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# Practising Creative Leadership: Pipedream or Possibility?

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## Publication Details

Bhindi, N. L. (2003). Practising Creative Leadership: Pipedream or Possibility?. *The Practising Administrator*, 26 (1), 18-21.

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# Practising creative leadership: Pipedream or possibility?



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**D**oes your school embrace the essential characteristics that distinguish creative organisations from the pedestrian? Do you possess the qualities that distinguish the sloggers and floggers from the creative leaders? Creative leadership, says Narottam Bhindi, is not the preserve of a chosen few, blessed with special gifts and foresight. It is a passion, commitment, and energy awaiting arousal, recognition, and release...

*You are led  
through your lifetime  
by the inner learning creature,  
the playful spiritual being  
that is your real self.  
Don't turn away  
from possible futures  
before you're certain you don't have  
anything to learn from them.  
You're always free  
to change your mind and  
choose a different future, or  
a different  
past.*

Richard Bach:  
*Illusions – The Adventures of  
a Reluctant Messiah (1977)*

The contemporary organisational environment is characterised by discontinuous change, competition for resources and advantage, intensifying stakeholder scrutiny, and growing public restlessness and irritability concerning the direction and relevance of our organisations.

Over the past decade or so, organisations worldwide have been subjected to immense social, political, and economic pressures as never before. The turbulence caused by these pressures has impacted on every facet of organisational life: man-

agement structures, leadership, job design, work ethics, employee motivation, performance, and productivity. Some of these pressures have been caused by excessive economic rationalism: the rapidly changing technology, the growing centrality of the customer, the oncoming globalisation, and the emerging influence of knowledge workers. Other pressures have been internal to the organisation: dwindling production, rising costs and inefficiencies, threat to job security under the guise of workplace reforms and the accompanying debilitating and frustrating feeling of helplessness and of loss of meaning and excitement. In such a climate, only the most resilient and versatile will thrive and prosper. Organisations in such an environment demand smart, capable, and creative stewardship.

## Defining creativity and creative leadership

The Collins Dictionary defines *creative* as (1) having the ability or power to create; (2) characterised by originality of thought or inventiveness, having or showing imagination; (3) (creative mind) designed to or tending to stimulate the imagination or invention.

Others like David Whyte provide a more soulful definition. Says Whyte:

Like water flowing from an underground spring, human creativity is the wellspring greening the desert of toil and effort, and much of what stifles us in the workplace is the immense unconscious effort on the part of individuals and organisations alike to dam its flow.<sup>1</sup>

The Celtic shaman O'Donohue claims that 'possibility is the heart of creativity'.<sup>2</sup> Amabile, who has written extensively on creativity in organisations, contends that creativity has three parts: expertise, the ability to think flexibly and imaginatively, and motivation. She believes that 'to be creative, an idea must also be appropriate: useful and actionable'.<sup>3</sup>

Although the accountants, auditors, and company directors in recent times have given it a bad name, creative leadership is still very much in vogue. In the organisational context, I believe that creative leadership is a passion, value, and process and that it is encouraged by a thirst or compulsion for alternatives, dissatisfaction with the status quo, opportunity to innovate, and tolerance for risk-taking.

I see creative leadership as a process by which leaders strategically position their organisations. Creative leaders consciously create conditions, structures, and practices that unlock, facilitate, and synergise the human potential to explore new alternatives and possibilities, improvise, improve, innovate, learn, and value-add, to make their organisations more vibrant and enterprising. The leadership challenge is how to stimulate and tap people's creative energies in 'return for being nurtured, developed and enthused'.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I propose seven essential ingredients and strategies of creative leadership based on my personal experience.

### 1. *Imagineering/Positioning*

An important ingredient for creative leadership is your ability to fire or alter people's imagination about the organisations you lead. It is absolutely crucial to project and evoke an exciting, credible impression about your school, its mission, its distinctive features, successes and achievements, its priorities and challenges, and the range and quality of the products and services offered. Imagineering in the hands of a creative leader can be a deliberate marketing and public relations strategy designed to position the school favourably, raise greater community confidence and parental loyalty, and boost staff and student confidence and morale!

Imagineering also includes the physical appearance of your school. When presented aesthetically, the campus projects feelings of warmth, welcome, pride, and caring. Litter, graffiti, and disrepair are often interpreted as signs of disarray, alienation, and neglect. There is nothing as disastrous as complacency or as uninspiring as a lingering image of a tired, struggling school. While new and recently renovated schools have an obvious advantage, there is much character in older schools to be revealed and admired.

### 2. *Developing reconnaissance capability*

Writers like Morgan argue that 'the ability to read and understand what is happening in one's organisation is a key managerial competence'. Whatever reading template we adopt for interpretation and analysis (Morgan's metaphors, Bolman and Deal's frames of reference, etc.), the exercise 'deepens our understanding of the territory we know'.<sup>5</sup> I will even go a step further and suggest that you also need to train your radar to track the territory you don't know. For example, what educational policy changes are in the offing and how might these impact on your school? What strategic alliances with other schools and influential professional bodies are desirable? What issues are currently in the public domain and what different views are being canvassed? What educationally innovative research is available and how might the findings be used to improve the quality of teaching and learning in your school? Such an understanding heightens your awareness about the push and pull factors in your external environment; by assisting in interpreting trends and issues, this awareness enables you to act proactively or defensively in order to protect or advance your school's interests.

### 3. *Reaffirming/Resetting strategic direction*

No organisation can operate through pious exhortations, dictates, threats, or manipulation. People invest their loyalty, effort, and enthusiasm, if they feel psychologically secure and connected. They want to know the big picture and how their own work and contributions sustain it. My colleague Terry

Burke at Wollongong calls this urge 'ontological security'; I call it 'the Soul Value'. Ricardo Semler puts it more tellingly:

I often thought of a business parable. Three stonemasons were asked about their jobs. The first said that he was paid to cut stones. The second replied that he used special techniques to shape stones in an exceptional way, and proceeded to demonstrate his skills. The third stonemason just smiled and said: 'I build cathedrals!'<sup>6</sup>

You cannot therefore take for granted that everyone in your school remembers or feels as thrilled as you do by the school's mission and vision. Institutional values and directions need regular reaffirmation and periodical review to ascertain if they are still relevant, appropriate, and exciting. They may need changes or adjustment or a total recasting to reflect new realities. In the relational circle – the sacred hoop if you will – which constitutes our organisation, everyone needs to make sense of where they are and where they are going, and to find ways of shaping and influencing the trajectory.

I agree with Loren Gary that key questions about our strategic direction need to be regularly asked:

Leaders must engage in what Heifetz calls adaptive work: ...meeting an ongoing stream of challenges that simultaneously represent dangers and opportunities, and asking in the face of each, 'What here is worth conserving, and what do we need to let go of in order to thrive in the new environment?'<sup>7</sup>

Arguing in a similar vein, I regard effective leaders as culture builders. I maintain:

As culture builders, leaders perform dual functions. Typically, they act as transmitters and nurturers of cherished organisational values and beliefs. However, as organisations move from the traditional structures and models to recreate themselves as flexible, responsive, and competitive workplaces, leaders are challenged to become active facilitators of change. In this transformational function, they restructure and resculpture organisational values, beliefs and norms.<sup>8</sup>

## Your Personal Creativity Checklist

Strategy	Examples of Good Practice	Your Current Practice	Possible Improvement/Innovation
Imagineering			
Reconnaissance capability			
Reaffirming/Resetting strategic direction			
Infusing learning culture			
Declaring people-centred values			
Responsive structures and systems			
Reflection-in-action			

But changing an organisational culture is never easy because people become complacent in their ways and try their utmost to resist change.<sup>9</sup> So while heritage is certainly something to be applauded and celebrated, persistent nostalgia can be a serious barrier to organisational transformation. Leadership credibility is dependent on how creatively leaders can navigate change and assist people in overcoming the pain and grief that many feel when their old and familiar ways are threatened or lost. As Garry Arbuckle points out, open organisations encourage people to search for alternatives rather than being mired in dead habit:

Open organisations encourage people who propose alternative ways of doing things because they know that organisations (or cultures) age and produce deadwood. New ideas and ways of doing things may guarantee that life and vitality will continue. They are the seedlings out of which the future is born.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. Infusing learning culture

I find a great deal of resonance with the spirit of leadership as conceptualised by Jaworski. He maintains:

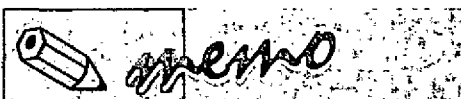
Leadership is about human possibilities. One of the central requirements of good leadership is the capacity to inspire people in the group: to move them and encourage them and pull them into activity, and to help them get centred and focussed and operating at peak capacity.<sup>11</sup>

People's creativity is better understood, nurtured, and harnessed in a learning environment. In a culture of continuous learning creativity, adaptation, innovation, and renewal are established norms<sup>12</sup> and a way of life, not fads, dramatic events, or periodic bursts of imagination and enthusiasm. In a learning community, both leaders and their staff continuously strive to build and expand their institutional and professional capacity. For learning to unfold creatively, leaders make a conscious effort to create and encourage a safe environment for innovation, debate, and experimentation.<sup>13</sup>

In a learning organisation, very few processes and structures are sacred or sacrosanct: almost everything is provisional, dynamic, evolving, and subject to improvement. Traditionally, the school has been regarded as a natural habitat where learning, innovation, and creativity are the core business; but to be taken seriously, these must be championed, fostered, encouraged, and facilitated as a valued school ethic. This can be done in a number of ways: providing incentive funding for approved innovatory projects by staff and students, showcasing creative exemplars, and organising Innovation Bazaars where schools from all the systems—State, Independent and Catholic—putting their tribal colours aside, can gather as fellow professionals to 'show and tell' and learn from each other.

#### 5. Living people-centred values

People must learn to return respect and uphold the dignity of others. They need authentic leaders: compassionate, trustworthy, inspiring leaders who are people-centred and people-builders: the horsewhisperers<sup>14</sup> and ragpickers<sup>15</sup>, not ratbags and cowboys.<sup>16</sup> School leaders can practise authenticity by uphold-



**Re: STAFF MORALE**  
**From: Jennifer Carr**

There's nothing worse than an unhappy school staff. Keep your colleagues happy by:

- regularly letting them know how they're doing. People need feedback.
- encourage them to participate in all aspects of planning and performing.
- Listen to their ideas.
- Make only promises you can keep.
- Be alert to minor irritations and trivial problems. Nip them in the bud before they mushroom into serious issues.
- Resolve any problem as soon as possible.

ing interdependence, building self esteem among teachers and pupils, and growing new leaders. As Phil Jackson, coach of the Chicago Bulls puts it, everyone has a seat at the table:

Our approach is to follow a middle path. Rather than coddling players or making their lives miserable, we try to create a supportive environment that structures the way they relate to each other and gives them the freedom to realise their potential. I also try to cultivate everybody's leadership abilities to make the players and coaches feel that they have all got a seat at the table. No leader can create a successful team alone, no matter how gifted he is.<sup>17</sup>

By infusing a hopefilled environment leaders demonstrate their personal credibility:

personal credibility:

When leaders act in ways that uplift our spirits and restore our belief in the future, they strengthen their own credibility... Constituents look for leaders who demonstrate an enthusiastic and genuine belief in the capacity of others, who strengthen people's will, who supply the means to achieve, and who express optimism for the future.<sup>18</sup>

However, being people-centred is not a code for being 'touchy feely'. Nor is it a pretext for accepting shoddy or pedestrian performance. Creative leaders find ways of actively engaging the underperformers and artful dodgers to ensure that they also do their fair share of work and contribute to the ongoing creative, learning process.

#### 6. Creating responsive structures and systems

The hallmark of a vibrant, versatile organisation is its internal coherence—in other words, the alignment of its vision, mission, strategy, structures, and systems. Well meaning changes are bound to flounder where, although the vision mission and rhetoric may have changed and become more enterprising and exciting, the old, conservative, control-oriented management structures and systems continue to frustrate and constipate the organisation. We cannot run tomorrow's organisation on yesterday's dreams and leadership paradigms!

In a professional service organisation like the school, the real source of authority is knowledge and expertise and these are differentially distributed and dispersed throughout the school. Applying Jackson's adage, school leaders are not the sole fountainheads of creativity and wisdom in their institutions. Nor can they handle all the challenges and complexities of running the school on their own. Leaders must learn to pool goodwill: teacher, parent, pupil, and community—and synergise collective effort in satisfying and responsible ways.

I believe that one creative approach to recognise and tap expertise and encourage collegiality is to work in and through cross-functional teams. Such teams include diverse interests, expertise, and expectations and are charged with identification, formulation and implementation of strategic and operational proprieties. If effectively used, these teams can serve as very powerful, productive, and collegiate forums where genuine

creativity and learning unfold. However, for maximum impact, teams need to be configured and balanced carefully, matching experience and expertise with enthusiasm.

Teams have their shadow side also. They can become talkfests, unless clear goals and groundrules are established. Secondly, leaders need to counsel chronic attention seekers who bellyache about everything and tend to hijack the agenda, constantly seeking soapboxes to shout from. These trumpet blowers can be disruptive and demoralising to other team members, particularly the younger ones. The energies of these trumpet blowers need to be channelled positively and creatively. Also watch out for 'show ponies' and 'show boats' who hide their laziness behind their fluff and bluff and flourishes. Thirdly, leaders need to be mindful of rewarding teamwork. The competitive environment we live in often rewards individual efforts and endeavours, despite the rhetoric of collegiality and teamwork. It is therefore understandable why people tend to look over their shoulders rather than looking ahead. With incentives to reward team effort, creative leaders can uphold the virtues of individual as well as collective efforts.

### 7. Reflection-in-action

The everyday micropolitics and the firefighting of the cut and thrust of 'here and now' can easily distract us from reflection-in-action that is an integral part of being a leader and professional.

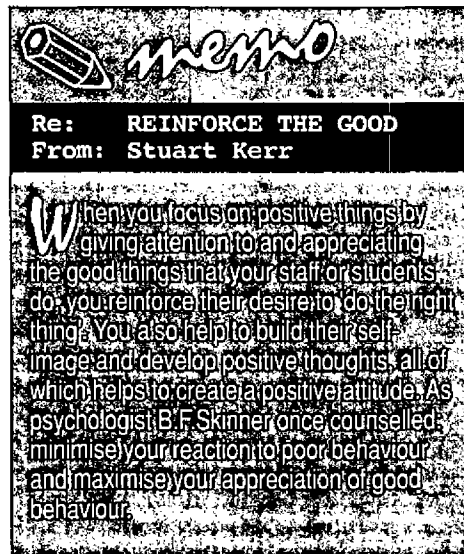
Indeed, creativity, reflection-in-action, and adaptive and imaginative learning go hand in hand. To keep the connection alive, creative leaders strive to preserve their mindfulness in the midst of routinised practice. Deep questioning assists the process of reflection: How are we tending our core business? What is the quality of our teaching and learning in our school? How successfully are we addressing our priorities and dilemmas? How am I contributing to teacher professionalisation and acquisition of new skills building? How do my key partners regard my leadership? Should I maintain my ground or shift? What are the incoming challenges and how can we enhance our strategic readiness?

True, some of these reflective questions are highly personal; others relate to the whole team. Nevertheless, these probing questions have to be asked and ways developed to deal with them because, as Arbuckle says:

Even the most creative leadership teams can develop middle-life weariness. They can lose their drive and enthusiasm and adopt a mechanistic leadership or managerial style; they fall victims to the deadly disease of spending their time solving the problems of yesterday rather than anticipating the challenges of tomorrow.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

The core business of the school is to equip children with intellectual, interpersonal, and functional skills to enable them to engage with the real world. The school is charged to build these



capacities in a psychologically and physically safe and pedagogically stimulating environment. The 'thrival' and prosperity of the school as an organisation in the turbulent context which I described very much depends on the nous of its leaders to read the environment, their readiness to jettison tired and uninspiring processes and practices, their ability to synergise the commitment and enthusiasm of their staff and students, and their willingness to learn, adapt, improvise, and innovate. I believe that these essential characteristics distinguish creative organisations from the pedestrian; and the sloggers and floggers from creative leaders. Creative leadership is not the preserve of a chosen few, blessed with special gifts and foresight. It is a passion, commitment and energy, awaiting arousal, recognition, and release. Its potency is derived from courage, imagination, and exploration. ■

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