

Stimulating Creativity, Enabling Innovation and Supporting Entrepreneurship^

Prof. Colin Coulson-Thomas*

Creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship appear desirable to their advocates, but is there a gap between rhetoric and reality? Do compliance cultures and many contemporary management practices actually kill creativity, stop innovation and prevent entrepreneurship? In relation to them, are the contributions of management services practitioners positive or negative factors? This article examines some issues to consider and questions to ask if creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship are to be relevant, appropriate and effective.

Business leaders face multiple challenges. They range from disruptive technologies to new business models. Kodak found with digital technology that innovation itself can be a threat to an established business. However, Canon's response shows it can also represent a route to rejuvenation, remaining relevant, being competitive and building market share (Christensen, 1997). While unnecessary innovation and change for the sake of change should be avoided, incremental improvement and excellence in current activities may not be enough. Survival, sustainability and successful adaptation may depend upon creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

We ought to be working with the grain. We are born with a drive to reach out, connect and learn. However, too often education and employment inhibits the release of creative potential. They constrain and limit, rather than inspire and liberate. People learn acceptable answers. Too rarely are they encouraged to seek their own solutions. Corporate policies and practices should encourage and support curiosity, creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, rather than frustrate and repress them. The confidence to be creative needs to be released (Kelly & Kelly, 2012 & 2013).

Valuing Questioning and Challenge

Do leaders really value qualities such as independence and intuition? Are wide interests appreciated? Are critical, imaginative and independent thinking recognised and rewarded? Is non-conformism welcomed or penalised? Many directors enjoy wielding power. They may have earned their spurs in a previous era when expectations were different and possibilities more limited. Another business model may have applied. Yet, they still think they know best. They issue policies and take decisions. They then monitor the extent to which others comply and fall in line.

Directors usually justify calling the shots. They claim position privilege, broader awareness and a more strategic perspective. In reality, many directors are preoccupied with internal issues and challenges facing their companies. Front-line staff may be much closer to customers, the marketplace and local communities. They may also be earlier adopters of new technologies.

Senior executives can also be surrounded by groupthink and the eager to please. Cocooned within a head office, they may be unaware of ferment outside and developments on-line. More executives should engage with, observe and experience the lives of customers. Obtaining insights from different situations can open one's eyes to changing requirements and new possibilities. It can raise questions and spark ideas.

How self-aware are your colleagues and the members of your board? Do they acknowledge and address their limitations? Are they listening? Are they open to new ideas and possibilities? Do they question assumptions? Do they encourage the exploration of alternatives and the creation of new options? Do they genuinely believe in the importance of challenge, discovery, experiment, exploration and trial?

Encouraging Openness and Candour

Sir Karl Popper (1945) warned of enemies of the open society. Are some business leaders and boards enemies of the open company? Are they excessively concerned with order and standards? Are they slaves to particular models and approaches? Are they intolerant of diversity and reluctant to let go and empower others? People should be encouraged to challenge.

In *The Future of the Organisation* I set out ten essential freedoms for removing organisational constraints and liberating latent talent (Coulson-Thomas, 1997). People should be supported and allowed to work, learn and collaborate in ways, and at times and places, that best allow them to give of their best and be creative and productive. Investigations have shown that performance support can increase flexibility and speed of response, allow senior management to let go, empower and trust others, and allow them more scope for innovation while simultaneously delivering multiple benefits for people, organisations and the environment (Coulson-Thomas, 2012 a & b, 2013).

Are you and your colleagues encouraging people to be open about problems and to suggest solutions? Are you helping them to learn from mistakes and failure and to build upon achievements? Pixar appreciated the importance of candour. It blossomed because openness, honesty and constructive questioning and comment were highly valued (Catmull and Wallace, 2014). People actively searched for better approaches.

Welcoming and Building Diversity

Many boards are intolerant of diversity. Their companies employ and serve people from many nationalities in a multitude of locations. The roles and activities of employees widely differ. Markets fragment. New business models emerge. Customers may seek bespoke and personalised responses. Yet many directors try to stamp out variety and impose uniformity.

Directors and boards have a lot to answer for. Many policies, rules, regulations, guidelines and practices reflect past views, priorities and understanding. Enforcing compliance with them can stifle questioning and challenge. It can inhibit the search for new and better alternatives. If you feel particular constraints are necessary and desirable, make sure their rationale is understood. Reward people for considering better ways of achieving their original purpose.

Many organisations exude a dull and monotonous uniformity. It is little wonder so many creative ideas originate outside of the workplace. Could and should you encourage greater diversity? What about different strategies, policies, processes and practices according to requirements, circumstances and possibilities? Don't forget diversity at the top. Is there sufficient diversity of experience, gender and thinking in the boardroom? What about competing research projects?

Enabling Collaboration and Creativity

Contending interests and competing solutions threaten some people. Others perceive differences of opinion as healthy. They believe that encouraging debate is more conducive of creativity and innovation than imposing single solutions. They may also reach out and be wary of rigidity and bureaucracy. Network organisations can embrace customers and business partners. They can support co-creation and grow organically. Collaboration with customers and iterative development can speed up adaptation and innovation.

C P Snow (1959 & 1961) warned of a growing division between science and the humanities, and the emergence of two distinct cultures. Within many companies today, is another division

emerging? Some people think in a logical and structured way. They prefer order and standardisation. Others are more tolerant of uncertainty. They favour variety and welcome diversity. They look for links, patterns and relationships. They can simultaneously explore in different arenas.

During its golden years, Xerox PARC recruited degree majors from disciplines that approached problems differently. Introducing them into research groups increased creativity. Throughout history breakthroughs in thinking have been caused by outsiders who challenged orthodoxy (Kuhn, 1962). Do you and colleagues look beyond the normal suspects? Are you alert to curious and restless explorers? Might greater exposure to the creative arts stimulate creativity in your organisation?

Engaging and Learning From the Creative Arts

The creative arts are undergoing a revolution (Coulson-Thomas, 2017). Digital technologies are creating new opportunities for engagement and involvement. They are opening up new arenas for innovation and entrepreneurship. They are democratising enjoyment of the arts and participation in the arts. More people can now find their voice and express their creativity. Channels of communication have become more open, inclusive and participative. We have more ways of being creative, connecting with others, and sharing our creativity than any generation in history.

The creative arts can enrich both working and leisure activities. They are ripe for enterprise and social entrepreneurship. They also reach beyond practitioners. They embrace the audiences, followers and exhibition visitors who enjoy their work at home or in the community. Collaboration with creative artists can unleash energy and ignite thinking. Creative artists in residence and creative arts activities can stimulate imagination, innovation and entrepreneurship across work groups, communities and organisations.

Businesses in many sectors could learn from the creative arts. They are sustainable. Repetitive and rule-based tasks can be automated. Unstructured creative activities are often less easily replaced by technology. The creative arts can also address social issues. They offer participation and self-employment as an alternative to boredom, delinquency and crime. They provide scope for philanthropy, corporate social responsibility and social entrepreneurship.

Adopting, Implementing and Commercialising Ideas

If business success is to be achieved, creative ideas have to be developed and commercialised. Innovation and entrepreneurial flair may be needed to deliver tangible offerings or acceptable solutions at affordable prices, that enough people will buy to cover costs and generate a profit. While Pixar exuded creativity, attention was also devoted to practical business issues such as brand building, rights and acknowledgements. Addressing contractual matters ensured the studio derived the maximum of credit and benefit from its creativity and promising ideas (Levy, 2016).

For companies to become more effective incubators of new ventures, corporate policies, rules, guidelines, standards, codes and compliance practices may need to change. Options, choices and possibilities are multiplying. As new business and economic models emerge, past strengths can become sources of weakness and vulnerability. Business leaders need to be alert to defensive responses and attempts to protect vested interests. When planning for their own succession and developing the leaders of tomorrow they should also be open to new sources of talent.

Education and involvement in the creative arts can enhance, enable, enrich and empower. It can stimulate the creativity and commitment that leads to successful innovation and entrepreneurship. Sir James Dyson the inventor, industrial designer and entrepreneur was educated at the Byam Shaw School of Art and the Royal College of Art. The School for the Creative Arts aims to build the

ability to explore and develop ideas, implement a business plan and fulfil commissions. It sets out to give people the ability and confidence to express themselves and become successful practitioners.

Scoping and Supporting Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Business leaders need to discuss, consult and consider where creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship are most needed. What should they be applied to and for what purpose? What might their relevance, significance and value be for customers and prospects? Should we take a wider range of interests into account when deciding when, where and for whom to be creative, innovative and entrepreneurial?

Existing policies, structures, attitudes, arrangements and practices should be periodically reviewed as situations, circumstances, requirements and priorities change. Innovation in the process of innovation itself may be required. In many organisations there are obstacles and barriers to creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship that need to be identified and addressed. Working and learning environments that are conducive and supportive of them may also need to be put in place.

To have a dream can be inspiring, but a relevant and affordable offering can provide an income. In business both thinking and doing are required. We need aspiration and achievement. The requirements for effective corporate leadership and successful entrepreneurship are converging. In some contexts they may soon overlap to such an extent as to be almost indistinguishable.

References

Catmull, Edwin E. "Ed" and Wallace, Amy (2014), *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces That Stand in the Way of True Inspiration*, London, Bantam Press

Christensen, Clayton M. (1997), *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*, Boston, MA., Harvard Business School Press

Coulson-Thomas, Colin (1997), *The Future of the Organisation, Achieving Excellence through Business Transformation*, London, Kogan Page

Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2012a), *Talent Management 2, A quicker and more cost-effective route to the high performance organisation*, Peterborough, Policy Publications

Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2012b), *Transforming Public Services, A quicker and affordable route to the performance public organisations*, Peterborough, Policy Publications

Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2013), *Transforming Knowledge Management, A quicker and affordable route to the high performance organisation*, Peterborough, Policy Publications

Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2017), *The Case for the Creative Arts* [Position Paper No. 1/17], Peterborough, Adaptation

Kelley, Tom and Kelley, David (2012), Reclaim Your Creative Confidence, *Harvard Business Review*, December, 90 (12), pp 115-8 and 135

Kelley, Tom and Kelley, David (2013), *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Potential Within Us All*, New York, NY, Crown Business

Kuhn, Thomas S. (1962), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, IL., University of

Chicago Press

Levy, Lawrence (2016), *To Pixar and Beyond: My Unlikely Journey with Steve Jobs to Make Entertainment History*, Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin

Popper, Sir Karl (1945), *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Volumes 1 and 2), London, Routledge

Snow, C P (1959), *The Two Cultures* [Rede Lecture], London, Cambridge University Press

Snow, C P (1961), *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, New York, Cambridge University Press

Note

This article draws upon position, theme and conference papers prepared by Dr Colin Coulson-Thomas for the Dubai Global Convention 2017 and 27th World Congress on Business Excellence and Innovation and his plenary speech at the event which was held in the Al Aameera Hall of the Hotel The Grand Hyatt, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

Further Information

Details of forthcoming programmes at the School for the Creative Arts to encourage and develop creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship for leadership in the creative arts will be available on www.sca.edu.gh.

*Author

Prof. (Dr) Colin Coulson-Thomas is Chancellor and a Professorial Fellow at the School for the Creative Arts, Honorary Professor at the Aston India Centre for Applied Research (Aston University) and holds a Distinguished Professorship at the Sri Sharada Institute of Indian Management-Research. In addition to board and academic roles, he is Director-General, IOD India, UK and Europe, leads the International Governance Initiative of the Order of St Lazarus, chairs the group Risk and Audit Committee of United Learning and is a member of the Advisory Board of Bridges of Sports. Colin has served on public sector boards at national, regional and local level and been the chairman and/or president of professional, voluntary and representative bodies. The author of some 70 books and reports and over 1,000 articles he has held professorial appointments in Europe, North and South America, the Middle East, India and China. He has helped organisations in over 40 countries to harness more of the potential of their people in order to build a business or deliver better services, improve performance and simultaneously deliver multiple objectives. He was educated at the London School of Economics, the London Business School, UNISA and the Universities of Aston, Chicago and Southern California. A fellow of seven chartered bodies he secured first place prizes in the final examinations of three professions. He can be contacted at colin@coulson-thomas.com. His latest publications on quicker, more affordable and less disruptive routes to high performance organisations are available from www.policypublications.com.

^Publication

Published in the Summer 2017 issue of *Management Services*, the quarterly journal of the Institute of Management Services. The citation is:

Coulson-Thomas, Colin (2017), Stimulating Creativity, Enabling Innovation and Supporting Entrepreneurship, *Management Services*, Summer, pp 26-29