Creative leadership
Developing future leaders

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Introduction

One of the essential ingredients of high performing individuals, teams and organisations is creativity (Basadur, 2004). To be creative means releasing talent and imagination. It also means the ability to take risks and, in some cases, necessitates standing outside the usual or accepted frames of reference. Creative people push the boundaries; they seek new ways of seeing, interpreting, understanding and questioning. They can accept the ambiguity of contradiction and uncertainty. They can tolerate disorder and unpredictability. In fact, they thrive in circumstances which others might see as chaotic and disorderly (Montuori & Purser, 1999).

But creativity is not a set of skills, traits or narrow competencies to be learned, taught or tested (Stoll, 2007: 8). Creativity comes from a deep-rooted passion and urge to act and think differently, to try things out, to make mistakes and to see the potential and possibility of innovation at both the micro and the macro level. Creativity does not always mean huge leaps forward or great changes that reshape and redefine thinking. Instead in classrooms, businesses, architects' offices, music studios, theatres and art galleries around the globe, marginal, incremental creativity is the daily norm. While some creative ideas have a huge impact others simply modify, refine and improve existing practices. This creative stance is the 'mindset' of the individual and the organisation. On a daily basis it contributes to the creative flow and energy of the individual, the team and the organisation (Rickards & Moger, 2000).

Developing creativity

Defining creativity isn't easy, primarily because it depends on the context and the form or forms of creativity being enacted or represented. As something we intrinsically experience or respond to, any attempt at a definition will be inadequate. Creativity evokes an emotional response in those who experience it or engage in it. Therefore we tend to know it when we see or feel it. Creativity is unlikely to be captured or evaluated through checklists or tick boxes. It is contextually located and will be judged in different ways by different people. What you see inevitably depends on where you stand. One person's creativity can be viewed by another as foolishness, recklessness or insanity. How you judge creativity depends on your particular and unique perspective on the world.

Although defining creativity may be a challenge there are identifiable dimensions of creative practice. John West Burnham (2008) suggests that it might be appropriate to define creativity in terms of:

- the use of imagination, insight and originality;
- the development of a different product, process or outcome;
- the addition of value to an existing product or process;
- the use of higher order skills, knowledge and qualities;
- the potential to make a difference, to improve, enhance or enrich.

However creativity is defined or understood, the need to develop creative leaders is more pressing

than ever before. There is a crisis in leadership succession in many parts of the public and private sector and schools are not immune. For example, over half the head teachers in England are aged 50 or over. There is a ticking time bomb of leadership succession.

But the next generation of school leaders will not be created overnight. Fast-track, quick-fix routes to leadership succession are not the answer. Instead, schools need to be 'growing their own' future leaders by investing in talented leadership right now. Only those organisations that identify and invest in the next generation of leadership talent will thrive and sustain success. The leaders of the future will be distinguished by their ability to collaborate and to be creative, whatever their context (Martin, 2007).

Talent and talent development across many sectors is now the top priority. Organisations that successfully release talent are those that focus on developing individual and collective skills, knowledge and creativity. These organisations actively distribute leadership in order to create the 'spaces' and 'opportunities' for creativity to flourish (Harris, 2008). They develop talent in ways that enhance both the individual and the collective capability to be innovative.

Talent-powered organisations invest in developing the capabilities of all employees and place a particular focus on accelerating creative capacity through the actions and interactions of people across the organisation. This is achieved primarily through instilling a strong sense of engagement but also through ensuring that networking and collaboration are reinforced as the most important leadership skills.

Creativity is more likely to be enhanced, developed and supported through collective rather than individual endeavour, in organisations that develop strong communities of practice (Stoll, 2007, 2008). This sense of 'community' or belonging is one in which creativity is more likely to occur because there are high levels of trust and a norm of 'no blame innovation' should things go wrong.

Creative leadership in action

Leadership is primarily about influence and change. Creative leaders recognise the need to influence others so that talent can be released and maximised. This cannot be done in a manipulative way, as creativity can only really flourish where the formal leadership authentically and genuinely reflects a desire for the many rather than the few to excel. Such leaders have a strong set of core values which are non-negotiable. They have a vision for their work or their organisation that is premised upon a clear and consistent moral, social or ethical purpose (West-Burnham, 2008).

Creative leaders set the tone, climate and conditions where creativity can thrive (Stoll, 2007, 2008). This means removing structural and cultural barriers that actively prevent people from working together, learning from each other and equipping each other to be creative through interaction and dialogue. This means that leadership can emanate from those without formal title or role and that creativity is a by-product of professional collaboration, dialogue and disagreement.

Those in formal leadership can release or suppress creativity. Organisational cultures, structures and climates vary. Those in formal leadership roles influence and shape school cultures, structures and climates for good or ill. Not everyone wants to encourage creativity. Creativity can be seen as a distraction, an irritation, a detour from a well thought-out and carefully conceived plan. One of the greatest threats to creativity is conformist leadership practice in our schools.

Another threat to creative thought, action and practice is selfish individualism where exceptional individual performance is rewarded. You only have to watch one episode of the *The Apprentice* to know that selfish individualism is alive and well. Yet ironically, it is this selfish individualism that is least likely to be needed or rewarded in the future. Recent research has highlighted that the most important leadership skills for organisational success in the next few decades include 'collaboration across boundaries', and the ability to 'build effective teams' (Martin, 2007).

So here we have the paradox. If creativity is a by product of interaction, inter-dependence and dissonance, many of our contemporary organisations are simply not fit for purpose. They function on position rather than process, competition rather than collaboration and independence rather than interdependence. Many of our organisations, including schools, are future-proofed to resist rather than to embrace creative thinking and are unconsciously crushing creative potential.

But we can't just dismantle organisations and disband structures in the hope that this alone will release creativity. It is not that simple. Instead we need to find new ways of reshaping or redesigning organisations from within so they can release creative potential. This means distributing leadership more widely and deeply

and encouraging broad-based involvement in leadership practice (Harris et al., 2007; Harris, 2008).

Formal leaders have a key role to play in orchestrating the conditions where creativity is fostered or negated. They need to have the imagination, versatility and tenacity to purposefully establish ways of working that are most likely to result in creative output. They will need to construct opportunities for dialogue, discussion and open debate among different groups of people. They will need to actively remove some of the barriers that stand in the way of people learning most effectively from each other. If we believe that every person has some talent, the task of those in formal leadership positions is to find ways of releasing it.

Communities

Communities are a necessary context for creativity, whether they are scientific communities, artistic communities, educational communities or business communities. They are required because creativity is sparked and fuelled by interaction and co-construction. Ideas can come from many sources – the more sources available, the more ideas emerge. The more people you meet and talk to, the more likely you are to rethink and reshape your own position, views and thoughts.

So, in summary, creative leadership is fundamentally about connecting people, often very different people. Creative leadership requires the time, resources, opportunities and space so that mutual learning can occur. The end result, however, is not cosy consensus or comfortable agreement but disagreement, dialogue and creative dissonance. Creative thinking is neither easy nor comfortable; it requires the abandonment of previous thinking and the confronting of established beliefs, mindsets and patterns.

Creative leadership is a form of 'servant leadership' where the main leadership task is to connect different people, ideas and ways of thinking. It is leadership that develops the capabilities and capacities of all those within the organisation so that creativity, wherever it occurs on whatever scale, can be captured, supported and enhanced. Creative leadership is 'leadership without ego'. It is fundamentally and genuinely concerned with generating new organisational possibilities through challenging rather than reproducing the status quo.

Acknowledgement

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