Why creativity is not enough to succeed with innovation.
Dr Bettina von Stamm

Often ‘creativity’ and ‘innovation’ are used interchangeably though there are fundamental differences. Creativity alone, to come up with ideas, is not enough. In order to reap the benefits one needs to do something with it. History tells many tales of great inventors who were not able to reap the benefits of their labour, think of the x-ray scanner, invented by EMI but made a commercial success by General Electric, VCRs who had been invented by Ampex/Sony but were successfully commercialised by Matsushita, or the vacuum cleaner, invented by a Mr Spengler but commercialised by Hoover. Why might that be? Let’s take a closer look at the two components of innovation, creativity and implementation.

**Implementation** - putting ideas into practice - is made up of three aspects, idea selection, development, and commercialisation; and of course creativity is needed here too. What do organisations need to achieve implementation? They need processes, procedures and structures that allow the timely and effective execution of projects; implementation is about team effort. But even companies that have all the right processes, procedures and structures in place are often unable to be innovative.

Taking a closer look at creativity might help to explain why that might be. If implementation is about putting an idea into practice, creativity is coming up with the idea in the first place. Creativity is an essential part of innovation, it is the point of departure. One of the big concerns for many companies is therefore how to generate more and better ideas - how to become more creative. Let us think a little about creativity.

As opposed to commonly held opinion, creativity, the act of coming up with an idea, is an inherently individual act – it is the development of an idea and the implementation where the team is needed.

Creativity has little to do with the ‘flash of inspiration out of the blue’. Creativity tends to thrive on the combination of diverse bodies of knowledge, and of transfer from insights of one knowledge domain to another. A report into The Creative Age had reached the conclusion that:

- Creative people have the ability to formulate new problems rather than depending on other to define them, and
- They have the ability to transfer what they learn across different contexts.

Think for example about Henry Ford’s production line. To come up with his revolutionary production line Henry Ford ‘borrowed’ from a wide variety of industries such as meat packaging, grain storage, sewing machine, bicycle construction and even brewing.

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1 Published in 1999 by authors K. Seltzer and T. Bentley on behalf of the UK-based think-tank Demos.
There is often some debate as to whether creativity is for the selected few or everyone. Fortunately more and more people realise that **everyone can be creative**, just the type and level of creativity vary. Let me share a comment from a large US-based company that participated in the latest round of innovation best practice research (von Stamm, 2006) on how they used an invitation for ideas from everyone in the organisation to kick-start their innovation efforts. “What we learned from the inventory [of ideas] is the following, (1) the more people you invite the better the output, and the higher the achievements; (2) when we looked at where the best, most powerful ideas had come from we could not find any link to either a particular geographical area, nor to a particular level within the organisation’s hierarchy, nor to one particular function. There were no hot spots for ‘good ideas’. The ideas were rather distributed across all dimensions. The ‘winners’ had only one thing in common: they were all quite exceptional. So we were pleased we asked everyone, otherwise we would have missed out on some fantastic opportunities.”

While certain people are more creative on their own accord than others, creativity can be stimulated and supported through training, and by creating the right work environment and atmosphere. However, **creativity cannot be ordered**, it relies much more on intrinsic motivation, on people being enthusiastic, inspired and knowledgeable. You cannot tell people to be more creative and innovative, you have to inspire them to be so.

Finally, organisational decision makers tend to require hard facts but **creativity and innovation are often based on intuition**. By the way, as early as the mid 80s authors such as Peters and Waterman (*In search of excellence*) suggested that the modern American manager’s over-dependence on analytic thought and quantitative analysis was a principal cause for the loss of its world-wide pre-eminence (as reflected in stagnating productivity, ageing and obsolete machinery, and inferior but more expensive products).

So implementation is about being organised and about using a methodological and systematic approach. It needs to be structured and cannot be left to chance. Time is of the essence - you need to be fast.

Creativity is less straightforward than implementation, it is not about a new process or establishing a new structure. To be creative people have to think differently. To be innovative people have to behave differently. And to be successful at innovation organisations have to employ people that think and behave differently. This is why I often define innovation as ‘a frame of mind’. Creativity is about being different, thinking laterally, making new connections. It is about allowing our subconscious to do its work. Creativity can be encouraged, not forced. Time is of the essence too but in as much as creativity cannot be rushed, you need to allow it.

Organisations that want to embrace innovation therefore need to find ways of reconciling the tension that lies in the juxtaposition of creativity and implementation, and acknowledge that an organisation needs both: innovation and operation. **Successful innovative organisations seem to manage to balance the tension between the two cycles without compromising either.**
By the way, when investigating what kind of people are creative and what kind of traits lead to creativity the Hungarian psychology professor Csikszentmihalyi came to the following conclusions\(^2\): “There may be certain neurological physiologies that predispose you to one or another type of creativity, but it doesn't seem to take a particular talent or genius to be very creative.” He continues, “However, we do find typically creative individuals have curiosity and interest, and also a certain blend of characteristics often thought of as opposites”:

- Divergent and convergent thinking – can think ‘outside the box’ while also being good at synthesising a number of ideas into a single concept
- Energy and idleness – high levels of energy, even at a great age (though they may have been sickly as children) but at the same time almost all of them are sometimes seen as being lazy as they don't let themselves be pushed, or keep routines [this is related to incubation, and they feel guilty about it, but they also feel that it's necessary]
- Introversion and extroversion – often being caught up in themselves but also being interested in a wide range of things, interacting with others and seeking stimulation
- Masculine and feminine – creative people tend to be psychologically androgenous (men who are shy, less aggressive, sensitive -women who are feminine but also dominant)
- Passionate and detached – highly intrinsically motivated, loving what they do but at the same time able to stand back, especially when it comes to evaluation
- Rebellious and traditional – confronting and challenging the existing but at the same time building on the past. As Isaac Newton pointed out: "If I can see farther than other men, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants."

I find this list quite useful as it can be used as starting points for designing training and development programmes for managers who want to improve their employees’ creativity (and innovativeness).

So if we are all creative, just in different ways, why does it seem so difficult to create truly innovative organisations?

I believe that there is something about us, as human beings that prevents us from applying our creativity – unless we have to. Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), said about 500 years ago, “‘There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new.”

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\(^2\) Extracted from Student Coloquium: Problem Finding and the Creative Process, Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Thursday, November 11, 1999, Notes by Anne K. Gay; see [http://www.eng.uwaterloo.ca/~akgay/creative.html](http://www.eng.uwaterloo.ca/~akgay/creative.html)
**Change triggers fear.** If change is imminent people ask themselves what personal consequences might be. With their skills and expertise still be required? Will / still be required?

Yet fear is the enemy of innovation: fear to be ridiculed, fear not being taken seriously, fear to damage one's reputation with a silly idea, fear to loose status. But, to quote Einstein again, “Unless something is utterly ridiculous at the outset there is not hope for it!”

If we want to create something truly new it may well seem crazy at the outset. A carriage that moves without a horse? A computer in my home? A device which is no larger than a pack of cigarettes yet holds hundreds of songs and even videos? Much of what we take for granted today was once believed to be the product of too lively an imagination.

Openness towards ‘crazy ideas’ is fundamental precondition for successful innovation. However, something that is difficult to imagine and seems somehow rather crazy does not sit well with those focused on cost savings and details. More often than not the response to an innovative thought is, “If it’s such a great idea why are our competitors not doing it?” But as Einstein said, “You can recognize a great idea by the fact that it seems impossible to realize.”

On top of some fundamental resistance to change there are also other aspects of humanity that make innovation rather difficult.

We all have our ‘personal pair of glasses’, that are tinted by our upbringing, education and culture, through which we see the world. The saying goes, if the only tool I have is a hammer every problem starts to look like a nail. We all draw on our background and experience when we look at things; the result is that we often see what we believe is there, rather than what is there. When the Wright brothers invited all journalists from their area to witness their first ever flight not one came as they all knew that ‘heavier than air things cannot fly’.

Don’t get me wrong, to deal with the ever increasing bombardment with information, impressions and pictures we would go crazy had our brain not the ability to cluster and categorise. But while this trait serves us well in our everyday life, it can get in the way of innovation.

Just think about starting a new job. Most of us will put our best foot forward and aim to be knowledgeable rather than to ask ‘silly’ questions; we want to fit in. Before we notice we have assimilated the habits and assumptions of that firm’s culture. You may ask, where is the problem with that? In most organizations we have rules and taboos that have had their justification when introduced – but the reasons for these rules and taboos may no longer exist! Unless we have people in the organisation who challenge ‘the way we do things around here’, and who are listened to and taken serious, we might repeat the same mistakes again and again.

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3 You can read more about this story on [http://amasci.com/freenrg/sad.html](http://amasci.com/freenrg/sad.html).
To put it differently, if we have an innovation team of ten where all think alike, we have a cost-savings opportunity of nine. Because, to put it with American journalist Walter Lipman, if everyone thinks alike no one thinks very much.

But bringing in people who are not like us has its own set of issues. While diversity (of mind) is essential for innovation it is also notoriously difficult to manage. The problem is that most of us will have prejudices against those who are different from us. And these prejudices tend to get in the way of us really listening and hearing what they have to say.

If we are to use diversity to drive innovation we need to find ways to help people of a different mindset to communicate with each other, to develop and appreciation of each other’s contribution and to revel in the differences – rather than being repelled by it.

That then brings me to my last point, the role of leadership. If there is one thing that can make or break the innovation culture in an organisation, it is you, the organisation’s senior management and leadership team.

Let me start by explaining why I believe that an innovation culture hinges on the organisation’s leadership and then lay out what it actually means to lead for innovation, and hence what is required from you.

The first time the importance of the modelling role of leadership occurred to me was in 1987 when I was working in an architects’ practice of about 30 people. I had been wondering why everyone seemed to be so much in the habit of gossiping about whoever was not present in the room, and that no one thought much of it – until I overheard one of the partners encouraging one of the employees to give him the low-down on the other employees, “so, what is the latest gossip around here?” Telling on colleagues was pretty much requested by ‘senior management’; no wonder everyone was busy doing it! In Germany there is a saying, ‘wie der Herr, so das Gscherr’ which means, like the master so the servants, and I certainly believe that it is very true. Have a look around you and see whether you can observe some of it – in yourself as well as others. Do you notice yourself referencing or quoting your parents? Do you hear your children and think, gosh, that just what I always say? Imitating and referencing ‘the powers that be’ starts rather early in life.

So it is important to understand that people do not listen as much to what we say than observe what we do. A well-known piece of research by Professor Albert Mehrabian revealed that only 7% of meaning is conveyed through words. That is less that 10%! 38% of meaning is transmitted through the tone of our voice, and the remaining 55% – over half – through our body language. This is why you can say to a person “You are really absolutely terrible” with a laugh, while hugging them, and they will view it as a compliment; or you can say “Oh, really well done” in such a tone of voice and expression on your face that there it is quite clear that the person has just made a big mistake. It is our actions that matter so much more than our words.
This is why sincerity and consistency are such important aspects of innovation – it is hard to fake a belief in innovation. In order to create an innovative organisation you have to encourage people to experiment and acknowledge that failure is part of it. If you do not really mean this people will sense your doubts in your tone of voice and spot it in your actions. If you say innovation is important, and than shut down the long term, speculative project in favour of rescuing next quarter's results, the message will be heard loud and clear. If you say you want innovation, and follow up by saying, but it should fit in with existing operations processes and structures, the message is loud and clear: innovation is nice, but not really that important. And each individual will set their own priorities accordingly.

Consistency is important because creating an innovative organisation is about establishing a certain set of behaviours and a certain mindset – and changing behaviours is neither easy, not does it happen quickly. So issuing the message that innovation is important one day, and then changing your mind the next leads to confusion – and keeps people in the status quo. Changing behaviours takes effort and time, and if people believe that it is a passing fashion they will not even try to change, but just wait and lay low until the storm is over.

How can you demonstrate that you are serious about creating an innovative organisation?

The first thing needed for the innovation journey is an ambition that is to be achieved – what is the dream? It is quite hard for people to innovate against an entirely open brief. If you ask someone, “do you have a good idea?” what are they supposed to say? Some guidance is needed to help people assess which idea is a good one, which one is not. The first question in assessing ideas should always be, does the pursuit of this idea bring us closer to our dream or not? (A possible second question that only slowly moves onto organisations’ agendas might be, “if the idea is not right for us, is there someone else for whom it might be right”?)

Part of the guidance that should be provided is a description or definition of what kind of innovation is actually wanted. Is it really, truly something outside the business boundaries (including the upheaval and disruption of existing knowledge and structures that goes with it)? Or is it radical innovation within existing boundaries? Or is it really only incremental changes to the existing that are wanted? Further it is important to define what is meant, in your organisation, by ‘radical’ or ‘disruptive’? We all seem to have slightly differing views of what radical actually means, and having a shared language for innovation is essential for a successful journey of innovation.

Clarifying the boundaries and how much we want of each of the different types of innovation is essential in managing expectations, as well as allocating resources. People are full of ideas – we all have a desire to contribute. (Taking the risk and) Putting an idea forward and getting rejected is tough; but getting rejected and not understanding why is even worse. What has started as an exercise in motivation ends up being the cause for resentment and disengagement.
Once you have created a shared dream you need to ensure that people know how they can contribute to achieving it. Whom do they go to with their idea? Who might be able to help them to develop the idea into a coherent concept? Where are the resources coming from? Putting a different set of processes and structures in place that facilitate this is important. The emphasis is on different. The processes and structures you have in place will work well for incremental improvements, but the very aspects that make them so efficient and suited for incremental changes are the ones that would kill of radical changes during the first stages. For radical innovation you need guidance and flexibility, not rules and bureaucracy.

As a next step you might want to make sure that you proactively seek your employees’ ideas and suggestions and show a real interest in them. This cannot be done by staying in the office. You may want to roam the corridors and offices of your organisation – and beyond. When you find budding ideas, you may what to check with the ideator how the idea could contribute to achieving the company’s dream, and how you might be able to help him or her with the idea. If it seems that the idea could contribute towards achieving the dream, then create some slack to explore and experiment with the idea. During its development take an active interest in the idea, monitor its development and become its ambassador in the organisation. Part of this is to take it upon yourself to communicate about the project to your colleagues and to ensure that innovation is on the leadership agenda – and not as the last item either.

Finally, be aware that failure is part of the innovation game; if nothing ever fails things cannot possibly be truly different or new. Embracing failure, and ensuring that as much learning as possible is taken out – and shared in the organisation – is what characterises innovative organisations. don’t forget, many successful innovations have come to life through failure.

If you are still sure that creating an innovative organisation is truly what you aspire to then, above all, you need to make sure that you not only ask other in the organisation to behave as described above, but that you, first and foremost, are the one displaying these behaviours.

Leading for innovation, by example, and with passion, is the responsibility of an organisation’s leadership.