativity through the scientific method, it cannot be separated entirely from socio-cultural factors. Creativity is our society’s most valuable resource (Florida, 2002, 2012, as cited in Oppert et al., 2023) – the one agency that generates human futures (Bevolo, 2016) with creatives becoming the dominant class in the 21st century. We define organizational creativity as:

‘An organization’s capacity to leverage people’s creative faculty and their creative output in service of its preferred futures. Creativity is a precondition of all progress and success of an organization.’

3. Making Creativity Happen: Using Organizational Design to Build and Institutionalize Creativity as a Systemic Capacity

A transformation into becoming a more creative organization sounds simple. While it doesn’t have to be complex, it takes time and effort. Many executives are convinced that creativity is essential for the success of their organization. But there’s a discrepancy between the ‘talk’ and the ‘walk’ concerning organizational creativity. Reason for this is that most organizations have not yet developed a systemic model for organizational creativity as a highly distributed ‘all the time everywhere’ strategic capacity.

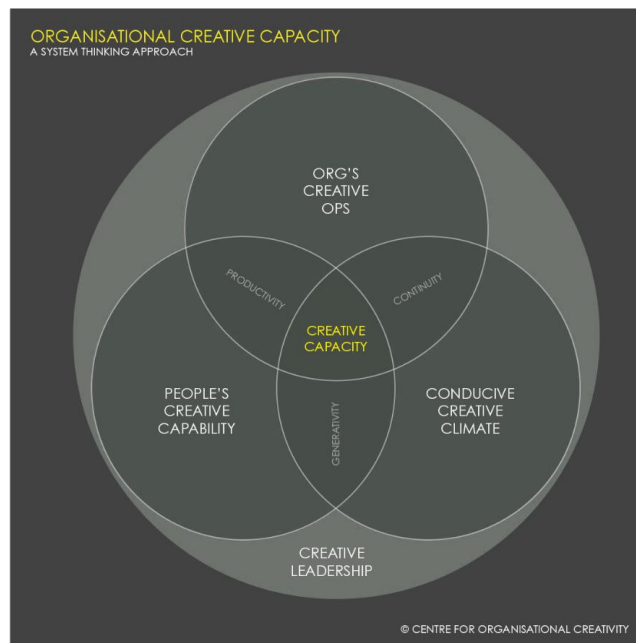


Figure 1. Organizational Creative Capacity.

3.1. So, What Is Needed?

We will now introduce a model that takes a systems-thinking approach to designing a more creative organization capable of riding the future waves of change, or better even, creating them.

This model challenges the dominant misconceptions of creativity as elusive and intangible and perceived as impossible to integrate into existing structures and therefore impossible to manage.

The power of this model is that it's based on the idea that everything in a system – be it cells molecules or a group of people – is inter-connected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time (Meadows, 2009). A systemic approach to building creative capacity provides consistency and clarity. It enables the breaking down of silos and integrate creative processes and competencies across the organization. Only systems turn a basket of ideas into a pipeline of ideas. Systemization makes creativity manageable and measurable.

The model contains four components that make up an organization's creative capacity. All four need to be developed if an organization desires to apply creativity effectively and systemically. Leaving one out would create a bottleneck hampering the organization's overall creative performance.

The four components are: (see **Figure 1**)

- Creative Operations: The structures, processes and tools to turn ideas into innovations and futures into realities.
- Conducive Creative Climate: Factors that define the atmosphere and how they add to – or detract from – people's creative performance.
- People's Creative Capabilities: The skills needed to develop creative aptitude and cognitive flexibility.
- Creative Leadership: Imperative to foster creativity and to inspire, motivate, and enable people.

We will now cover each of these components in more detail:

4. Creative Climate

...it's time to do things differently. Hard work is irrelevant. Be brutally honest. Take your holiday whenever you want. Don't ask for approval. You decide on your expenses. And never ever try to please your boss...These are some of the ground rules for people working at Netflix.

Netflix' CEO Reed Hastings has defied the conventional ways under which most organizations operate by creating an environment where people have lots of freedom, self-motivation, and self-discipline to make a positive impact. This enables the company to reduce the number of formal structures and processes that limit creativity and flexibility. But freedom is only one part of the Netflix culture; the other is responsibility. Netflix's culture revolves around high performers. Adequate performers get a generous severance package (Fisk, 2023). Not everybody is cut out for it and the company turns over a lot of people.

The climate in an organization influences how it people communicate, solve problems, make decisions, handle conflicts, and learn. It has an impact on job satisfaction, motivation and employees' ability to innovate (Ekval, 1983, as cited in Ling Tan & Yan Ho, 2015).

We identified several factors across 3 dimensions (see **Figure 2**) that impact an organization's climate in a positive or negative way:

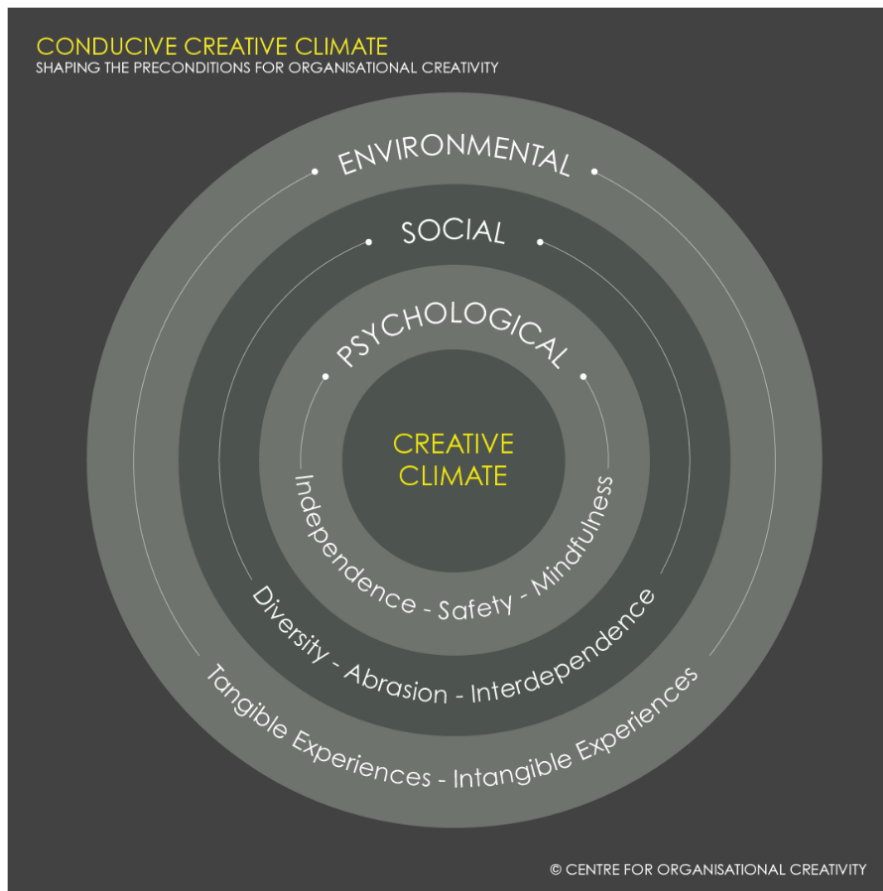


Figure 2. Conducive Creative Climate.

4.1. Environmental Dimension

4.1.1. Tangible Experiences

The etymological root of the word company stems from Latin ‘Companio’, (Com = ‘with’ or ‘together’ + Panis = ‘bread’; Literally meaning ‘Bread Fellow’, those with whom you share your bread with. As organizations seek to foster interaction and exchange of ideas, they should think how they can design their physical spaces to maximize encounters between ‘Idea Fellows’.

Bringing individuals closer together increases community and promotes creativity. Proximity increases the chance of collaboration, especially between different disciplines.

Not every employee works best in the same area. No matter how great an organization's intent or planning is, having only one type of work area option will hinder some people’s productivity and creativity. Therefore, the best office spaces are flexible and allow for encounters, secluded workspaces, larger meetings, team meeting rooms, and more open-plan offices (Sayiner, 2015).

Creative ‘spaces’ invite interaction (spontaneous or planned); provide room to retreat (to dream or focus); support experimentation and play (taking apart and building up) and help showcase progress. Even furniture can play a role in this. Catmull, head of Pixar Animation Studios, talks about the drawbacks of using a large rectangular table as compared to a round or square table. The latter, in his opinion, facilitates more creative and non-hierarchical interplay between directors, writers, producers, team members, and other contributors (Catmull, 2014).

4.1.2. *Intangible Experiences*

While intangible experiences aren't immediately observable, people can feel them, be affected by them and in turn influence them and shape them. Dynamism for example is when people perceive the atmosphere to be vibrant, lively, entrepreneurial and not short of challenges. Dynamism breaths through the walls.

But dynamism doesn't root in the walls. It starts with people, and people only. Usually, government institutions are not perceived to score high on dynamism. But this is changing. Marianne Mazzucato talks about the 'entrepreneurial state', referring to government bodies that show the willingness and ability to take on risk, real fundamental uncertainty. In her opinion, an enterprising public sector has often proven far more venturesome than short-term-focused private-sector firms (Colford, 2015).

To better response to the needs of citizens, public leaders are looking to inject a more enterprising spirit and innovation into the traditional structures and processes of government. In September 2020 the government of India introduced a bold programme designed to modernize the civil service by setting up a system that's more responsive, versatile, and result-driven. The aim is to produce a citizen-centric public workforce that is prepared for the future by nurturing a culture of continuous learning, competency-based training, and collaboration (Bold News Online Desk, 2023)

4.2. *Social Dimension*

The dynamism of an organization can't be separated from the "interactional dynamics" between people. The more diverse a group the more dynamic the interactions. The dynamics of groups are subject to different factors. Here we touch on 3 factors and look at how they affect the creative climate in an organization:

- Interdependence
- Diversity
- Abrasion

4.2.1. *Interdependence*

The words cooperate and collaborate are often used interchangeably, but they are quite different. Co-operating is about when people leverage on each other's strengths and expertise to realize individual goals more efficiently or effectively than they would have done working separately. Collaboration happens when a group of people come together and work on a project in support of a shared goal or objective that neither of them could reach on their own. Formula1 drivers, racing for the same team, 'co-operate'. Soccer players, in contrast, collaborate. Collaboration is deeply and creatively interdependent.

A good metaphor of how essential interdependence is as a component of a creativity is found in Jazz music. Jazz creates space for ideas to emerge from the collective center of the group. This requires each in the group to be highly attuned to the others and to trust the spontaneous flow.

Like with jazz bands, team interdependence is based on a shared awareness that each individual embodies the whole. It's at the heart of group integrity and as such it requires a foundation of reliability and trust. Interdependence fuels cohesiveness and transparency.

4.2.2. *Diversity*

Homogeneity and ingenuity don't go well together. Just like forests, teams depend on diversity for survival. Without variation of key tree species and other plants, animals and insects, a forest lacks growth and viability in the long term. Biodiversity makes a forest more resistant to stressors, more resilient and adaptable. Also, the more diverse a forest is, the more it contributes to the larger ecosystem's productivity, stability and sustainability. The same is true for teams (Pilgrim S, 2020).

Diversity in organizations and teams shouldn't be understood as merely a result of a wider variety of demographics e.g. ethnicity or gender. True diversity also includes experiential and cognitive diversity (De Anca & Aragón, 2018).

Many of the perspectives and insights each person brings to the workplace are shaped by the professional experiences of that person. People's knowledge and competencies are important aspects to consider in team interactions, as these experiences have a significant impact on the team's overall creative output and the decision-making processes. Experiential

diversity is shaped by a wide array of professional experience and learning, preferably across different industries. More of the same leads to uniformity and more variation to multiformity.

Increasingly recognized as critical to success is cognitive diversity. Different people approach and solve problems differently. The neuropsychological explanation for this is straightforward. Different people apply different modes of thinking. Some react to things in a certain way and tackle a problem differently than others would. Some are very explorative or experimental, others more focused or structured. Some like to retreat to think about a problem while others prefer interaction.

Diversity brings divergent thinking. If every team member possesses a thought process unique to their own experiences, then the ideas generated will be as broad and diverse as the team itself (Hill et al., 2014). Great minds do not think alike.

4.2.3. *Abrasion*

Diversity naturally leads to abrasion. Abrasion stems from intellectual debate, creative disagreement & fair arguments. It's in the heat of this creative conflict where people find potential futures and ideas to further explore and modify. Ideas and foresight lack potency without debate and discourse. Disagreement and debate are triggers for a group to think again, to think deeper, and to reflect. This form of constructive confrontation can be built into the organization – sparks by design.

Creative conflict is thus a good thing. But not all conflict is creative. Some conflict is reactive. When advocates oppose each other instead of each other's ideas, conflict can turn personal and destructive. To keep conflict creative a sense of community in teams and across the organization is therefore important. For people to offer ideas that allow abrasion to occur, they need to feel psychologically safe.

4.3. *Psychological Dimension*

4.3.1. *Psychological Safety*

Psychological safety is partly a social construct and partly an inner construct. From a group perspective it requires a social code that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. This implies all in the organization need to develop the confidence that it is ok to be vulnerable in the eyes of the group regardless of status and hierarchy (Edmondson, 2018). It isn't about people always agreeing; not about niceties or offering bouquets of praise. It's also not about giving unconditional support to others. Safety is about creating room for ideas and opinions to be expressed without the fear being criticized, ridiculed, or silenced.

As an inner construct psychological safety involves self-awareness and accepting that you can be vulnerable sometimes. It's about having the confidence to share how you like to communicate and what motivates you to be your best. But also, to embrace letdowns as learning opportunities and do not take criticism personally. It's tough, we admit. Who doesn't have a problem saying "I don't know" or I need help. What about "I made a mistake" or "I'm sorry."

4.3.2. *Mindfulness*

Key to creativity is our ability to observe a situation without passing immediate judgement. Just reflect on how powerful it can be to have a creative debate with someone and you're mindfully paying close attention in an open and accepting way. Mindfulness in the workplace is about a non-judgmental approach that expands people's thinking and creativity.

What often happens in hectic workplaces is that employees resort to autopilot or habitual ways of working. When people don't have the time or space to look at challenges in a mindful way, they may miss out on opportunities to reframe a problem and may fail to see new possibilities for potential solutions. Researchers concluded that groups that practice mindfulness experience a freer flow of ideas which are more likely to be expanded on to create unique solutions (Serrano, 2020).

4.3.3. *Independence / Self-directedness*

Dynamic Futures-oriented organizations 'experiment-and-learn' organizations. They embrace people who are capable and motivated to take on what is needed to achieve a goal - people with a high sense of autonomy and self-reliance in their

thinking and actions. In addition, self-directed people recognize that their attitudes, actions and challenges reflect their own choices; that they have to carry responsibility for their work and actions.

Fundamental to autonomy is an employee’s need to have choices and be in control of what they are doing. A Citigroup survey found that nearly half of employees would give up a 20% raise for greater control over how they work (PwC People, 2018).

Netflix for example, got rid of its employees’ expense guidelines that dictated what was possible or not with regards to airfare or hotel expenditures. The company instead asks its employees to “Act in Netflix’s best interests” (Hastings & Meyer, 2020).

We have covered the most noticeable factors to predict creative behavior and outcome. These can be used to develop a framework to assess the creative climate in an organization helping leaders to identify development opportunities. Next, we will look at the second creative capacity component: Creative Operations.

5. Creative Operations

Having ideas is hardly ever the problem – having a structured and systematic approach to move them forward and turn into a potential reality is where organizations often get stuck. Ask leaders what is needed to drive quality and they will talk at length about TQM systems. Ask them what it takes to manage a pipeline of ideas from conception to a successful innovation and you will find their answers fuzzier and more abstract.

Creative operations are twofold. On one hand there is the need to continuously feed and optimize the organization’s incremental innovations and on the other hand the need to explore new fields of possibilities. This ambidexterity (Spuijt, 2019) is key to create and pursue new futures – organizations don’t need to choose. Both systems should run simultaneously.

“The Roman god Janus had two sets of eyes—one pair focusing on what lay behind, the other on what lay ahead. General managers and corporate executives should be able to relate” (O’Reilly III & Tushman, 2004). They, too, must constantly look at their current reality and past learning, attending to the current products and processes, while also gazing forward, preparing for the innovations that will define the future.

We will now zoom into Creative Operations and how to effectively put it to work.

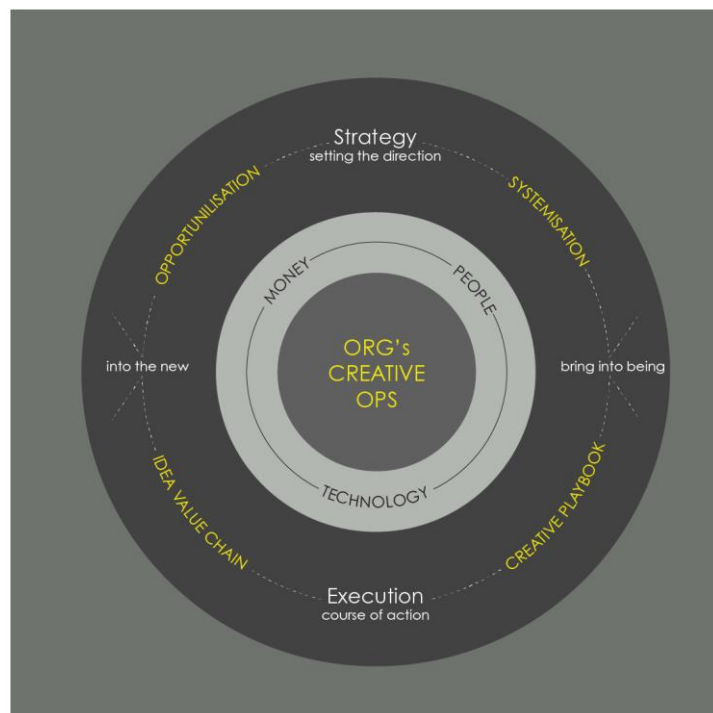


Figure 3. ORG's Creative OPS.

While there may be different ways of how companies go about it, all organizations share the need to (See **Figure 3**):

- Identify where the opportunities are (opportunalization).
- Channel opportunities for effective prioritization (idea-value-chain).
- Establish a shared approach for effective collaboration across multifunctional teams (creative playbook).
- Secure productivity and coherent outcomes (systemization).

5.1. Opportunalization (or 'Operationalizing Opportunities')

Human beings have always grappled with the fundamental tension between their inability to know and control, and their capacity to anticipate, imagine and create the future (Wilkinson, 2017). Leaders have the choice to either slow down the pace of change, or speed up their organizations' ability to learn their way into the future. Considering today's world, the first option seems hardly realistic. Innovation requires a conscious, structured and solidly grounded effort to identify possible and probable futures. Forecast and Foresight are at play in this context. Foresight is about actively future forming and therefore should not be confused with Forecast, which is about predicting what will possibly come next based on existing information, however brilliantly processed (Bevolo, 2023).

Foresight is a creative act. It uses imagination to envision what potential Futures may come our way. It engages our intuition to make choices and arrive at decisions as Futures don't present us with facts. And it uses storytelling to give meaning to these Envisioned Futures and to engage and motivate people to help us prepare for what is yet to happen.

To effectively operationalize opportunities, organizations must integrate strategic Foresight on both a structural and cultural level. On a structural level Foresight should be integrated as a part of daily operations e.g. by setting up a centralized foresight unit which shares learnings across functions and teams in the organization. To make Foresight meaningful over the longer term and to incorporate it as part of the psyche of the organization, make sure that the Foresight function involves and engages people from across the organization as well as other stakeholders. As such it becomes a habitual behavior and grows to be a part of the culture.

An organizations ability to operationalize strategic Foresight challenges people to think creatively and builds a future-minded organization.

5.2. Idea Value Chain

Most companies have no problem coming up with ideas. What is often hard is to turn those ideas into action in a structured and disciplined way. The Idea Value-Chain is a systematic sequential process that goes through multiple stage gate steps involving idea generation, idea development, prioritizing and funding of ideas and finally the diffusion of developed concepts.

Firstly, each idea that moves through the pipeline must have a well-defined goal that is in line with the strategic intent of the company. Secondly, it needs to be regularly monitored that the idea value chain is generative. This means it is important that ideas are gathered from all relevant sources, including R&D, Market intelligence as well as insight and foresight sources. Thirdly, the idea pipeline must be well managed to evaluate ideas objectively and effectively select those with potential for further development. Then, often overlooked, it takes money, talent and willingness to push ideas forward towards realization. Finally, the result of each step in the process must be recorded so progress can be tracked over time and improvements made accordingly.

Here too it's best if there's a cultural element at play in addition to a structural foundation. Just like it takes collaboration to make quality happen and its collaboration that turns ideas into reality. This means that the organization must put a social architecture in place that encourages people to co-create ideas and champion those ideas.

To effectively operationalize opportunities from idea to execution it's essential to ensure that ideas are well developed, funded and that success is well measured. Done well, it will positively impact value, speed, and efficiency.

5.3. Creative Playbook

A creative playbook It's a toolkit that gives an organization the script of its creative operations. It's used in preparing for the creative act of teams. The playbook includes the pieces and parts that make up the act; It outlines the props needed;

who are the actors that take stage in the operations; how the different actors work together; what roles are needed; It provides guidelines and support for the work-flow as operations continuously develop and grow.

A Creative Playbook provide multifunctional teams with a shared language and approach, as well as common processes, methods & tools which is instrumental to apply their creativity with conviction. In many ways it can be seen as a collaboration system within an organization that defines the go-to approach for getting things done. Eg. procedures & principles, creative process flows, methods, tools & techniques for thinking as well as doing.

Can we do without it? Sure, companies are innovating without a creative playbook in place, but what will likely happen is that teams compensate for the lack of common ground and create their own pathways resulting in different processes, methods, and tools. This leads to fragmentation and confusion making it hard for people to collaborate across different projects.

How comprehensive should a playbook be: we believe organizations should not overwhelm their people with heavy and complex ‘publications’. We’ve come across a 453-page ‘Defence Innovation Handbook’ which may be somewhat overpowering. Keep the creative playbook inviting and engaging; start small and let the document grow with the creative capacity of the organization.

Tata’s Idea Guidebook is a mere six-page document and may not fit the bill to be a full-fledged playbook. But what it achieved in its simplicity was to inspire employees (and students) and give them the confidence to contribute ideas to the Tata Imagination Challenge and help shape the future of the company (Tata Group, 2023).

If well-crafted, a Creative Playbook inspires proactivity and initiative. That’s what play is all about.

5.4. Systemization

Even the most creative organization needs systems that supports high-value people towards high-value work. With Systemization within Creative Operations, we refer to the guiding principles and ‘evolving standards’ that are relevant in working towards efficient and coherent outcome. In essence it’s about preventing people having to reinvent the wheel again and again.

Design systems are a good example of systemization. A design system is a complete set of standards intended to manage design at scale using reusable components and patterns (Fessenden, 2021).

Even governments use design systems. A good example is ‘Rules as Code’. Based on the question “If public services are available online, why aren’t the policies and laws that govern them made digitally too?” Governments across the world are exploring possibilities to turn their country’s legislation and regulations into machine-readable code.

Design systems of coded rules and regulations can automate decision-making in government. They are particularly well-suited to yes/no and if-this-then-that decisions, such as eligibility for benefits or obligations to pay tax.

In Singapore, design systems help the Government to create Codes of Practice to regulate harmful online content on social media and improve online safety. In Australia design systems not only, enabled collaboration among a community of government innovators but it also presented new concepts and delivery opportunities which led immediately to ideas on how to improve the citizen experience of government services (Basu, 2020).

The underlying motivation for the organization is to provide the bedrock where creativity meets productivity – to make it easy for people to make it right.

So far, we have presented the importance of nurturing a creative climate and developing a systemic way of implementing and running creative operations. If well in place, the combined influence of creative climate and creative operations can get an organization in good shape to ride the waves of change. But, while we want our organizations to be nimble in responding to futures, it’s important to create waves as well, i.e. to create new futures. The following two dimensions complete the model of organizational creativity: Creative Capabilities and Creative leadership.

6. Creative Capabilities

Creative thinking – including flexibility and curiosity – and design are identified as top skills for organizations for the year 2027 (WEF, 2023)

Turning ‘exploiters of the present’ into ‘explorers of the futures’

As individuals, organizations, communities, and societies we share the desire to bring our preferred futures to life. Today, organizations seek people who can think imaginatively about the range of futures that might unfold. This is

important but not enough. Organizations also need their people to be able to think expansively about how to make these futures a reality. They need people to go beyond what seems logical or common sense.

In pursuance of the new, organizations need Futures Explorers. People who are capable of, and comfortable with, continuous experimentation and making connections between different concepts and ideas to seek out new possibilities. Einstein called this combinatory play. Abrupt changes in the environment narrow a business' existing field of possibility. With future-minded people it achieves the opposite – it can expand its field of possibility. This is a universal principle for continuity and growth. Futures explorers are Open minded, agile thinkers, non-conformist, and active imaginative.

6.1. Open Minded

Open mindedness is absolutely essential to creativity. Those who are high in openness are more willing to embrace new things, fresh ideas, and novel experiences. They are open-minded and approach new things with curiosity and tend to seek out novelty. Organizations benefit from people who are open to pursue new experiences and endeavors.

Sanna Ahvenharju of the Finland Futures Research Centre (2022) sees a correlation with Futures consciousness as she connects openness to Experience to people's "ability to predict near-future events". Steve Jobs once spoke of the benefits of an openness toward diverse inputs: the bigger your "bag of experiences," the more varied the connections you can make between things – like say, technology and the liberal arts (Baer, 2013).

Organizations should take an active role in 'opening up minds.' More variety in job scope or reducing repetitive tasks; inserting variety in work environment; allowing room for tinkering, experimentation and discovery while tackling unnecessary rules all contribute to achieve this.

Another impactful way is to create more cross-functional teams and to introduce cross-functional training programs. There's also a growing trend across industries towards cross-sector innovation and collaboration to mine for completely fresh perspectives. Today a restaurant seeks to learn from an airport, a car manufacturer from the games industry, a hospital from a hotel or theme park, or a chemical company gets inspiration from a festival organiser (Vullings & Heleven, 2015).

We also see more initiatives to formalize collaborations between artists and the corporate world. Artists, designers and other 'creatives' inject new perspectives, insight and expertise into private and public sector organizations and are valuable in helping organizations shape attractive futures.

6.2. Agile Thinkers

In 2015, the Dutch banking group ING, anticipated customer behavior, to rapidly change in response to new digital distribution channels. The bank realised that customer expectations were being shaped by digital leaders in other industries, not just banking. Bart Schlatmann, COO of ING Netherlands at the time understood that ING needed a new and agile organizational model that has no fixed structure - one that constantly evolves (Mahadevan, 2017). People were regrouped tribes that were further subdivided in squads. Small self-steering teams of around 9 people able to quickly change their functional composition in response to new Futures. This requires flexibility and the ability of a team to rapidly adapt and steer itself in the new direction. But building an agile organization goes beyond operations, it requires flexibility of everyone's thinking as well.

Agile thinking has two dimensions: First it's about the ability to break out of old habitual ways of thinking or looking at things. As Wayne Dyer once said. "Change the way you look at things and the things you look at change." This form of 'creative perception' is an effective way to take a fresh look at the present, based on anticipated or preferred futures. Secondly, agile thinkers also utilize their ability to consciously 'toggle' between creativity and criticality. Think how painters alternate the application of small amounts of paint to a canvas with the act of stepping back to appraise or assess their work. There are hundreds of acts of critical assessment that accompany hundreds of brush strokes (Paul & Elder, 2012). Criticality here is not based on truths, laws or rules. Agile thinking doesn't follow prescriptions of "what must be" or "what should be". Instead, it follows the creative flow, wondering "what can be?"

6.3. Non-conformist

Ask a team leader "would you hire troublemakers?" Changes are high their answer is 'No'.

Interestingly, in groups with high consensus, the thinking actually narrows. As the Japanese saying goes: The nail that sticks up will be hammered down. However, too often there is no nail standing up. Consensus prevails, conformity ensues, and group processes look more like groupthink.

If one person goes against the grain, minds stop converging. We realise that this contrasts with the generally accepted misconception that we must build on each other's ideas. Consensus, while comforting and harmonious as well as efficient, often leads to bad decisions. Dissent, while often annoying, is precisely the challenge that we need to reassess our own views and make better choices. It helps us consider alternatives and generate creative solutions. Dissent is a liberator (Nemeth, 2018).

A field study in which groups showed that groups that experienced dissent reported more divergent thinking. They “identified a large number of alternatives” or “identified many advantages and disadvantages to each alternative.” They also produced reports that were consistently rated as more original and of better quality by outside experts (Van Dyne & Saavedra, 1996).

6.4. Active Imaginative

Imagination often gets a bad rap. Businesses often see it as unreliable and fact less. It is usually associated with daydreaming or childlike fantasy in an environment where facts are prioritized. But imagination is one of the key skills in people's creativity toolbox.

Active imagination helps leaders and teams to see beyond the present moment and the immediate environment and anticipate a myriad of possible futures. It is gaining traction as one of the in-demand qualities in executive leadership. Starting a question with “What if?” is an example of active imagination with creative and strategic relevance. Shell is considered a pioneer in imagining the future. Since the 1970s their Scenario Team has envisioned countless futures, helping its leaders explore ways forward and make better decisions. Currently, the team is imagining sustainable futures and new energy sources in line with its vision to become a net-zero emissions energy business by 2050 (Shell Global, 2023).

When it comes to imagineering the future organizations can learn a few things from designers. Designers don't just see the future as it potentially will be, they see how it can be – with people at the center. Designers imagination is usually rich and human-centric. Beyond a mere picture their foresights form stories.

Philips has a tradition in multidisciplinary, design-driven innovation programs. One of them is the visionary and groundbreaking City.People.Light research project, a multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary program to explore and imagine the futures of cities and possibly make their vision a reality (Bevolo & Rosenius, 2014).

Philips Healthcare recently envisioned five people-powered future forces that could transform personal, community, and planetary health in the next decade. Besides drawing from their ongoing research on social, scientific, economic, and technological forces, Philips Healthcare focuses on identifying the ‘change-makers’ who actively help shape the future of health and well-being (Philips, 2021).

Clearly, if organizations want to fully tap into the creative capability of their people they need to give them ample opportunity to develop it, train it, and put it in practice. Put the right climate in place and you stimulate creativity; Provide the right resources and operations and you facilitate creativity; But when you develop people's creative thinking skills you empower creativity and here's where organizations and their leaders will be able to make the leap. Let's now look at creative leadership.

7. Creative Leadership

Creative Leadership is both a philosophy and an act (Van Dijk et al., 2018). As a philosophy it embraces change as a given while seeking opportunity everywhere. It envisions desirable futures and unleashes the courage, collaboration, and creativity of contributors.

Creative leadership as an act builds on those desirable futures through systemic and scalable actions derived from innovative strategies. Creative leaders put the right conditions in place for people to move forward creatively. Nurture a creative climate, enable creative operations, and empower the creative capabilities of the people so that the organization remains flexible, responsive, and relevant.

A leader can exhibit a wide range of leadership styles. Their style is generally shaped by different factors, including personality, values, skills and experiences. As one of the creative leader's roles is to inspire and motivate people to pursue and realize desired futures, we consider the following qualities important determinants for their leadership styles: Creative leaders to be transformative, provocative, and facilitative (See **Figure 4**). At the heart of these qualities lies the fact that creative leaders should always bring their true self to work. This is the quality of authenticity. Let's now look at these qualities supported with some examples of leaders who have demonstrated these qualities compellingly.

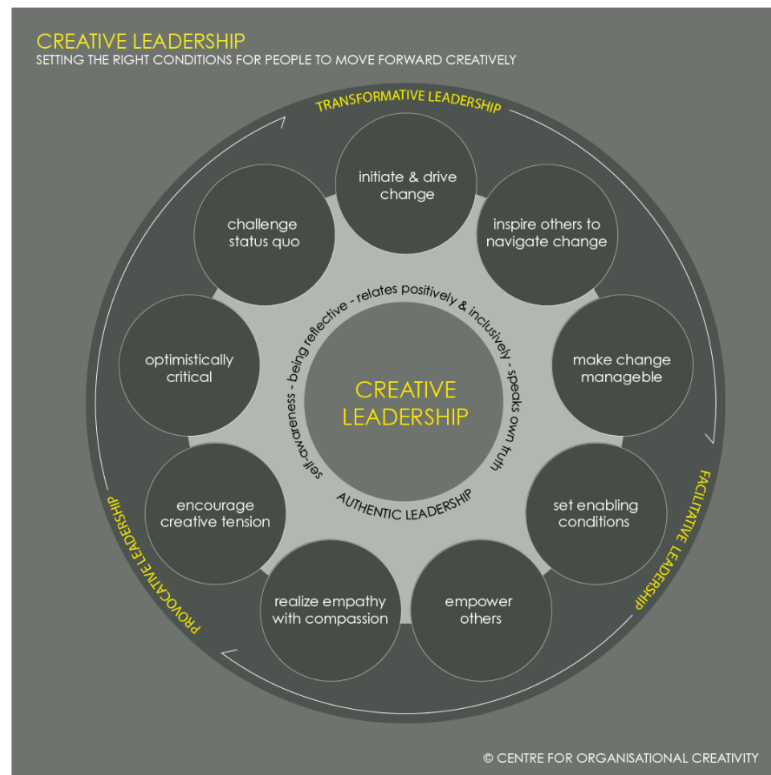


Figure 4. Creative Leadership.

7.1. Creative Leaders Are Transformative

We consider Microsoft's Satya Nadella an excellent example of a creative leader who inspires and drives change. When Nadella took the helm in 2014, Microsoft was in danger of having missed almost every important new technology trend since the turn of the century (Waters, 2019).

Nadella realized he needed to transform the company's culture and bust the establishment where hierarchy and pecking order had taken control, and spontaneity and creativity had suffered as a result (Nadella, 2018).

A big challenge was to tackle Microsoft's persistent self-perception that it was in the business of selling PC software and to shift the company's focus to cloud-based services and other emerging technologies, such as AI and the Internet of Things. To succeed he had to first re-define the company's mission statement. He changed the obsolete 'a PC on every desk and in every home' to 'empowering every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more.'

He then transformed Microsoft's traditional approach of building proprietary software by embracing open-source development, something company traditionally always opposed. This move ultimately positioned the company as a leader in the open-source community. Moreover, Microsoft's AI-powered Bing shows Nadella understands transformation is not a destiny but a continuous journey.

7.2. The Provocative Creative Leader

Reading the word provocative may generate a picture of an aggressive leadership style - a loud, confrontational chest thumping style of communication. But 'creative provocation' is nothing like that. It is charged with positive energy and its purpose is to intentionally challenge old ways of thinking, obsolete processes, and conventions, including the leader's own.

Provocation spurs a response. Indeed, provocation can shape the way we think about an issue, the way we arrive at our position or decision. Provocation opens the valves of our thinking.

Leaders may provoke to create energy, focus, or a sense of urgency; To bring attention to something, especially when more conventional and unchallenging interventions have failed; To move people into a zone of learning and reflection; To prod people out of complacency and self-satisfaction (Fern & Johnstone, 2022).

A good example is Bracken Darrell. In his tenure as CEO of Logitech, he turned a stagnant maker of mice and keyboards and charioted into a design-driven innovation powerhouse. He achieved this by challenging the organization into developing a new mindset revolving around continuous iteration, constant improvement, never being satisfied, and a ‘can-always-do-better’ attitude.

A people’s leader and a team player, Darrell wanted to build a culture of speaking up from the moment he joined. He told people they must be able to challenge others in the organization, including himself. He invited people new to the company to send him a note with recommendations for what the company should do differently, and what they thought didn’t work.

He also wanted people to challenge themselves by telling them to seek disagreement. His message: “You have an obligation to find challengers to your ideas... an obligation to yourself. This is free so you have no excuse. You just need thick skin and the ability to step back and listen.”

Darrell also challenged himself. After five years on the job, one Sunday night, He pondered: “Am I the right person for the next five years?” He felt he got too embedded in everything Logitech was doing and decided, as a thought experiment, to fire and rehire himself as his successor (Bryant, 2019) and to take a fresh look at the business and the key issues it was facing. Being able to challenge your own work as a Leader is particularly important in a time where maintaining the status quo is not an option anymore.

7.3. *The Facilitative Creative Leader*

Imagining futures and making decisions how to move in the direction of preferred ones demands cross-functional participation and collaboration. Leaders need to let go of the belief that they are supposed to hold all the control handles and have all the answers. They should be able to let-go, empower and then facilitate.

The word facilitate comes from Latin ‘facilis’ meaning ‘easy’. But creative leadership is not so much about making things easy. It’s about putting the right enabling conditions in place for people to make something possible. It is about empowering them based on empathy and compassion. This breaks with the traditional idea of leadership. Traditional Leadership is reactive, it prioritizes self-protection over productive engagement, and aggression over building alignment. It’s ultimately about the need for control (Craig, n.d.). A creative leader is confident in being hands-off and instead guides, inspires and motivates. This requires trust and seeing leadership qualities in the people who work for you.

Jack Ma is a leader who slowly loosened his grip on the control handles over his 20 years tenure at the helm of Alibaba. While his early leadership style used to be more autocratic, Ma found that this type of management will ultimately limit his people’s freedom and ideas. He understood he needed to let go rather than hold on and decided to avoid getting too closely involved in the day-to-day decision-making of employees (Finanhill, 2023). Instead, Ma empowered them to thrive in their own creativity and tap into on their own resources and experiences as they strive towards goals. Such approach to leading a team requires a foundation of confidence in the abilities of employees. You have to fully trusts their judgements and stick to providing guidance. Like in Netflix’s case, control is indirect – by keeping people fully responsible for the outcomes of their choices.

Different leaders have different leadership styles. And yes, there are many more than the three we outlined above. In fact, many leaders, knowingly or unknowingly, use a combination of different styles. But we consider being a facilitator, a provocateur and a transformer as instrumental to constructive creative leadership.

But there’s one leadership style missing in the equation. One that is fundamental to the three styles mentioned earlier and conditional to their effectiveness. Regardless of what leadership style an executive deploys or develops over the years, it must be built on authenticity.

8. **Authenticity at the Centre of Creative Leadership**

Authenticity in leadership is best explained as bringing your true self to the job. For creative leaders it is the central ingredient. It builds on their ability to be self-aware and reflective; to follow an inner compass that guides their principles and values and to act on them with integrity and consistency. Authenticity is a covenant of the integrity of all three creative leadership styles mentioned earlier.

One leader whose authenticity helped her lead by being open, principled and genuine across her other creative leadership styles is Ginni Rometty, CEO of IBM between 2012 and 2020.

Rometty’s transformative power became evident when she turned a massive organization with an enormous legacy into a future oriented company around cognitive computing and the AI platform Watson. Under her leadership a company

designed by engineers transformed into a company engineered by designers. Not all welcomed the transformation. It was hard to get shareholders on-board after her predecessor Sam Palmisano in 2010 had promised a turnaround that would roughly double their per-share earnings within five years. Rometty made it clear to all stakeholder that she didn't believe in turnarounds but in transformations "When you're in tech, you have to transform"(Ignatius, 2017). Her move was guided by principles and candidness.

Rometty also didn't compromise on human-centric values and beliefs. She felt IBM's role in the next cognitive computing wave needed to be based on clear principles and an obligation to society and people: "Every organization that develops or uses AI, or hosts or processes data, must do so responsibly and transparently. Companies are being judged not just by how we use data, but by whether we are trusted stewards of other people's data" (IBM, 2018)

She also challenged the organization on a long-standing tradition and deeply rooted conviction that people need a college degree to get hired by IBM. Rometty challenged this orthodoxy because she recognized that organizations (and societies) have a responsibility to provide economic opportunities for a much broader group of people, not just the higher educated. Her provocative stance benefitted IBM by opening a much greater pool of talent, but it was equally driven by her values and beliefs that companies should play a role in creating healthier, happier and safer communities (Rometty, 2023).

The four examples show us that the influence of creative leadership as opposed to the reactive styles of leadership is key in convincing others to embrace new realities and futures.

9. Conclusion

We often think of innovation and technology as synonymous to the future. But it is creativity that is most intimately related to the future. Creativity is central to a leader's ability to envision possible and preferred futures; Creativity is how an organization's future comes into being. Creativity is both the spark and the fuel that propels an organization's innovation engine 'into the new.'

Our goal in this article was two-fold. First, we wanted to challenge the current paradigm in organizations that creativity can't be managed. Our aim was to show that leaders, through organizational design, can, and in fact should, build a deep and enduring capacity to better prepare for, and create possible futures.

Secondly, our aim was to provide leaders with practical ideas, tools and mechanisms to maximize the organization's creative capacity. We zoomed in on each of these preconditions and how they impact and shape actual future-oriented thinking and behaviours.

10. What Are the Implications for the Organization?

- Organizations need to direct their focus towards developing and nurture a creative climate, which is all about putting the right conditions in place for creative behavior. This goes far beyond installing a barista coffee corner or replacing meeting tables with bean bags. It includes making sure all people are feeling comfortable on a social and psychological level to ensure engagement and motivation.
- Organizations need to set up and actively manage their creative operations to secure a continuous stream of groundbreaking ideas by operationalize opportunities, free up creativity and maximize people's efficacy. This requires a systemic and structured approach and a playbook to help people understand the whats, whys, and hows.
- Organizations should provide employees with the opportunity to develop the right skills and mindset so they can flourish as Futures Explorers and know how to expand their thinking; become more open and receptive to novelty; stretch their cognitive flexibility; break away from beaten tracks and conformity and become 'imagineers' of preferred futures.
- For leadership this means actively adopting the behaviors and leadership styles that inspire, motivate, and empower people to transform, to be able to leave their comfort zones, and to initiate action, in teams or individually.

A returning subject in this article was transformation. What was not covered however is a very common reaction to most transformation effort: resistance to change.

Moving toward new futures presents to many a feeling of uncertainty and can be met skepticism or even outright opposition, often followed by inertia.

Foundational to any transformation is how the leader goes about initiating the change - how they plan for it and how they break it in manageable chunks to minimize resistance. It is essential to take it step by step, always with one eye on the here and now and another on the horizon, regularly reassessing the progress and the directions.

By building a clear roadmap with structured activities and actions, leaders will succeed in taking the organization to a new space. The Organizational Creative Capacity Model is a key part of this roadmap.

We hope this article works as an eye opener and as an inspiration to get started. Clearly it can't be achieved with a quick-fix, but with vision, patience, and determination it can be done. As the Chinese saying goes: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second-best time is today."

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