



Creativity is Power

A manifesto

By Phil Lewis of Corporate Punk

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“The possible’s slow fuse is lit
by the Imagination.”

– *Emily Dickinson*

“A lot of people never use their initiative
because no-one told them to.”

– *Banksy*

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Introduction: A New Crisis



Here are two truths.

- 1 *Getting the creative best out of people is essential, not only for organisations to do well, but also for them to survive in the modern world.*
- 2 *Most organisations are terrible at it.*

Let's unpick those truths. The leader of an organisation might ask the following questions in response. (My answers are in italics.)

Why should I care about creativity?

Because creative organisations are the ones that succeed.

Does our survival really depend on creativity?

Yes. Because if creativity is poor, the organisation will fail.

If my organisation is so bad at creativity, why is it my problem?

You're the leader. Everything is your problem.

Why am I not getting the creative best out of my people?

Read on, and you'll be able to diagnose what's wrong with your organisation.

Most organisations are not very good at creativity because for a very long time the world of work has been organised around the idea of process. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, workers were given tasks, and had to finish them in an allotted time, with that time getting ever shorter. Creatively, they gave very little of themselves at work, because that wasn't part of the deal. They gave their time, a small amount of their capacity, and then they went home to do something more

interesting. Too much of working life is still like that. It isn't good for creativity, and it's not what the present or the future demand of us. Quite simply, it's old hat.

And it isn't just old hat. It's a crisis.

What machines cannot do

The notion that 'knowledge is power' has only recently become out of date¹. Search engines, Big Data, and (shortly) artificial intelligence all provide access to endless knowledge. Humans have become expendable in this context, being replaced by robots and automation. But creativity and caring are the two things that machines cannot do. Caring is important, but creativity is where the power will reside. And creativity is not a desirable extra; it is a requirement *right now*.

Does our business culture do enough to put creativity at the heart of our working lives? No, it doesn't. In fact, many organisations barely even recognise the problem.

In the 21st century, creative organisations are succeeding, while uncreative ones are failing. It's that stark. In the past, it used to take years for large companies to decline. Now it can be a matter of months or even weeks. Smaller companies, which don't make the headlines but make up a much larger proportion of the economy, can go to the wall in the blink of an eye. The crisis is spilling over into politics. Voters have recently given the establishment a kicking because they are unhappy with their lives. Automation is driving mass obsolescence in low and medium paid workforces, in a context where these workers are already struggling to get used to inequality, the instability of employment, mass migration and globalisation.

Take Trump's victory in the 2016 US Presidential election. Workers in uncreative organisations, as well as the unemployed, can see others (including many who were foreign-born) in fast-moving, creative, technology-driven businesses

¹ The first coinage was in the tenth century *Nahi Al-Balagha* and attributed to Imam Ali (599-661 CE). But Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes and Thomas Jefferson have made it famous.

becoming rich. In some cases, very rich. They cannot join ‘hero’ companies like Apple and Google, they are not the beneficiaries of the wealth being created and redistributed, and they are rebelling. This is an existential crisis for mankind – and there are symptoms of this revolt of the powerless elsewhere, from Brexit to the Italian referendum, and it will continue to surface in various elections to come. Although many commentators would have you believe that we are at some sort of high tide mark, in truth these events are just the first wave signs of a vast, global malaise.

This manifesto is going to make the case for creativity as the solution to a critical problem that needs fixing now: what are human beings *for*, in an age when machines can do so much, and how must our organisations adapt today and tomorrow?



“Rage, Flower Thrower”, Banksy

Why Creativity?

To stay in business, or to continue doing the things it does, every organisation must create and ship excellent things. That is what work now demands of us, and that is exactly what workers are now demanding in order to feel fulfilled. Famously creative outfits like Nike and Zappos get the best out of their people – and keep doing so despite threats to their competitiveness from every angle. Organisations in which people do not play to their strengths, for ends that are without purpose, and in which truth is a stranger and the politics is bad, find themselves stuck, leading to dysfunction, crisis and demise.

You know this, too. In your organisation, you probably try to emulate your more creative rivals. You envy them for the things they do and the way they are. You do not envy the others.

Here are, boiled down, the preconditions for a creative organisation. (When none of these preconditions is in place, progress is unlikely.)

- 1 *Leaders must spot and deal with barriers to creativity, hidden and in unlikely places as they may be.*
- 2 *Everyone must work honestly, creatively and flexibly with others who have complementary skills.*
- 3 *People need to be in the right jobs, and getting better at the things that they are naturally good at.*
- 4 *The organisation needs to be open.*
- 5 *The organisation needs to be optimistic and purposeful.*

These preconditions are not as easy to achieve as they are to distil. This might be because some of them feel intangible ('how do we know if we're open?'). This manifesto will take the reader through why they must be brought about, and how.

In **Part 1**, we will examine the current technological threat to organisations, the possible outcomes in the short and long term, and what this means for creativity.

In **Part 2**, we will explore the nature of creativity, why it is so badly needed in every business, and the cultural context that has led to it being so underrated.

In **Part 3**, we will see what being in an uncreative organisation is like, and identify how you can assess your own organisation's shortcomings.

Finally, **Part 4** will show you how to remove the roadblocks to your own organisation's creativity, and provide a map for the way forward.

There are three things to bear in mind as you read.

First, lots of work is subtly creative, whether it's solving problems, designing something, or enabling others. We will delve deeper into this, but in the meantime don't let pre-existing notions of 'creative work' stifle you. It is not 'airy-fairy', 'fluff', or just 'colouring in'. It is far broader and far more important.

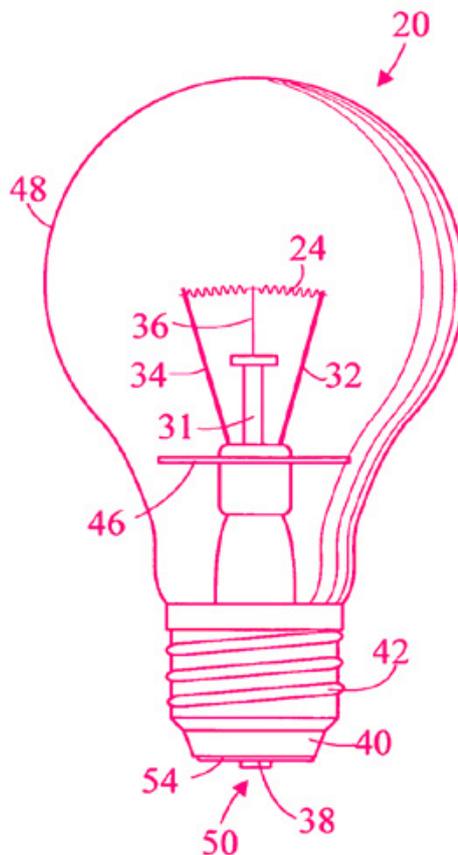
Second, hero companies – the ones we all know and whose products we all use, such as Facebook, Amazon, and the BBC – routinely make and ship excellent new things. They do so by seating creativity at the heart of what they do. But so do those competitors whom you envy in your own sector. When I mention well-known brands in this manifesto, it is only for the purposes of recognition. I am just as concerned with, and the same insights apply to, smaller organisations. You do not need to be famous or big to harness the power of creativity. Indeed, if you harness that power, you may not remain small for long.

Third, 'organisations' obviously applies to commercial entities, but also to charities, governments and the public sector, and in some respects to families too. In the western world, where the popularity of devoting one's life to preparation for the afterlife is dimming, we find our sense of purpose largely in the work we do and the communities in which we do it. So this is not just corporate life, but life itself.

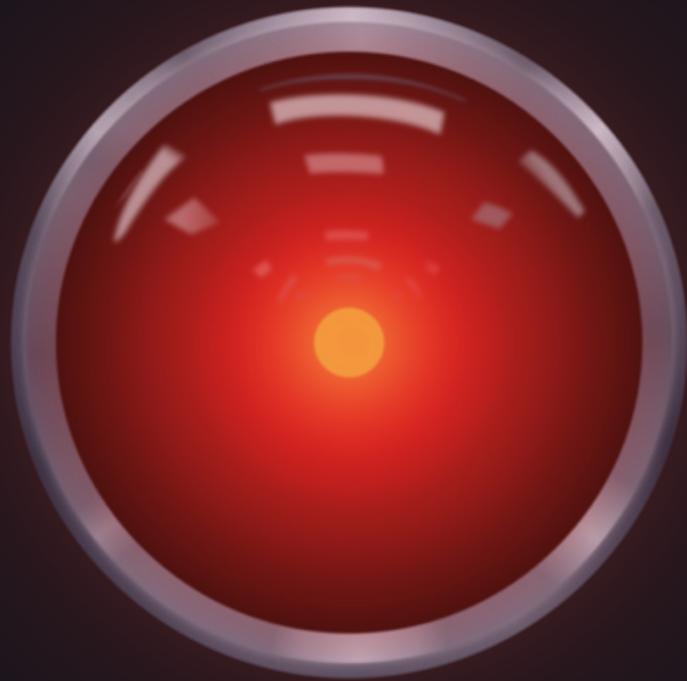
We're in this together

It took a great deal of work to arrive at the conclusions contained in this manifesto. I have been refining them for years. In fact, only after 20 years' experience, and many twists and turns in my own career, have I found myself capable of doing some justice to what is intended as both a manifesto and a handbook for urgent action.

You, the leader of your business, also have some work to do. The business had better be paying you properly, because making the changes you need to make now, before it is too late, may not be easy. Those changes will not always be comfortable. But they will be right, and they will get results.



Part 1: I, Robot



"I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that."

The World Economic Forum released a survey in 2016 called *The Future of Jobs*. It tried to determine which skills would be valued in five years' time compared to now. In the light of increasing automation – a trend also known as the Fourth Industrial Revolution – there are some interesting findings.

“Five years from now,” the report says, “over one-third of skills (35%) that are considered important in today’s workforce will have changed.” HR and Strategy chiefs in global organisations were asked what skills they were looking for now, and what skills they thought would be needed when robots are doing so much more. Their collective answers were as follows:

Top 10 skills:

In 2020

1. Complex problem solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordinating with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgment and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility

In 2015

1. Complex problem solving
2. Coordinating with others
3. People Management
4. Critical Thinking
5. Negotiation
6. Quality Control
7. Service Orientation
8. Judgment and Decision Making
9. Active Listening
10. Creativity

You might question the categories in this survey. Isn't 'quality control' more of a practice than a skill? Could 'active listening' not be a subset of 'emotional intelligence'? And what is 'cognitive flexibility' if not part creativity and part critical thinking?

But, quibbles aside, it isn't how much change will be required by the workforce of the robotic age that we should be struck by. It is how incredibly similar these lists are. There's a good reason for that. We've always needed all these skills to work

well, and we probably always will. A successful sixteenth century merchant needed all these skills – he just didn't call them that.

Nonetheless, there are two big movers between these lists, and they are what makes this survey so notable. One is obvious, one truly remarkable. Negotiation is losing its sheen in an era when so much data is so readily available, and machines are so much better at crunching it. Organisations will have little room to manoeuvre on price or indeed any other terms of a deal. But the remarkable one is Creativity. In 2015 it was tenth, but in 2020 it is predicted to be third. Suddenly it goes from “also ran” to “chart topper”.

That is a stunning change, and the working world isn't adequately prepared for it. The leaders of today are telling us that creativity is something that last year they valued less in an employee than the ability to control quality (i.e. be consistent). But in just a few years' time, they say, they will value creativity more than co-ordinating with others, and a lot more than plain old-fashioned judgement.

But are these business honchos really making a statement about the needs of tomorrow? Or are they are talking about the needs of today? Perhaps they are not so much gazing into their crystal balls as crying out for creativity to be unleashed now. This should be no surprise.

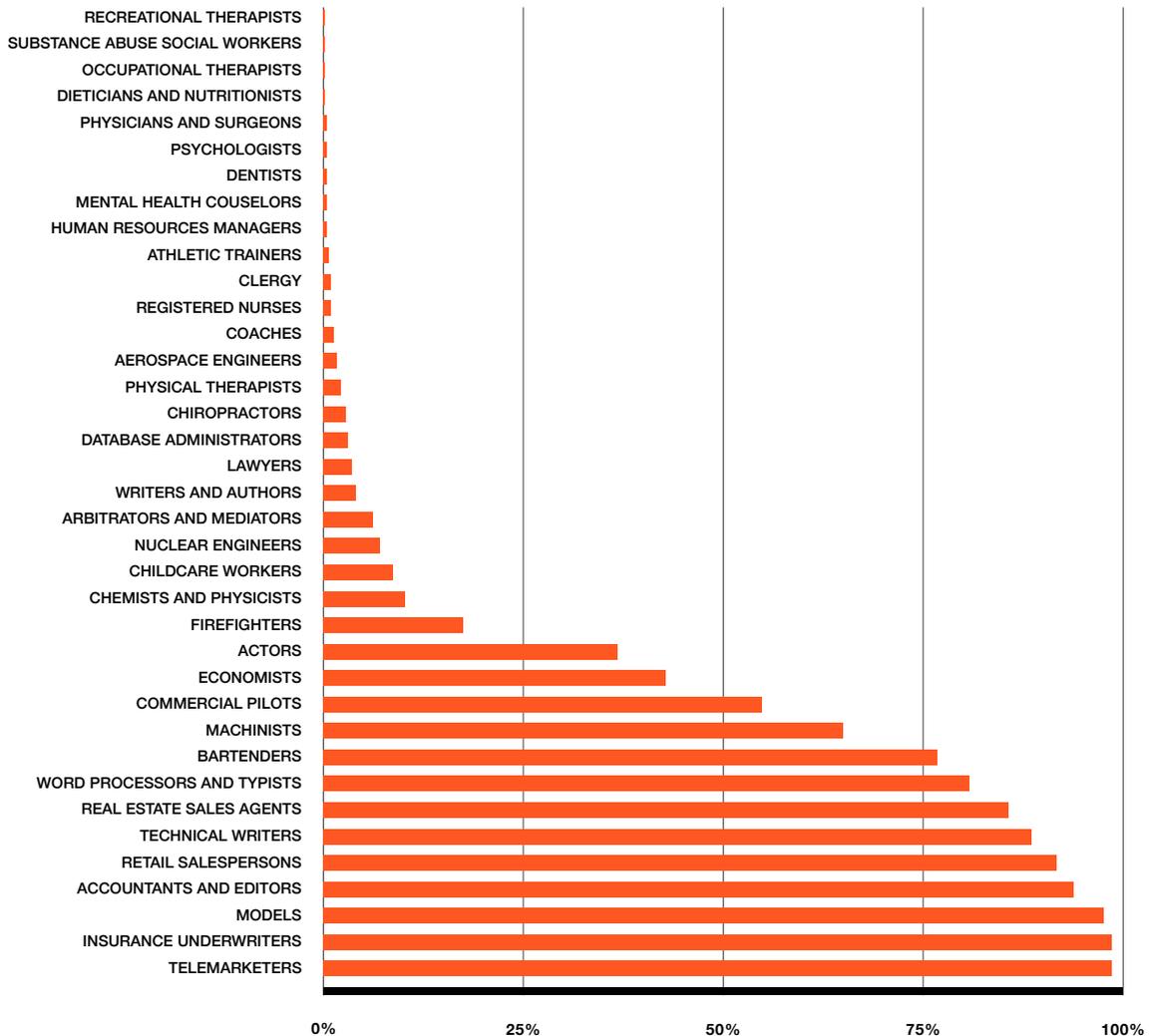
Creativity is not just a thing that robots cannot do – and thus a thing we are left with that does not threaten many roles and livelihoods. As we shall see in the next chapter, it is the thing that makes the difference between organisations that succeed and those that do not.

Caring and creating

The two types of jobs that cannot be done by robots are those that involve caring and those that require creating. This reflects the fact that artificial intelligence has not yet managed to replicate two things that define us as humans, and make us such a successful species – namely, emotion and genius. By genius, I don't mean being Mozart, I just mean our capacity for making cognitive leaps that may defy logic or just be in advance of it.

Look at the specific jobs that are set to disappear over the next few years:

**Probability that jobs will be eliminated
as a result of innovations in digital technology**
(including computerisation, robotics and artificial intelligence)



Source: *The Future of Employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?*
by Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael A. Osborne, 2013

This is scary for the people in these jobs, and could result in uncomfortable consequences for the rest of us. But we have seen this before, in the first Industrial Revolution. We know what happens when machines can do what humans had previously done.

The First Industrial Revolution

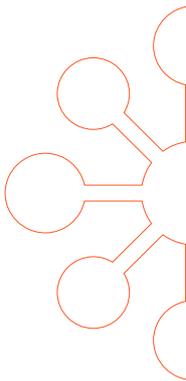
Two hundred years ago, two thirds or more of the workforce in Britain was employed in agriculture. By 1850 it was down to a quarter, and has been reducing ever since. Now, by the way, it is 1.5%, which is remarkable considering we spend ten per cent of our income on food. Machines simply became the means of production. This was a dramatic change, and caused the most profound social and political upheaval the world has ever seen. While releasing many millions from badly rewarded drudgery, it also ushered in a new form of serfdom. It established a slavery to the machine (or rather, to the owners of those machines), which took many political and social revolutions, the disintegration of empires and a couple of world wars to sort out. It also echoed around the world. Perhaps it has not yet finished echoing. But at least coal dust lung has been replaced by RSI, and more than a few inventions have liberated people, from the tractor to the washing machine to the internet.



The Fourth Industrial Revolution

Will we experience the same upheaval before we see the benefits of this next technological revolution? Stephen Hawking, who is famously not a fool, has warned a number of times in the last few years what might happen when artificial intelligence, developed in full, becomes a commercial reality. He predicted that an existential crisis was on its way – and we can already see the symptoms of this in the world around us. But his worries are worse than that. In fact, the professor is concerned that it could spell nothing less than the end of the human race. It “would be the biggest event in human history,” he told Larry King in 2015. “Unfortunately, it might also be the last.”

“Are you referring to ‘technological unemployment’, where machines take all our jobs?” *The Guardian* asked him in a 2014 interview. “The outcome,” wrote Hawking, “will depend on how things are distributed. Everyone can enjoy a life of luxurious leisure if machine-produced wealth is shared, or most people can end up miserably poor if the machine-owners successfully lobby against wealth redistribution. So far, the trend seems to be toward the second option, with technology driving ever-increasing inequality.”

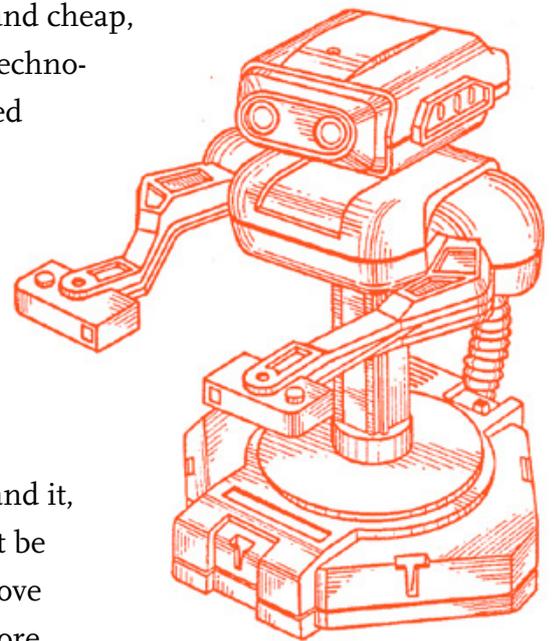


If all this seems farfetched, then take the case of the Japanese insurance company that has just replaced 34 insurance claims clerks with IBM's Watson artificial intelligence program (plus a management protocol to check the work of that program). This is not the start of something. It is a part of a continuum, going back quite some way and sure to continue².

If the owners of the robot-driven economy fail to give away rather than profit from the technology, will inequality result? (When, you might ask, have owners of things ever given them away?) But surely, if they don't give it away, then the rest of us will just take it from them, won't we? There are more of us than them, after all – and these days we vote. So perhaps we should look at the positive side. “A life of luxurious leisure?” That sounds good to me. Where do I sign?

New communism?

The theory is called fully automated luxury communism. If all the tasks are taken up by robots, we can all float about doing whatever we want to do. But this means we will all need a guaranteed minimum income and housing provided by the taxpayer, which doesn't sound cheap, and history is littered with the blueprints of unrealised technotopias and work-free leisure societies. Thinkers as varied as Marx and Bertrand Russell were certain that science, technology and human cooperation were on the verge of liberating humanity from the bondage of labour. And there are halfway views, too. As long ago as 1964, President Lyndon Johnson summed up the findings of a commission he had set up on the impact of automation on the US economy. He struck a moderate note when he said “If we understand it, if we plan for it, if we apply it well, automation will not be a job destroyer or a family displaced. Instead, it can remove dullness from the work of man and provide him with more than man has ever had before.”



² The name of this insurance company, and make of this what you will, is Fukoku.

Isaac Asimov, the biochemistry professor and science fiction writer, laid down an interesting ethical framework in his Three Laws of Robotics in the 1942 short story “Runaround”³. They state that a robot must obey three simple laws to preserve human life above its own or that of any other robot, and that these laws should be sewn into any code that an artificially intelligent robot is programmed with. It seems sensible to suggest that some form of ‘Asimov control’ will be in place by the time robots achieve full AI. We all know the legend of Faust, and about the folly of Dr Frankenstein – and they are still relevant to us, which is why we constantly retell these stories. So we are unlikely to make their mythical mistakes, at least not wholesale. The doomsday scenario where machines take over the world, or even your kitchen, in some sort of coup, seems unlikely. Indeed, MEPs are already looking into what laws might need to be put in place to manage robotics and AI.

In fact, if doom is in store, it is likely to be specific, local, temporary, and from a much more familiar source. It will be a result of man’s inhumanity to man.

We are already seeing what happens when the people the automation first affects decide to kick back against it. They don’t break the machines. They target other people whom they do not identify as being in the same boat. Or, to use another metaphor – one that looks as if it may become literal – they build a wall.

³ Asimov’s three laws of robotics are:

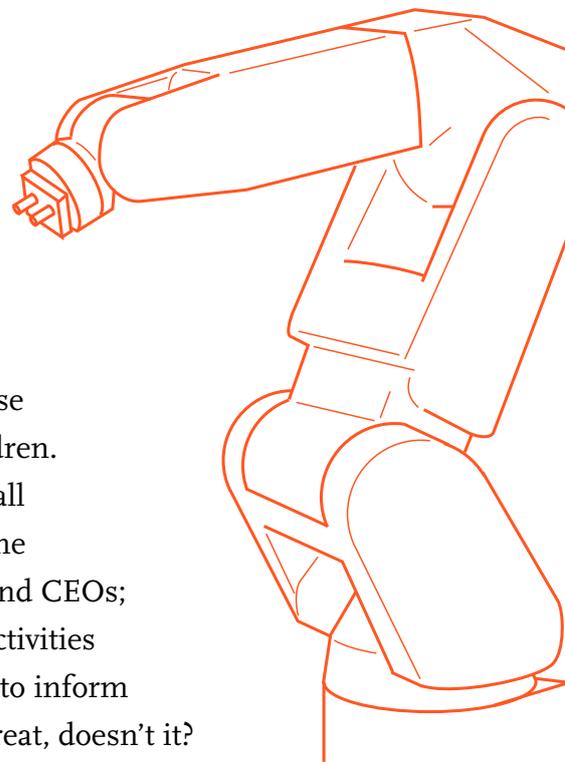
1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

The likely future

Where does this leave us? Should we be as gloomy as Professor Hawking? There certainly doesn't appear to be much sign of the machine-owners relinquishing control or ownership. But the market is more sophisticated than it was in the first Industrial Revolution. The technology is different and the owners have no interest in oppressing people. Doing so would only reduce their market, and thus their profits.

The smartphone has become affordable for most people in under a decade. It was never possible for a poor person to own a factory, but he or she can now own a smartphone. And a smartphone is the new means of production. Perhaps AI will go the same way. If there is greater profit to be made by companies like Apple, Google, Microsoft and IBM bringing affordable AI to everyone rather than very expensive AI to just a few, we can be sure they will do exactly that. Also, technology tends to settle not at its zenith, but at a convenient average. Mankind achieved supersonic flight, and it amazed everyone for a while despite it being unaffordable for most. But then the demand for it reduced to just a few applications. Concorde was eventually scrapped. Supersonic just wasn't worth it commercially. What we wanted was Easyjet.

A report from the McKinsey Global Institute by James Manyika suggests that there are actually relatively few jobs that can be entirely taken over by robots and AI in the short term. The more likely threat is that elements of many roles will be mechanised. Suppose you run the corner shop. You may well be able to get a cheap robotic solution very soon for stock control – but someone's still got to sympathise with the customers about their corns or their wayward children. Manyika writes that "about 30% of the activities in 60% of all occupations could be automated, and that will affect everyone from welders to landscape gardeners, mortgage brokers – and CEOs; we estimate about 25% of their time is currently spent on activities that machines could do, such as analysing reports and data to inform decisions." This sounds more like an opportunity than a threat, doesn't it?



We are looking, then, not at an era of mass unemployment, but mass *redeployment*. Redeployment, if we get it right, into work that is more creative and leaves no one behind. This is a huge opportunity, and some businesses are already spotting it.

Indeed, in the 21st century, creative businesses, those that do bold and enterprising work, are the ones that are succeeding. When companies move their brand forward, expand or disrupt their categories, they find new markets, change economies and advance life for all of us. But it doesn't happen by accident. It must be a deliberate action. It all starts with taking the innate skill that every human is born with – imagination – and putting it to work in new and exciting ways.

Part 2: **What is Creativity?**



“Do you want to be a more creative person?” screams the self-help industry from the shelves of bookshops and the screens of Kindles everywhere. There are hundreds of books about being creative, what creativity means, and how to do it. They discuss creativity in writing, painting and poetry, and mainly from the point of view of self-actualisation. There is also plenty of literature about being creative in an organisational context. But few of these works do anything other than address how an individual might position themselves more readily to appear creative, or to bring the ideas they already have into sharper focus for others to recognise. As befits the social media age, these books tend to be about broadcasting the individual as loudly as possible.

Turning up the volume may have a temporary value for the individual and their career, but it has little value for organisations. We do not need louder voices in creative situations (if anything, we could all do with a bit more quiet reflection). What we need in corporate life is for creative people to work better with each other to *make things happen*.

Creativity and Art

Organisations in general – and businesses in particular – are terrified of creativity. Traditionally, business has rarely thought of promoting people who think in creative ways, or people who express themselves creatively. To do so has seemed “un-businessy”. We cannot afford this tendency any longer. We must grasp this nettle.

Brian Eno, the prolific musician, producer and artist, is one of the most creative people alive. He gave this definition of art in his 2015 John Peel lecture:

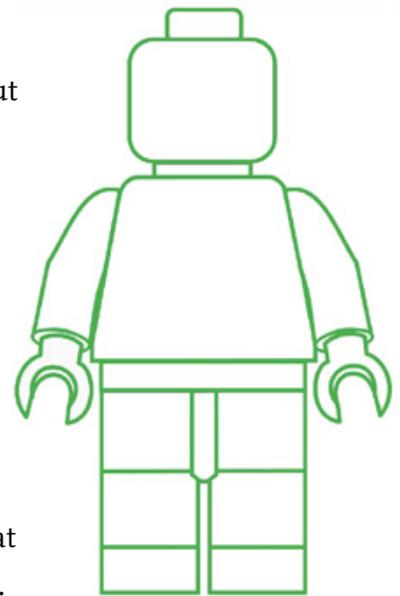
“Art is everything you don’t have to do”.

As soon as anything doesn’t *just* fulfil the function of survival, and as soon as some creativity has been enacted and an embellishment made, it becomes art. We might need a rug to stop our toes from getting cold, but it doesn’t have to be decorated. We need to move, but we do not need to tango, twist or twerk. We need food, but Heston Blumenthal is an artist. Somewhere along the spectrum from sack of grain to The Fat Duck is the degree to which all our jobs are creative.

Where does creativity come from?

When children are playing, they say “let’s pretend”, meaning “let’s imagine”. It’s a vital behaviour; it’s how they learn. It’s an innate human tendency. So yes, adults have the same urge. Everything from symphonies to nail painting is about constructing worlds and asking other people whether they recognise this ‘false’ world as one containing anything they recognise about the real world. It’s the way we gauge our own and other people’s reactions, and rehearse having feelings about things safe in the knowledge that those things are not actually dangerous or too painful, emotionally.

But it’s not just about feelings. We also create to establish co-operation. The working world, and likewise most human development, is all about co-operation. But we can only co-operate with each other if we understand what it’s like being in someone else’s head – so we imagine it, and present the results of that imagination to others. We conduct a continual conversation that binds us all together. In business, as in life, we call this culture.



Who can be creative?

Creativity is often treated as if it is a special thing, reserved only for geniuses and people who don’t seem to have much. This is unfair nonsense, and damaging to the culture of an organisation. Everyone can and should be creative.

There is an old truism that there is a novel in all of us. I firmly believe this to be true. It doesn’t mean that the novel that is in me would be of equal merit to the novel that is inside the next person, especially if the next person happens to be Zadie Smith or Danielle Steel. I haven’t put in the work to make that so. But it doesn’t mean I couldn’t. It might not be genius, but I haven’t given the 99% perspiration that Thomas Edison referred to so that I might find out.

Everyone is innately brilliant at being creative. Again, look at how sophisticated and ingenious children are at manipulating their parents. Most organisations, though, do not prize and nurture this generative ability. In fact, they try and

crush it for the same reasons a parent tries to resist the child – for the parent’s own immediate convenience. It may be that the organisation believes it is only the preserve of senior people to be creative, or that it becomes so afraid of risk that it feels it must block any attempt by others to think or act in creative ways.

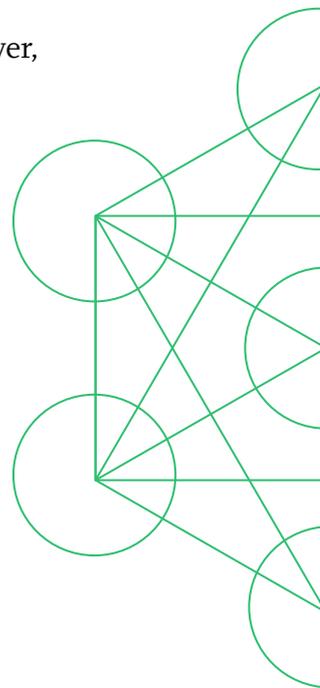
Creativity in business

Every situation in business that needs a combination of intellect and ingenuity needs creativity. The need for it is particularly acute in marketing, for the simple reason that marketing is about trying to communicate something to an audience that is unfamiliar with that something. It was always the case, but it is particularly so now. In the past, the vendor of a product had limited time to communicate the need or desire for a product or service. That time has reduced. But moreover, these days businesses also find themselves in categories which are disrupted, and where their competitors may have changed strategy quickly or radically. Creativity in organisations must now be flexible and adept as well as robust and competent.

In the organisational context, creativity may be the ability to make and ship excellent things, whether they are physical products, services, or digital products, and whether they are new things or tried and tested products sold and/or delivered in new ways. But, on a broader scale, it is much more than that.

Creativity is about using ingenuity to navigate through complex and ambiguous situations. It is about the application of intellect, instinct and imagination to spot and execute a strategic path through a given problem.

Creativity just isn’t valued enough, either in society or in most organisations. It has traditionally been seen as too ‘risky’ – an emotion that business in general finds uncomfortable, and prefers to avoid.



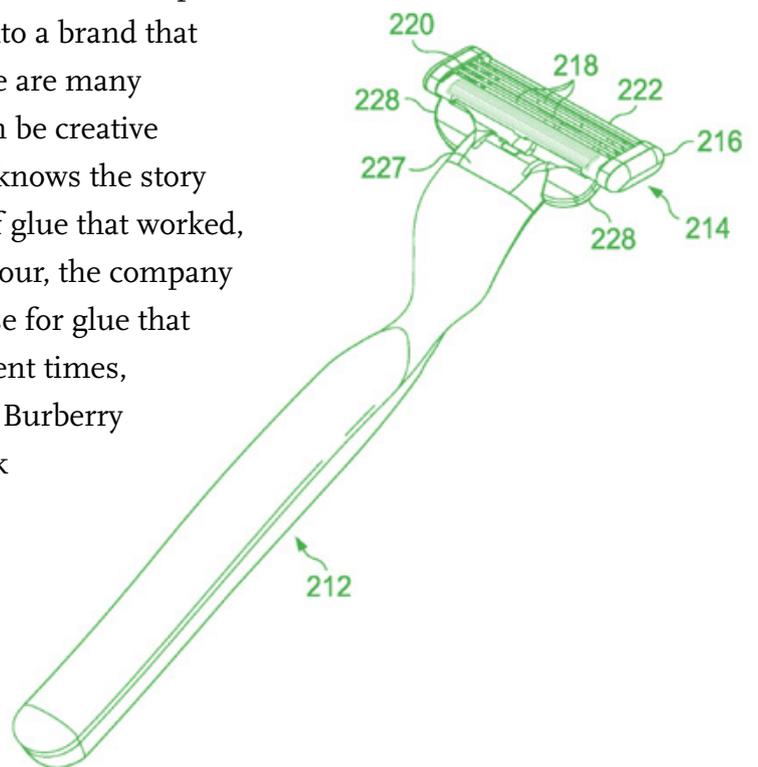
The commercial value of creativity

There are many examples where creativity has worked wonders for organisations. In a communications context, the John Lewis Christmas adverts, for example, have succeeded so well that the company has become synonymous with Christmas itself – the most crucial period for a retailer. These adverts are not only creative in their ideas. They also give great prominence to selling an emotion rather than a product or a service, and they are creative in their strategy: they break normal retail broadcast ‘rules’ by only going out once a year.

There are many fans of Warren Buffett, not just because he is successful, but because the way he communicates with his shareholders and the wider market is so quirky. Everyone in the US stock market, and many others besides, take fifteen minutes out of their year to read what he has to say in a few densely written pages. In marked contrast to certain other billionaires, he tweets annually.

In pricing, the Dollar Shave Club in the US – with its copycats elsewhere – has hugely disrupted the men’s toiletries industry, and has further forced the industry to follow in the wake of that disruption. Stella Artois has also been very creative in both strategy and execution, becoming known for being “reassuringly expensive” at the same time as becoming renowned for being cheap.

For new products, Marmite has done well to exploit a ‘one product’ problem and turn it into a brand that has diversified spectacularly. But there are many other ways in which organisations can be creative about category. Everyone in business knows the story of 3M. While trying to invent a type of glue that worked, and being unsuccessful in the endeavour, the company managed to invent the world’s first use for glue that didn’t work – the Post-It. In more recent times, to mention just some success stories, Burberry has successfully conjoined the catwalk with ecommerce; many companies have changed from selling software to selling subscriptions to software; and Unbound has conquered print-on-demand publishing.



These successfully creative businesses have one notable characteristic in common: a healthy attitude to risk. That attitude doesn't just come about because one person decides to take the risk (even in the case of Buffett), or because the risks aren't actually risks in objective terms (sometimes they are). It is because the organisation has a culture that is comfortable with risk. It understands that risk is both entirely subjective and entirely necessary. This attitude is lauded, confronted, assessed, and found to be the right thing. It feels right.

Although some people consider 'risk management' to be a science (a dangerously blinkered view), it is essential to understand that navigating risk in business is also emotional work.

Emotional work

Making real things happen is hard work. It is putting in the ten thousand hours that sociologist Malcolm Gladwell speaks of before you can call yourself an expert in something. As the poet Maya Angelou says, "Nothing will work unless you do". But the process is only partly intellectual. It is also emotional. That may be the reason why it isn't given enough weight in our culture, and is not a big enough part of working life as it exists now. In most offices and factories, emotion is inconvenient and suppressed. We check our feelings at the sliding doors. (Or, rather, we think we do.)

There isn't a self-help book, or a confessional memoir, about creativity or the creative process, in any discipline, that doesn't refer to it being an emotional process. This is hardly surprising, as creativity is not a logical thing. But emotion doesn't have to be at the expense of intellect. Creativity runs better when both run free. Successfully creative people and groups spend much more time thinking than they do anything else, but they are also emotionally intelligent. How else can you collaborate with others, and successfully negotiate new solutions to old problems in ways that the group deems acceptable?

How do we correct the prevailing psychology and create a better culture – one in which creativity can flourish? Before we go on to that, we must first visit the land of the sick business. Psychology doesn't tend to study happy and productive people. It studies the mind, or the collective mind, when it or they go wrong. That's what we're going to do in the next chapter.

Part 3: **This Isn't Working**

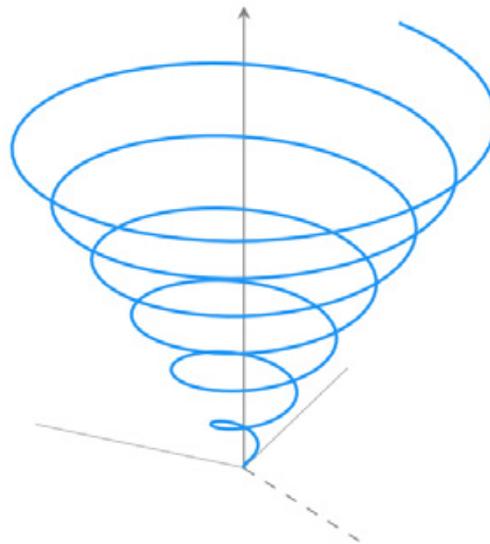


“Oh, the horror. The horror.”

– Kurtz, in *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

Organisations don't wake up one morning and become creatively dysfunctional. The Board of Directors of a company, for example, isn't happy one day, and then screaming for change and improvement the next. The staff isn't suddenly running about panicking, shouting at each other and crying in corridors. Working life is rarely like a soap opera. But even if it is, it doesn't happen without a long lead-up and it doesn't stay as dramatic for long. There is a spectrum of behaviours and characteristics, of course, but it's usually a process of steady decline.

In fact, to strangle people's natural creativity requires a lot of hard work. It is not a question of failing to hire the right person, or of not embracing the latest management fad, or of having the wrong office layout.



Creativity dies as a result of more generalised failures in business management that take place over a long period of time.

These failures are often borne of issues such as management structure, or operating process, or culture, which undermine people's emotional ability to bring their best selves to work and positively challenge the status quo.

They are never the result of your ad agency failing to deliver the right 'mood board'.

The symptoms of creative failure

The products and services – the excellent new things that the organisation is supposed to be making and shipping – usually suffer first. At worst, they don't get made or shipped at all. But, more likely, the making and shipping just follow an unsatisfactory path. The products themselves may lack lustre or be badly conceived. The campaigns or sales initiatives to sell them may be poor. “Our new products,” as one unhappy client told me recently, “don't so much get launched. They escape.”

As the temperature in the organisation cools, it may start to lose confidence in its own imagination and rely too much on external agencies. Or if it has lost confidence in the agencies, fire and rehire. Then it may do the same thing again. Or the organisation may retreat into itself entirely. None of these tendencies is healthy, and they provide only more dysfunction, muddying the waters so that leaders cannot see what has caused what.

Then the Board starts to reject all new initiatives. It doesn't seem to matter who is pitching it or how the initiative is pitched. At some point, the management will usually step in to try to solve the problem. Generally, they get it wrong. The reason they get it wrong is because of the strong prevalence of three myths.

Three management myths

The first is the myth of insufficient ideas, in which leaders declare that everything would be better if the organisation just had more ideas, better ideas, quicker ideas, or ideas that were easier to implement. This is almost always complete nonsense. People usually have perfectly good ideas; it's the way that the business is being managed that prevents useful ideas becoming useful reality.

The second is the myth of insufficient people. A lot of business leaders will say “We're not getting value out of our people – there's something wrong with them. We need more and we need better people who can think differently”. This can be damaging not only in human terms (people being sacked who would have been perfectly creatively capable if only they had been led properly), but it's also expensive and rarely works.

The third myth is that a business's culture is indefinable or intangible, and therefore cannot be changed. Culture in an organisation is nothing more than a collection of stories that the organisation tells itself about what it does, how it does it and why. It is perfectly possible to describe it. You just find and retell those stories, and list them. When we change those stories, we change the culture.

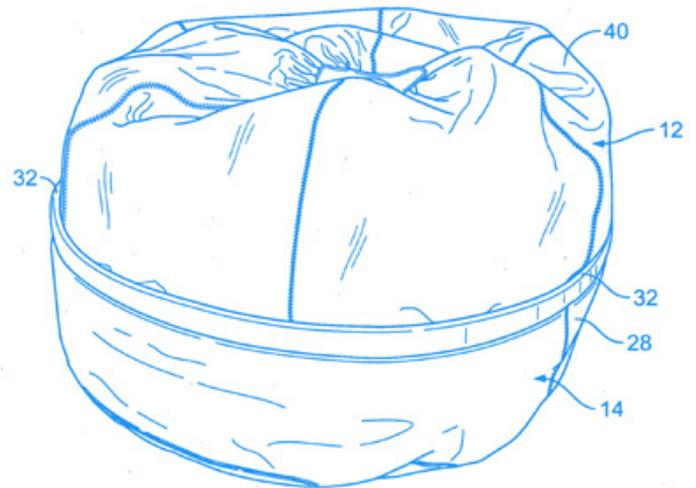
Management-led solutions

Under these misapprehensions, management's homegrown solutions tend to be of three types. All of them are prone to failure – or at least, equivalent to applying a sticking plaster to a broken leg and wondering why the hobbling and screaming doesn't stop.

The first solution is one that we at Corporate Punk call 'hitting the beanbag'. In this route, insufficient ideas is held to be the primary problem. So beanbags get sat on, and new ideas are generated. But because the underlying problems are not being solved, they just remain ideas and they never get executed.

The second solution is 'heading for the bypass', wherein people sneak outside the city walls and concoct something new. But when it is dragged inside, it looks like an alien and everyone gathers round to kill it. (Traditional management consultancy also heads for the bypass in a different way, by trying to slash and burn human capital to lower barriers to commercial success. This approach tends to create more pain, and will soon become redundant anyway, as the robots take over the tasks that depend on efficiency.)

The third solution, 'hiring a bigwig', involves trying to find a person who will solve the organisation's problems for it. But such innovators are difficult to find and, without the right context in which to work, they often end up freezing to death or being lynched by the mob.



Beanbag, bypass and bigwig – the killer B's.

If the help sought is external, in most cases the supplier doesn't have the energy, the nerve or the expertise to delve deeply enough. They usually employ the killer B's – just in a more fancy and expensive way. For example, workshops on future vision may get run, trying to create a new dawn. But they usually fail to address underlying problems, and follow only the path of least resistance. So the promised dawn is false, serving only as a distraction and a waste of time and money.

The six symptoms of creatively dysfunctional organisations

There are more specific symptoms of creative malaise. These usually arise before misery spreads more generally. Can you spot any in your business?

Foot-dragging

If you want to understand the nature of political conflict, James Scott wrote in *Weapons of the Weak*, don't look at the surface. It's what happens below the surface that can help you find the reasons for what is going on. Take the 2016 US Presidential election. The pollsters didn't pick up on the foot-dragging resistance to the political establishment, so the result was a surprise. Passive resistance is active resistance in disguise.

If you want to look for symptoms of foot-dragging in your own business, you only have to attend meetings and listen. Meetings are the cauldron of a business, and you can determine a great deal by their tone and content.

Presentation not conversation

These days, you could be forgiven for thinking that presentation is everything. In social media, the squeakiest wheel gets the oil. In traditional media, spin is king. All media operates in an atmosphere of 'post-truth'. Particularly in the creative industries we are prone to thinking that we should spend more time on presentation than we should on substance.

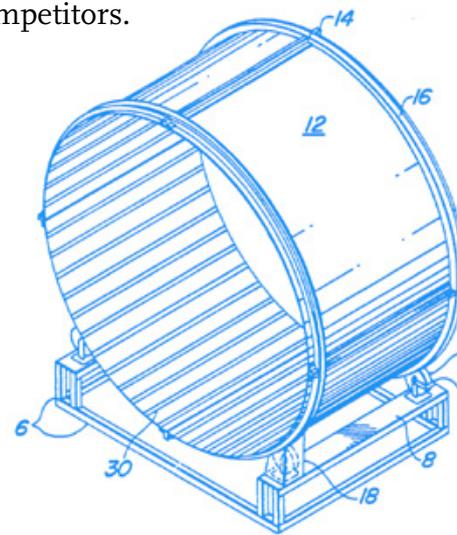
People spend far too much time on PowerPoint. This is very much the reverse of what we should be doing. The Pareto Principle should apply to the narratives

we tell in a business. Of your time, 20% should be spent on storytelling, and 80% thinking about how you're going to do things and navigate with integrity through the usually ambiguous circumstances in which creative thought is required⁴. There is an older word for post-truth: lies. And just because you say something – no matter how beautiful your charts are – does not make it true.

Myopia

Otherwise known as shortsightedness, this is where the perceived pressure of doing business means that the organisation cannot see beyond the daily grind. When it does look further, it can see only as far as its immediate competitors. Limited horizons do not give rise to fresh thinking or new ideas. By contrast, taking a good look at related categories, and some unrelated ones, can be an inspiring thing to do. Easyjet took its business model from how buses were run, not from what other airlines did. Apple advertised the Mac as a lifestyle choice, not a business machine. And so on.

When myopia rules, managers don't read or think enough, largely because these things are not valued enough as a use of time. But if the business is arid, and devoid of ideas and arguments, dysfunction will creep in. Optimisation is all very well, but you can only optimise what you're already doing. What about new opportunities? What about different sources of creative input?



Self-referentialism

A close cousin of myopia, this is what happens when management teams concern themselves only with what all the other members of the management team are doing. In one instance we witnessed at Corporate Punk, the Directors didn't even appear dysfunctional because they weren't arguing. Each of them thought that everyone else was brilliant. But they never looked outside. They didn't look at their clients, and didn't pay attention to the huge threats

⁴ The Pareto principle states that 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. So in business, 20% of the workforce does 80% of the work; 80% of your work is done in 20% of the time you spend doing it; 80% of profits come from 20% of customers; and 80% of revenue comes from 20% of products.

that were being posed to the business. Sure enough the business plummeted. Like the British Empire, according to the comedian Eddie Izzard, it collapsed “like a flan in a cupboard” because everyone was too busy congratulating each other to notice the signs of decay.

Meeting misuse

Meetings are the way that business gets done. If they don’t work, the organisation isn’t working. Unproductive meetings are a huge cost to the global economy, and the consequences go further than just hours burned. After all, with all this wasted time, how do we all catch up with our “real work”? We do it after hours and at the weekend. It is a business imperative – and human one – to get some control over this waste, and do something about eliminating it.

Enlightened companies do address having better meetings, but standard solutions tend to be gimmicky. We’ve all heard of the no-biscuits meeting, the stand-ups, and the one-point agenda. We all dread the CEO asking us to perform the latest Japanese management technique she’s read about in an in-flight magazine. Devotion to any one methodology is cultish and alienating, and when people drag their feet in meetings the real issues don’t get dealt with, and the whole culture of an organisation can be killed by a thousand cuts.

These are the main problems that occur in meetings:

1. Carrying **dead weight**.
2. Giving **introverts no voice**.
3. Creating **no room for thinking**.
4. Tolerating **showboating** and contrarianism.
5. Allowing things to go on **too long**.
6. Operating to **no agenda**, or a bad one.
7. Agreeing to **no action points**, or not following them up.
8. Failing to think about **different meeting modes**.
9. Enabling **role-based behaviour**.
10. Ignoring the **signs of distress**.

The ten signs of bad meetings are explored in more detail in Appendix One at the end of this manifesto.

Emotional distress

When creative people are being crushed, depending on how honest they feel they can be, you may or may not notice that they are in emotional distress. The mood and behaviour of your people will go through a process of decline, in a similar pattern to the five stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance.

It is a process that is depressing even to describe. But we can't shy away from it, especially as leaders. Appendix Two of this manifesto describes in more detail how to identify which of these five stages your people may be experiencing.

A cry for help

If your organisation exhibits any of these symptoms of creative dysfunction, even if it has bits that work quite well from time to time, it needs help. Rarely will people go through all this pain (either collectively or individually) without seeking it, but most of the time a narrative that has become like a stuck record (“my face doesn't fit”, or “this place doesn't get it”) will undermine that help's ability to make a positive impact. And, to make matters worse, while all this emotional stuff consumes all the bandwidth, you usually have to carry on with business as usual – which makes it more boring, more grinding, and harder to change.

That's quite enough doom and gloom. That was an unpleasant main course, familiar as it may be, but now it's time for a large and delicious pudding – the take-home. How do you fix it?

Part 4: **How do we fix it?**



The problems of an uncreative organisation develop over time. So it stands to reason that fixing them will also take time.

Let go of the killer B's. What you do every day – the habits you develop and the culture you engender – is what will transform your business's creativity.

What follows in this chapter are just a few pointers to help you along the way. They're not exhaustive, and they're (obviously) not personalised to your business. But these observations have been true for every organisation that we have worked with, and leaders that have shown a willingness and ability to address them have invariably enabled huge leaps in the creative productivity of their teams.

In the introduction to this manifesto, I suggested that there were five conditions for a creative organisation:

1. Leaders must spot and deal with barriers to creativity, hidden and in unlikely places as they may be.
2. Everyone must work honestly, creatively and flexibly with others who have complementary skills.
3. People need to be in the right jobs, and getting better at the things that they are naturally good at.
4. The organisation needs to be open.
5. The organisation needs to be optimistic and purposeful.

If we had to sum up each of these in one word, we could say:

- 1 *Insight*
- 2 *Operations*
- 3 *Structure*
- 4 *Politics*
- 5 *Culture*

Those five words provide a framework to describe the solutions.

Insight

The art of spotting and dealing with barriers to creativity

The most dangerous word in the world of work is ‘because’.

“Work is unbearable because my boss doesn’t understand me/the business.” “None of my ideas get taken up because it’s so political.” “Half of my team needs firing because they’re useless.” Usually, the only thing that’s going on here is a retrospective fitting of a self-serving narrative to half-understood facts. At Corporate Punk, we call it ‘movie-making’. Linking two separate ideas with the word ‘because’ does not necessarily make a logical proposition. But it often looks like one, and that’s what’s so damaging.

Everybody lies

The non-conscious part of the human brain is hardwired to take shortcuts. These shortcuts have evolved to allow us to decode a particular event or situation efficiently. (Think about it: without shortcuts how could you even get the most basic of tasks done, let alone navigate your way through the complex world of work?) But one problematic consequence of this cognitive ability is that we all end up incorrectly diagnosing and second-guessing other people’s motivations, perceptions, reactions and opinions. Our failure to understand that this is what we are doing, while simultaneously convincing ourselves that we are being entirely logical, can stop us having meaningful conversations, tackling issues objectively, and bringing out the best in each other⁵. This is a huge barrier to creative effectiveness.

We are all taught from an early age that people essentially act rationally (indeed, this is the very foundation of modern economics). But there are few bigger lies than this. Human behaviour has nothing to do with rationality or logic at all.

⁵ Another classic logical mistake in business is the old sin of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* – since event y followed event x, y must have been caused by x.

Even highly logic-driven people, like mathematicians and philosophers, hoodwink themselves with stories that are convenient but not true⁶.

But a misplaced belief in the essential rationality of others is no good in an organisational setting. Leaders have to do their best to understand, and then strip away, movies that obscure the truth – as Hollywood-like and compelling as they may be.

Sadly, this isn't just a matter of engaging correctly with individuals. Social hurdles also stand in our way.

Here's another inconvenient truth: most of us are not very good at our jobs. By definition, half of all workers are below average, and most people use only a small part of themselves to carry out their work.

In support of our survival and ego, we often try to draw support from people who will reinforce our own views on a given situation, or will just agree with us for the sake of an easy life. All of us get the people who know us, both in work and at home, to support our misapprehensions about how brilliant and right we are. In the end, this is self-defeating for the simple fact that, when there is real trouble, it is the wrong kind of support.

“I'm having a bad time with X, because...” (Again that word ‘because’.) And the response comes back: “Poor you, everyone else is wrong and you are right.” “Thanks very much,” you say, and gratefully pay for the coffee without having solved the problem (and in fact made it worse). The feelings are coming from you, and your diagnosis of the situation may well be wrong. An objective bystander might be able to see that. Someone who wants to make you feel better as quickly as possible will not be the best judge.

Now consider this in a group context. Consider all those mental movies that your team is making and playing. Consider all the emotional (and often misplaced) reassurances that they are giving to each other. Consider the impact that this might

⁶ Stephen Hawking himself has been told by his wife that just because he understands the secrets of the universe, that doesn't mean he's not a long way off understanding her.

be having on their ability to work effectively together. The consequences should feel stark: this is how cliques form, and how the narrative that those cliques tell to themselves can defeat or obscure what the real problem is.

This is a major challenge for leaders: how do you overcome the fact that, consciously or not, everybody lies?

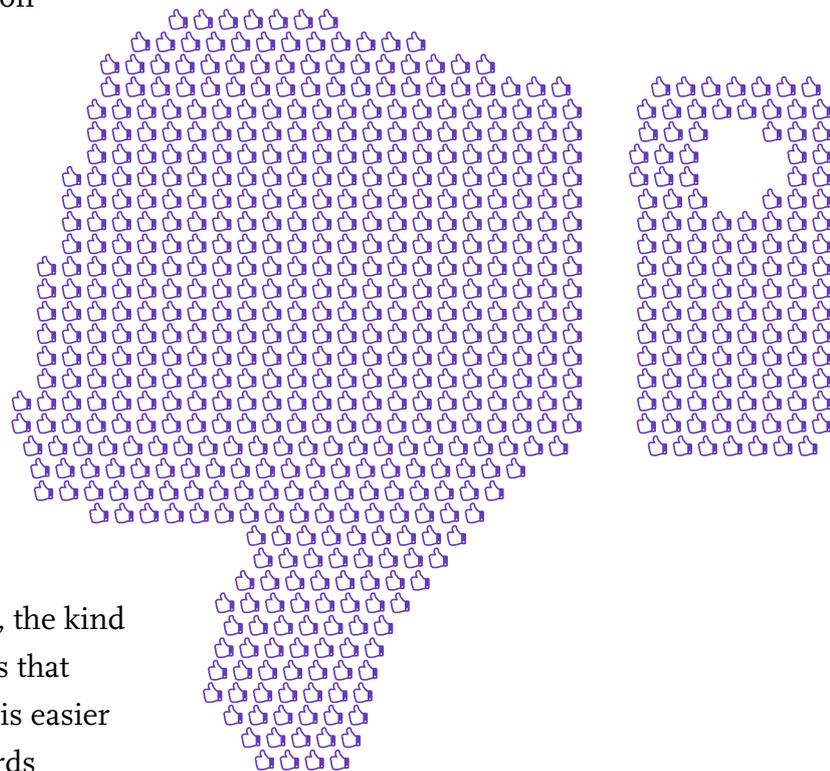
Everybody lies, especially to the leader

In *Creativity Inc.*, Ed Catmull, one of the founders of Pixar, shrewdly defines the role of the CEO as the requirement to spot hidden barriers in the progress of a company and remove them. This is not easy because, as we've seen, people don't tell the truth very often – and it is even less likely when the CEO is involved. Also, because the CEO is just one person in an organisation of thousands, he or she doesn't get to see a fraction of what really goes on. But it is his or her job to ferret out these barriers. So how do you do that?

○ *First, get uncomfortable.*

Anyone wanting to improve the creativity of their environment must get used to being uncomfortable. Again, we're back to hard emotional labour. "The problem with real insight, the kind you advocate," said a client last year, "is that you need to do something about it". It is easier to look away than to tackle the hard yards of getting people to face their fears, embrace risks, and play well with others. How are you going to react when you start hearing the truth?

I've come across a few CEOs – the more old fashioned kind, generally – who react to things in one of only two ways. Either they passively accept something,



or they go nuclear. Agree, or flip out, with nothing in between. But the hard work to create an effective creative culture and make and ship excellent things is done in the grey areas between these two extremes. If you can't get uncomfortable, you're suppressing yourself and diminishing your ability to add value. Seth Godin, in *Linchpin*, argues that emotional labour is 21st century work⁷.

○ *Second, take some proper time to think about it.*

You're going to need to engage in a real process of examination of the culture you want. What relationships do you want with others? How do you want them to develop? How do you personally want to develop and get better at what you do? It is rare to take time to think at this level. But if we are going to find our blind spots, and lead the way, we need to dig deep.

○ *Third, be yourself.*

So often, even as leaders, we find ourselves mirroring the behaviour and dysfunction of other people in our organisations. It can be very subtle. Perhaps you have a passive aggressive person in your organisation and they turn on you, not liking anything you do or say. You may find yourself being passive aggressive back. Mirroring the dysfunction of others in your business – this is how cultural erosion starts.

And it isn't just colleagues. Just as easily, it's clients. At Corporate Punk, our clients sometimes want us to mop their brow and tell them that everything will be OK. It would be tempting, if we didn't know that it is absolutely the wrong thing to do. They are paying and want the quick, painless fix – and we find ourselves instinctively wanting to please them. But a tweak here, an allowance there, and soon we would be as dysfunctional as the clients that we're supposed to be serving. How could we help them then? Is your business compromised in this way?

So, when leaders are trying to find insight into their organisations, and release the creativity, they have three awkward factors to contend with. One, people

⁷ Godin's book and blogs argue that being creative will make you indispensable at work, and that indispensable people are the ones who avoid the downsizings and gain the respect of their colleagues because they can come up with occasional things that no one else can. It's a bit more of a "me first" attitude than I advocate, but he has a point.

aren't logical. Two, they are mostly underperforming against their true capabilities, and are prone to co-opting others into their narratives. (An excuse shared is an excuse legitimised.) Three, they won't often tell you the truth.

As a leader, you need to see this for what it is, and learn to deal with it. No one said it was going to be easy.

Operations

The art of working honestly, creatively and flexibly

Operations are the ways in which systems and processes conspire in order to get things done (or not). In many organisations, the processes in place amount to as much or as little as ‘the way it works around here’. Changing them can feel like too big a task, or is seen as unnecessary.

We may think that there are bigger problems to address than worrying about whether or not the behind-the-scenes wiring is working. This makes the mistake of assuming that the wiring isn’t the business. But it is. How you do things dictates the limits of what can be done.

Good process, bad process

The one thing you can guarantee about anything that is called a “decision making process” is that no decision will be made. We see this sort of torpor all the time in the corporate cultures we work in. It is the death knell of many creative processes.

In a creative context, good process is what happens when the right balance of agility and rigour is achieved in both idea development and decision-making.

In some organisations, agility has the upper hand, and people start saying things like “We just need to move fast and break things”. You hear this a lot, particularly in dotcoms. But break what, exactly? Your product? Your people? Your bank balance? Why is breaking stuff important? (What inner rage are you trying to expel?) Here’s a better idea: move fast and don’t break things.

In many more organisations, the fear of breaking things drives the entire way of working. For example, many matrix management structures (and we will come to structure next) encourage a process whereby multiple stakeholders must be engaged in every stage of every decision, in order to get ‘buy-in’. As a result, ideas can take months or years to get to fruition – if, indeed, they’re not killed by groupthink, smothered by due diligence, or abandoned through failures of will.

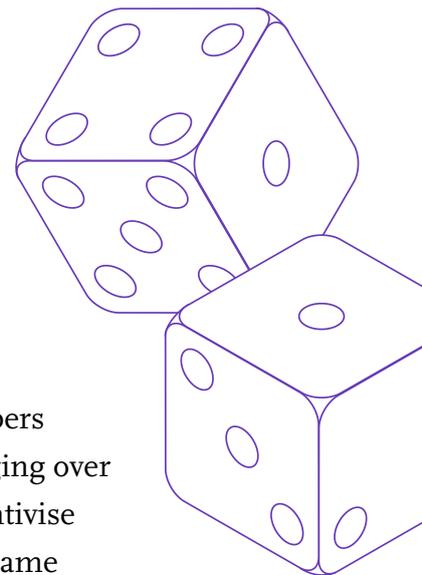
The advice, then: **move as quickly as you can, but no quicker.**

Death by a thousand cuts

There is no better example of an often ‘hidden’ process that serves to fail a creative culture than financial management in big business. The link between financial management and creative excellence might not be immediately obvious. Let me take just one example of many we have witnessed at Corporate Punk. The finance systems in one company made it as difficult to sign off £100,000 as £10m, and the finance team were stretched because of a big push to global consolidation. A creative team in this business asked for ten £100k decisions in order to pursue some new ideas. Those requests were turned down for reasons of perceived ‘efficiency’, and the initiatives in question died. The agendas of the finance team and those responsible for creative development were simply not sufficiently aligned.

People often say that ‘what gets measured gets done’. But a more accurate statement might be ‘what gets incentivised gets done’. What soft and hard outcomes do your processes incentivise? How well are they helping you to navigate the tensions that exist between different sorts of agendas and outcomes? How are you incentivising people to have the right conversations in the right way?

Johnson & Johnson used to incentivise their people on being ‘prudent risk-takers.’ It’s interesting to contemplate how that might influence a decision-making process. How flexible are different members of staff likely to be when the entirely subjective word ‘prudent’ is hanging over their heads? (Incidentally, and on a related note, J&J also used to incentivise their teams on the basis of link-test results for TV advertising, and became surprised when no one was engaged in their digital agenda.)



There are broader cultural and political issues at work here, which we will discuss later. But, of all the issues we're covering, process is often the hardest type of dysfunction to spot. The devil is in the detail of how your business works.

So, leaders looking to increase the creativity of their organisations would do well to start with a forensic examination of one or more creative projects. Working from beginning to end, examine every single operational process that was involved, with one question in mind: 'did we achieve the right balance of speed and rigour here – and if not, why not?' You may be surprised at where the true blockages exist.

Structure

The art of getting people to work from where they're strong

Structures are complicated things. They are manifestations of culture, but people inside those cultures can be very resistant to being told so. They say things like: “Our org chart is not a manifestation of our culture: we just have to deploy certain people in certain roles to do certain jobs. Ball bearings have always been made this way.” Of course, every organisation needs people to perform certain functional roles. But it is the stories we tell ourselves about our organisations that drive how roles are defined and how they are conducted.

There's no such thing as good or bad structure from an academic point of view. Consultants spend years discussing the difference between pyramid structures and holocratic structures – and the latest thoughts on this and other related issues keep the likes of the *Harvard Business Review* merrily pulling up trees. The problem with such debates is that they ignore a simple reality: all businesses are different, and therefore structures (like operating processes) have to work in the unique context of the business in question.

But, ultimately, a good structure is one where everybody in an organisation is able to do what they do best, and continually improve. For some organisations, that means a holocratic structure. Some need a pyramid. Some work best when they're flat, some when they're upside down, and some function well with very little structure at all.

Fundamental decisions on structure are often settled very early in a business's lifecycle, with even the largest corporate organisations rarely challenging the basics no matter how many times they restructure (despite this being a seemingly annual process). In truth, structure should be an ongoing discussion, with leaders playing a highly active role. ‘How do we organise ourselves to best effect, given what we know now, and where we think the future is going?’ is an enquiry that is rarely made in the far-reaching spirit that it deserves. Here are a few questions that can help pave the way.

○ *Is everyone doing what they're good at?*

Just as the brain never works at full capacity, so it is with most people at work. But when you encourage people to do work they are good at and enjoy, they will naturally be willing to use more of their capacity. Conversely, spending time working on one's weaknesses is simply a recipe for wasting energy, by trying to become strong in an area in which you do not naturally excel. The key is to do the bare minimum to neutralise the weakness in question. This principle is increasingly being used in education. If a pupil likes maths, but isn't very good at drawing, progressive teachers do not require the pupil to spend more time on their drawing to make up for the weakness. They encourage the maths.

○ *What's the return on creative energy?*

Rather than performing this exercise on the whole organisation straight away, you might start with yourself. Think about your own time. Meetings, presentations, phone calls, and so on. What is the value of each one? Should you really be doing it, or should someone else? You may start to see that your return on energy in most of your actions is depressingly low.

When you identify what support you need to deliver a better return on energy, you may begin to see what surgery is required to the structure around you. When you're convinced of the value of this exercise, you can talk about it to the rest of the business. Structural innovation is often what makes the difference between a good return on energy and a poor one – especially for organisations in which creative knowledge exchange is important.



○ *What does this place feel like to work in?*

Creative people can create uncomfortable environments. Obviously, that is not a rational thing to do. But as the neuroscientist and behavioural psychologist Daniel Kahneman proved in *Thinking Fast And Slow*, the vast majority of apparently rational decisions are driven by the non-conscious mind, and all decisions are based on emotions. But businesses still persist in treating people (staff and customers alike) as if they are rational actors. If your organisation feels full of unease, *ennui* or misery, you may well be asking your people to work outside their strengths. This may mean the structure needs correcting.

Politics

The art of openness

One of the oddest things we hear when talking to organisations is “We’re a happy ship – there are no politics here.” (In reality, this is often a major clue that a nest of vipers is seething just below the surface.)

No organisation can or should aspire to be politics-free. Every organisation is a political organisation, and every organisation should be a political organisation. Recall our example about finance processes slowing down creativity. Well, it is often the case that marketing people want to spend money and finance people don’t want to spend money. There are competing agendas to be reconciled in this context. That is politics, and it’s very common. But it’s a very healthy dynamic if the tension is commonly understood and navigated in a way that is open, honest and with the business’s best interests firmly at heart.

Bad politics are what results when individual agendas or the wrong kind of stories start to dictate how things get done.

Note here the difference between healthy politics – a constructive clash of agendas, and unhealthy process – a counter-productive organisational torpor. The desire for the former often leads to the latter, of course. The challenge for leaders is to identify which of the two situations applies. And torpor can easily disguise itself as rigour, which causes diagnostic problems. Again, no one said this was easy.

The tangled web we weave

Negative politics may manifest itself in histrionics or passive aggression. Both of those symptoms are coping mechanisms for people who are unable to navigate through the complex political and cultural world they’re experiencing.

But politics per se is the price of going to work every day. It's what happens when you put a group of people together to build something worthwhile in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. You, the leader, need to manage what happens as a result. How well you do so will be the difference between creative success and creative failure.

Indeed, the wrong political conditions can easily create a zero-sum game. When presentations aren't well received, for example, it usually isn't the presentation itself that's the problem. It might be the data behind it that isn't believed, or the context in which it is being experienced that causes it to fail. For example, Norma makes a presentation about sales projections, and is recommending hiring another salesperson. If Norma is regarded as the worst performing salesperson in the team, the recipients may be disinclined to follow her recommendation. They may also disbelieve her figures. She might be right about her data, and she might be right in her solution. But the presentation was unlikely to work whatever she said, given the context.

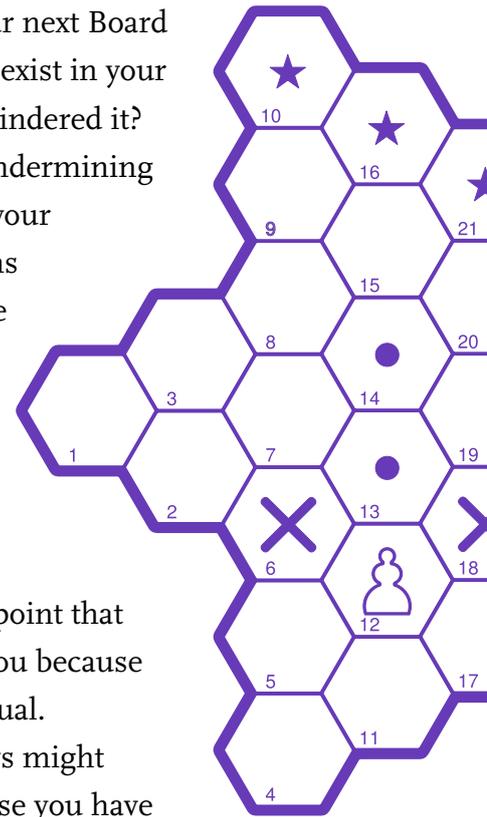
How do we tame the political beast?

First, [get real](#).

Politics are going to exist in your business. Openly acknowledging this may be scary, but it is often a moment of great liberation for leaders, teams and businesses. There are two reasons why people live in fear of doing so. The first is the obvious one – it can feel like encouraging the unnecessary airing of dirty laundry. But, and forgive the metaphor here, if the laundry is stinking the place out anyway, then surely it is better to tip it all out so that you can determine where the bad smells are coming from? The second reason is less obvious, and is to do with control. Some leaders indulge in a divide and conquer approach, believing that careful, Machiavellian manipulation of the political context will drive people to perform at their best. In some situations this may be true (although it is debatable whether the human cost of such a sadistic approach to management is ever worth it). But this does not apply in a creative context. Manipulation drives internal narratives that sap energy from the process of imagining and building excellent things.

Second, **try and encourage conversation about politics**. In your next Board meeting, ask each of your Directors what sort of politics they feel exist in your business. When have politics helped progress? When have they hindered it? What type of politics is most prevalent? Are they supporting or undermining your organisational values? Depending on how politically stifled your team has been, some coaching around these sorts of conversations may be necessary. But the sheer freshness of this sort of exchange can create a huge momentum for organisational creativity.

Third, **carve out time for reflection**. Politics are also a function of how a leader behaves. To an extent – and this is particularly true of CEOs – politics can be a manifestation of our own blind spots, insecurities and worries. (Always beware of the CEO with imposter syndrome.) This brings us back to the point that Ed Catmull made in *Creativity Inc*: people will hide things from you because you're their leader, and being honest can feel risky for the individual. But let's look at that from the other end of the barrel: in what ways might you be encouraging your teams to hide the truth from you, because you have no facility to deal with it? What's the brutal truth that you need to face, but can't?



Culture

The art of storytelling

This is a universal truth: culture drives creativity. Even when the leaders of organisations accept this, they may resist the personal implications in subtle ways. They may behave as if the culture is something that they experience when they come into work rather than something they *create* when they come into work. Culture is hard yards: it's the emotional labour of an on-going negotiation between you and everyone you work with about what you do, how you do, and why it's necessary. Brilliant things can happen in conversations about culture. When you accept that nothing is easier to change than a story, it becomes incredibly empowering.

The stories that a leader needs to tell to build a constructive creative culture must contain four elements: **optimism**, **purpose**, **pleasure** and **profit**.

Optimism

Being optimistic is an underrated value in a business. It's important generally, and it is particularly vital for creativity. Not only are people rather delicate when they are being creative, but creativity itself is a rather delicate thing. True optimism, however, doesn't just mean being chirpy, phoney or superficial. In fact, surface optimism is often embarrassing for all concerned. But the truth is that a baseline of optimism about the future vastly improves the potential for everyone in an organisation to be creative. So how can you induce optimism in others?

It has become fashionable to talk about happiness at work and 'employee engagement', but it's a bit of a loose term, and covers a multitude of sins. HR departments can be guilty of using such language without substance. The sad truth is that 'employee engagement' has ended up being associated far more with dog-eared posters, poor training, and failed intranet sites than with business

transformation. A term that doesn't sound as if management are exempt from responsibility might also be preferable. But whatever we call it, it's a question of optimism being required for creative potential to be fulfilled.

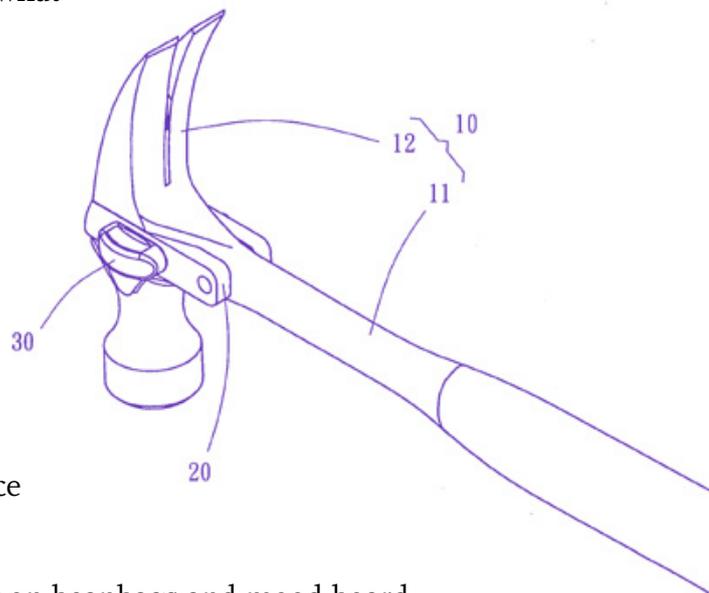
The cultivation of true optimism is not something that can be delegated to HR. Woolly notions of 'getting ourselves to feel great' are a waste of time and often lead to nothing more creative than a false smile. The leader of the business must ask themselves difficult questions, derive the truth and ensure that optimism is a real business goal. Good leaders think about this all the time. In fact, when I coach high-performing CEOs, they often list it as one of the top requirements of the job.

Purpose

Every organisation needs an answer to the question "Why bother?" But, more positively than that, a sense of purpose can be the source of a lot of value. None of us are going to be motivated to have good ideas if we think those ideas aren't going to do any good. Indeed, if management thinker Simon Sinek is to be believed, purpose is the primary source of value. In *Start With Why*, Sinek says "People don't buy what you do; they buy why you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe."

The passion felt by people in a business is a valuable and tradable thing. It doesn't have to be a unique creed, but it does have to feel special to the people inside the business. Unfortunately, branding agencies and the like may, in the absence of doing the required critical thinking to get at the truth, overreach on this subject and produce little more than hype.

You know the syndrome. After a lot of sitting on beanbags and mood-board creation by men with beards and women with terrific hair, a mission statement arrives, full of hyperbole. But a ball-bearings manufacturer in Slough is not 'making the world a better place' by doing what they do. That's an empty desire, made ridiculous by being too lofty. But the people who work there would like to think that they are doing a good job in a tough market. Their sense of purpose will take a little



longer to describe and may have to be more subtle than a cheap and quick line of crass and inflated prose. It is often in trying to articulate nothing more ambitious than some achievable goals that a sense of purpose can be derived. You don't have to strive to be the best in the world, or to save the world. Aiming for the best customer service reputation in northwest Slough, on the other hand, might feel purposeful and true.

A conversation within a business about its purpose must be real and honest. If it is, and it is articulated well, people will get out of bed in the morning with gusto, and stay loyal for years.

Pleasure

When you're doing something that you care about, it is a pleasurable thing. But we must be careful when we talk about pleasure or enjoyment in the context of work. Enjoyment of your work doesn't mean the easiest path. It doesn't mean there won't be barriers to overcome, setbacks to recover from, and late nights. There may indeed be times when you're tearing your hair out.

Studies have shown that when children are praised for something they have done, they do not try so hard the next time that they are given a similar task. But if they have had to try hard to achieve the goal, and are praised for the effort, they tend to redouble their efforts next time. Adults are no different. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, among many others, saw strife as the very source of pleasure. This isn't obtuse. Without having to try, achievement has no value. Purpose without pleasure is just grind. But pleasure without purpose is transient.

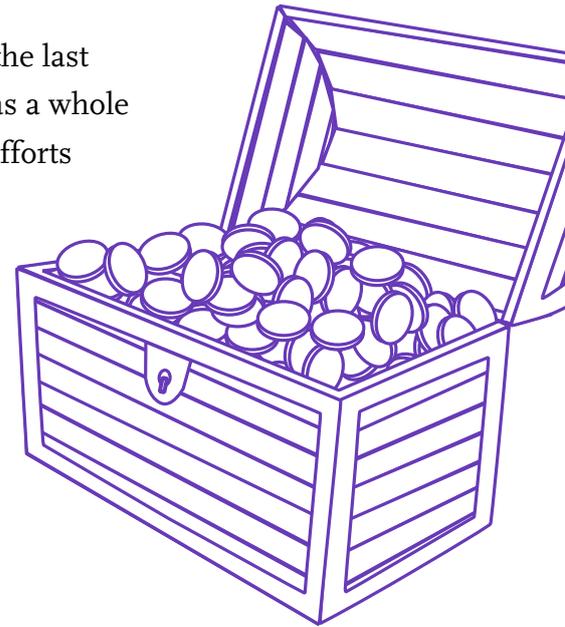
Profit

The profit motive is taken for granted in most businesses. It is, without a doubt, a quick answer to the 'why bother?' question. Of course making money is vital, and the Micawber principle applies to us all⁸. But no one ever got out of bed to create shareholder value.

⁸ "Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen [pounds] nineteen [shillings] and six [pence], result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery." – Mr Micawber, in *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens.

There have been many efforts in large businesses over the last few years to create a wider definition of profit for business as a whole – something more meaningful than *just* money. But these efforts are usually consigned to CSR departments with little power in the business, and fall foul of the hype trap that dogs many purpose-related discussions.

I believe that we can reframe the term ‘profit’ and get a lot more out of it. We should view profit, in terms of money, as a catalyst that enables the company to do more of the work it does, in the process creating more value for more people. This in turn creates more pleasure and furthers the purpose. It enriches the whole business, the customers, and everyone whose purposes are served by the business – not just the shareholders.



Is it me?

In this manifesto, when I’ve offered suggestions for the diagnostic questions you might ask of your organisation, I’m not just suggesting them as something to ponder, or as a rhetorical device. I actually want you to ask the questions of your business and answer them. It must be the leaders who ask those questions and demand the answers.

There is one final question I want you, the leader of the organisation, to ask yourself – and it is the most important one.

‘Is it me?’ is a question we should all ask of ourselves in a spirit of genuine enquiry. It is the job of anyone who wants to work in an actively creative culture to consistently try to identify their own blind spots, and to work out how they can get full visibility of them. But this applies particularly to leaders. We’re all blind to the issues that inhibit our own progress and may create bad politics, but with leaders it matters more because of their influence. If you answer those questions as honestly and as fully as you can, with emotional maturity, others will follow in the same spirit. If you are guarded, sneaky, slapdash or flippant, why should anyone else give you what you need?

Anyway, meditate on the proposition that the main problem in your business could be you.

**Conclusion:
Creativity Is Power**



“Intelligence plus character. That is the true goal of education.”

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

When IBM did its periodic study of the opinions of CEOs, it was quite clear that business leaders value creativity very highly. In the 2012 study, CEOs said they needed employees to be “collaborative, communicative, creative and flexible”. That’s all creative work in my understanding. In the 2010 study, of the characteristics they felt CEOs themselves needed, “Creativity was the one they selected more than any other choice.” (Integrity and global thinking were second and third.) “The challenge has historically been a shortage of particular skills,” the 2010 study went on. “But today, it’s virtually impossible for CEOs to find the future skills they will need — because they don’t yet exist.” Better, then, to develop a characteristic for the entire organisation that never goes out of fashion.

It would seem to me that where most CEOs are failing is in recognising that creativity is just as much about executing the ideas as about having the ideas in the first place. If your business is failing to harness the power of creativity, more ideas is never the answer. In all the businesses I have coached through the process of opening up their creativity, the ideas are already there. They are lurking in the recesses of colleagues’ laptops and on the tips of their tongues. Often they have voiced them already, but the problem is that they are failing to carry them forward. The organisation just lacks the ability to see those ideas through; to couple them more profitably with another idea from across the table or from another floor of the building; to develop them into a product or service that can be marketed; or, in the case of marketers themselves, to translate them into a successful campaign and drive this through to the bottom line of the business.

In other words, the organisation is generally failing to manage itself in a way that is conducive to successful creative outcomes.

Changing the nature of a business to be more creative and productive is an iterative process. It cannot be done with ‘measures’, or as a ‘project’. It must be ongoing – a matter of changing the habits, conduct and psychology of you and your people, and constantly striving to perfect the five preconditions I laid out in the introduction to this manifesto.

It is, like trying to be happy, not a process with a definable end. Improvements and results are achieved on the journey.

* * *

While I have made the case that creativity is vital to your business now and in the foreseeable future irrespective of the technological horse and carriage that will be driven through our working lives in the next few years, I would like to return briefly to the subject of tech.

In the 1990s, the ‘Information Superhighway’ was the political buzz-phrase. It was thought that speed was the factor that would separate the economic winners from the losers. There was a concern that those who could not keep up to speed – such as underdeveloped countries without the right infrastructure and the individual without the resources to afford ISDN – would be left behind and disadvantaged. The worries proved unfounded and the conversation moved on.

In the 2000s, another intersection between the computer and business worlds was revealed. Economists were worried about the ‘Information Age’, and whether there would be a generation of ‘information poor’. These people, it was thought, would be those who could not afford computers, and would therefore be left out of the computing revolution. Again, this proved to be a worry without foundation. Everyone can have as much information as they want for comparatively little.

Now, though, we do have cause for alarm. With the advent of commercial robotics and AI, no one is worrying about people being left behind by technology because they don’t have enough money. The worry is that people will be left behind because they do not have the right education.

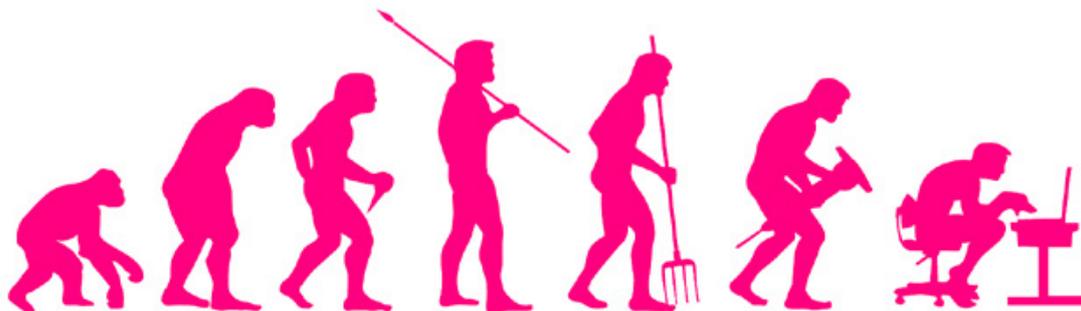
Education will be the key to the new creative economy. But this will not just be education of the formal kind.

It is widely recognised that without lifelong learning none of us will be much use in the jobs market of this century. This is from the leader in *the Economist* in January 2017: “When education fails to keep pace with technology, the result is inequality... That fundamental insight seized reformers in the Industrial Revolution, heralding state-funded universal schooling.” But this next revolution calls for a different educational revolution. “Working lives are so lengthy, and so fast-changing,” *The Economist* continues, “that simply cramming more schooling in at the start is not enough.” People must acquire new skills throughout their careers.

But whatever the functional education we receive early in our lives and whatever skills we top up during our careers, these types of education must be accompanied by an education in the ability to evolve our own emotional intelligence and maturity rigorously and consistently.

Most of what we do at work creatively is emotional in nature. But not all of us mature very well. Such are the traditional strictures of working life that we tend to ossify, in skills and temperament, rather than becoming more flexible, more creative and better able to cope with shocks and changes. It’s not a factor of age – it’s about the culture in which each of us operates. Some 80 year olds I know are the most flexible creative thinkers, and some 25 year olds are the most rigid and hidebound.

It is interesting that I have often turned to similes about childhood, learning or education in this manifesto. When illustrating the psychology of the individual



and organisations, perhaps that is inevitable. But there are two further reasons why education may be at the heart of fixing creativity in an organisation.

First, I believe that our work at Corporate Punk, as a team of consultants – fixing creative problems, and engendering creativity itself – may just be, at its heart, a matter of education. I certainly feel like a teacher most of the time. I stand in a room while others sit, speaking or letting others speak, exploring their ideas and mine, and ultimately giving them the tools to solve their own problems.

Second, creativity in organisations is a leadership problem. It is incumbent on the leader or leaders in an organisation to ask the questions that motivate, inspire and move individuals, and lead teams to be more creative to better ends. Leaders are the educators of the creative workforce. That's what your work is, and that's where your creativity can be brought to bear. That's where the power lies.

There are two conclusions, then, to this manifesto.

Creativity is power, yes. But also, the Power must drive creativity.

The Power, in this case, is you.

Appendix One

The five stages of creative grief

In a business in creative decline, the mood and behaviour of people will go through a declining process, in a similar pattern to the five stages of grief.

Denial. “Things here feel like they aren’t working. If we just have a good idea or a series of them, we will ultimately win the day.” This is often said with brittle expressions. People know in their hearts that it’s not going to be easy, it probably isn’t going to work, and they start doing things that are not addressing the problem. They kid themselves that this will do, and they suffer from politician’s logic⁹.

Anger. “I seem to be the only sane person in the asylum,” people say. And they say a lot less moderate things in private. The anger becomes an infectious new narrative. Every discussion starts to be coloured by it. Tribes start to form, and warfare breaks out.

Bargaining. “There is a compromise to be made,” people say. “There is a deal to be done which will allow some changes to be made. That will have to do.” Teams fight only winnable battles, leaving the battles that would really address the causes of the dysfunction untouched. They may also look in strange places for comfort blankets, such as recruiting or over-praising junior people. But because the issues being addressed are superficial, the resulting efforts will likely produce nothing, or at best a sort of dead cat bounce, before collapsing into the next stage.

Depression. People withdraw, protect themselves, and try to ruin others by stealth. Passive aggression rears its hideous head, and formerly creative

⁹ Sir Humphrey Appleby, in the BBC TV series *Yes, Minister*, defines politician’s logic: “We must do something. This is something. Therefore we must do this.”

and positive people start to lose faith in the organisation, and their sense of self worth. Working life in this context becomes a sickening chore. Even turning up requires effort, and everyone is hopelessly tired.

Acceptance. “Things around here will never change; this is how it is.” The collective behaviour becomes that of the surrendered person. People quit, or – often far more corrosively for organisational culture – hang around in a sort of resigned torpor, having lost all hope.

Does this feel familiar to anyone in your organisation?

Appendix Two

The ten signs of bad meetings

First, some statistics¹⁰:

- ▶ Employees attend an average of 62 meetings a month.
- ▶ CEOs spend a whopping 40% of their time in meetings.
- ▶ 47% of employees think that meetings are the number one timewaster at the office.
- ▶ 90% admitted to daydreaming during meetings.
- ▶ 73% said they did other work during meetings.
- ▶ Best of all, 39% said they slept.

Here are the ten signs of bad meetings. Do they ring any bells?

1. *Carrying dead weight.*

If your meeting is intentionally discursive, but someone hasn't made a meaningful contribution within the first ten minutes, does it occur to you or them that they might they be more productive somewhere else? Perhaps they should come back for the bit that is relevant to them? (Note that there is a critical distinction here between dead weight and introverts.)

2. *Giving introverts no voice.*

The cut and thrust of many meetings is the enemy of the introvert. Introverts can often be the most creative thinkers in any group – but keeping their thoughts

¹⁰ These are from *The Wall Street Journal*, the British Psychological Society, the University of Harvard, a Harris poll, and Atlassian.

and ideas to themselves does not do anyone any good. If you are failing to give your introverts your vocal support, and nurture the best out of them in what they might find a challenging environment, you are fundamentally failing your business.

3. Creating no room for thinking.

A combination of the deadening effect of PowerPoint and office politics means that meetings can be a fertile ground for the spreading of bullshit. To be effective, meetings rely on open, honest discussion. But if you all need some thinking time, then be quiet. Silence is often the sound of thought happening, and it isn't awkward – unless you are personally creating a context in which it is.

4. Tolerating showboating or people taking a contrary position for the sake of it.

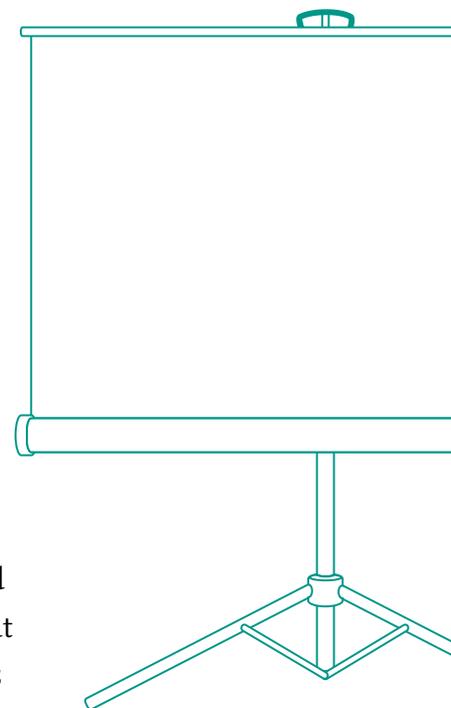
Arguments can be constructive things. But when they're not, take them outside the main meeting. If you banish antagonists to the (metaphorical) balcony or the (literal) corridor, more often than not they'll come back with a resolution, or at least a better understanding of each other's position.

5. Allowing things to go on too long.

The principle that short is good doesn't need to apply to a meeting as a whole. People are not psychologically programmed for marathon conversations. Rather than a 60-minute meeting about 8 things, might it be better to think about holding 8 micro-meetings that last 6 minutes, with short breaks in between?

6. Operating to no agenda, or a bad one.

The humble agenda is one of the most misunderstood items in business. A list of topics will not get you very far, for the simple reason that they often lack context. What are your objectives in general and how is this meeting contributing to them?



Equally importantly, what could go wrong in the room? A ‘pre-mortem’ is never wasted. Taking ten minutes to think about how the meeting might play out for better or worse is a valuable investment, and a way to make sure your agenda gets followed. Otherwise you are likely to have to negotiate your position whilst in the meeting, thus wasting everyone’s time.

7. Agreeing no action points, or not following them up.

Enough said.

8. Failing to think about different meeting modes.

What applies in an ideas kick-about doesn’t apply in a sales presentation. But how often are you imposing the same meeting structure, or expecting the same results from different meeting modalities? Jay-Z once said that there are only 10 kinds of rap song. Isn’t the same thing true of meetings? How do you segment your meetings? What rules are you following to dictate which type of meeting is which?

9. Enabling role-based behaviour.

A bit like families at Christmas, people tend to play the same roles when holding meetings with the same people. There’s the curmudgeon, the clown, the matriarch, and so on.

Slipping into those roles is often counterproductive: it stifles creative endeavour and masks the discussion of difficult problems. If you can describe your role in meetings in three words or fewer, you are limiting your ability to contribute. “I’m Mr Common Sense” is all very well and ego nourishing, but is it allowing you or others to work at your and their creative best?

10. Ignoring the signs of distress.

It sounds obvious, but when people roll their eyes, nod off, do other things, don’t turn up, or leave early – your meetings aren’t working. So what are you doing about it?

Acknowledgements

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This manifesto is dedicated to Steve Clinton.

Phil Lewis



Phil has been involved in strategic planning and change management for 20 years. He has worked in agencies and for management consultancies.

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