

IMAGINE THERE IS NO BOX?

ARTICLE BY CHRIS GRIFFITHS, FOUNDER & CEO - OPENGENIOUS & CO-AUTHOR (WITH MELINA COSTI) -
THE CREATIVE THINKING HANDBOOK

There was a time when possessing information and being an expert in your field gave you prime advantage. Your unique mass of experience, professional training and knowledge gave you your 'edge'. Now, not so much. What's becoming apparent in the fast and furious cycle of today's world is that, what used to work before no longer works now, and existing knowledge, while still useful, is not enough to thrive.

Compare life to how it was 30 years ago: Today we eat differently (convenience foods, multicultural cuisine), we communicate differently (mobile phones, e-mail, social networks), we shop differently (online, huge one-stop supermarkets), we work differently (sophisticated machinery and technology, new jobs such as 'app developers'), we even learn and study differently (virtual learning environments, interactive whiteboards, internet research). The list goes on, in just three short decades, we're living in a different world! Knowledge is no longer power. What does this mean? It means that no matter how smart or talented we are, we must be able to adapt and evolve - both as businesses and as individuals. The dilemma is that while everything around us is on the move, much of our present way of thinking is stagnant. Most of the time we manoeuvre through our work domain following the assumptions, patterns and belief systems that we've carefully honed over our years of expertise, responding to challenges and opportunities using standardised strategies that worked for us before. After all, we're paid to have all the answers. However, 21st-century business problems contain too many variables and unknowns to be answered with existing knowledge alone. The tried-and-tested solutions of the past

won't cut it when it comes to solving present and future challenges. We need creative thinking to find new and interesting ways to crack them. Consequently, creativity is the new power. Success is no longer about what we know, but what we can create.

When the time is ripe to explore the unknown and generate new ideas, our conventional thinking habits let us down. They box us in by focusing on what we already know, rather than bringing something entirely new to the table. Eventually, they turn into thinking 'errors' because they stop us searching for inventive ways to accomplish our goals. Thinking differently is the key to unlocking the best, most innovative answers to your business challenges, so you're not just 'getting stuff done' but 'getting it done better'. According to research by Yale School of Management's Professor Richard Foster, the average life expectancy of a company listed in the S&P 500 Index dropped from 61 years in 1958 to just 18 years by 2012 (Innosight, 2012). Foster also estimated that, at the current churn rate, 75 percent of top US firms will be replaced by companies we haven't even heard of by 2027. In the UK, it's a similar story. Of the 100 companies listed in the FTSE 100 in 1984, only 24 were still in that

position in 2012. There's a stark lesson in these figures. If companies aren't constantly looking to innovate and reinvent themselves, they risk being caught off guard by new entrants and falling by the wayside. The large organisations whose power previously rested on their command of scientific knowledge and expertise are on a losing path. There's a maxim that goes, 'If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you've always got.' Again, this is no longer true. In the new economy, if you aren't moving forward, you're not just standing still, you're being left way behind. Remember Blockbuster, Compaq, BlackBerry and HMV? These are companies that once dazzled with promise but have long since gone to rust. It's easy to follow in their footsteps if you fail to see the opportunities around you.

Today's businesses require a constant flow of new ideas, angles and solutions to stay abreast of rapid change and uncertainty. Creative insights are needed to solve industry challenges in new and useful ways, and to make bold leaps into uncharted territory. There are still professionals and businesses out there that believe creativity has no real substance. They see it as decoration - something pink and fluffy to beautify the look of a product or garnish a company's reputation. In this, they're inherently mistaken. Creativity can, and indeed should, be as focused and targeted as any other key operation in the business, from HR to Finance to Product Development. I like to call this rigorous and forward-thinking approach applied creativity. Through applied creativity, you can find new ideas about the causes of problems, ideas to help you solve those problems, ideas to make common executive decisions, and ideas about where you will go next. Knowledge is still important. It's a crucial pillar of the creative process; you need knowledge to help you connect information and evaluate ideas. But its value is limited without creative application. Creativity allows you to discover new knowledge and fresh ideas, and these ideas are what will change the status quo. Just like Google changed the way we access information, Netflix changed the way we watch TV and

Twitter changed the way we interact with others. Regardless of size or scope, producing novel ideas is what will help you break new ground in your corner of the world.

Bit by bit, the power of creativity is coming to recognition. In its *The Future of Jobs* report published in 2016, the World Economic Forum identified complex problem solving, critical thinking and creativity as the top three crucial workplace skills needed to thrive by 2020, stating: 'With the Avalanche of new products, new technologies and new ways of working, workers are going to

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have to become more creative in order to benefit from these changes' (Gray, 2016). Adobe surveyed 1,000 full-time, college-educated professionals and found creativity to be an integral part of modern work, with more than 85 percent agreeing that creative thinking is critical for problem solving in their career (Adobe, 2012). Nine-out-of-ten workers agree that creativity is required for economic growth, and 96 percent believe it is valuable to society. Yet, 32 percent don't feel comfortable thinking creatively in their career and a huge chunk (78

percent) wish they had more creative ability. Eighty-two percent of surveyed companies believe there is a strong connection between creativity and business results. But, 61 percent of senior managers do not see their companies as creative, only 11 percent agree that their current practices are aligned with creative working and only ten percent felt their practices were the opposite of what creative companies do.

As children, we were all far more creative than we are today. This premise has been tested many times over the years. For example, 1,600 five-year olds were given a creativity test, used by NASA, to select innovative engineers and scientists in 1969. Of these children, a staggering 98 percent scored in the 'highly-creative' range. Five years later, these same children (now ten years old), were re-tested and only 30 percent were still rated 'highly-creative'. Another five years later, when the children were 15 years old, just 12 percent of them were ranked in this category. More revealing, however, was that 250,000 adults over the age of 25 also took the same test and just two percent of them scored in the highly-creative range. What does this study prove? In the words of innovation author, Stephen Shapiro (2003): "Creativity is therefore not learned, but rather unlearned". Creativity is a quality that can be universally found in all of us as young children, but it dies out rapidly as we reach adulthood. As a little kid, you probably had no problem using your imagination. So, what happened? Ask yourself these questions: How many hours did you spend learning maths at school? Most people who've gone through the standard school system would say about 5,000+ hours. Was it the same for you? How much of that was valuable time? How much do you remember now? How many hours did you spend learning creativity? A few? None? Most of us learn this outside of the education system. Did you ever take an Innovation 101 class? At school we have countless limits set on us by our teachers. The educational system focuses on training our minds for storing and analysing information instead of developing our power to generate new ideas and bring them into being. We're

taught to memorise the right answers and use other people's solutions and knowledge, and at the same time we're 'untaught' to find our own answers, solutions and knowledge. It doesn't take long for us to learn that mistakes are bad, either. A fear of being wrong frightens even the bravest of us out of expressing ourselves in ways that are mildly unconventional or different. By the time we enter the world of business, we're so used to putting constraints around our thinking that it becomes institutionalised very quickly.

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Young kids can come up with strikingly original solutions to problems because they aren't bound by the rigid conventions and methodologies of adulthood. They don't have the same mental restrictions as us poor adults. Pablo Picasso, the Spanish artist and painter, illustrated this point perfectly when he said: "It took me four years to paint like Raphael but a lifetime to paint like a child". That mindset of always being open, excited and curious to look at different things is what exposes children to new ideas. Instead of being constrained by boundaries, their thinking is boundless; instead of

conforming, they are creating. Because of this loss of creativity over time, it's common for people to believe that they're 'just not the creative type'. This line of thinking is crushing as it leads them to doubt whether there's any point in even trying to think or act creatively - creativity is for artists, designers, musicians and mad bohemian types, not for us straight-faced professionals. Some of us aren't very sporty, but if we start a training regime and take care of our diet, then in a few months we would be much fitter and healthier. By the same token, we don't actually lose our creative capacity as we get older, this is a false impression. It just becomes out of shape through lack of use, because of our misguided belief that it doesn't have any practical application. Like a muscle that's never exercised, creativity withers through neglect. By relearning how to play and adopting an active pursuit of creativity and mental improvement, we can all rediscover and re-experience the magic of creativity that we knew as children. Imagine what you could achieve if you could go back to your creativity levels at five years old!

Some people say creativity is about thinking outside the box, others that it's about being creative inside the box. But what if there is no box? If you can realise what the box is and remove it, you can unlock unlimited streams of creativity. The box represents your existing assumptions, habits, biases and default thinking routes. Apple threw away the box when they asked themselves, 'What if we developed a mobile phone without a keypad?' This was a magic moment for Apple, and the unprecedented success of the iPhone, with its huge touchscreen and sleek, sexy design, soon toppled the global market leader, Nokia, from the top spot. At the time, every other manufacturer had overlooked the emergence of touchscreen technology. They couldn't break free from existing assumptions about phone design and judged that consumers would continue to prefer physical keypads. If, like me, you've attended your fair share of brainstorming sessions, you'll know from experience that discarding the box is not an easy thing to do. Let's look at a typical scenario.

"Minds are like parachutes. They function only when open". As with a parachute, if your mind is kept closed when you're trying to be innovative, sooner rather than later you'll come crashing down. To open your mind, you need to know what locks are on it. An open mind, free of any locks, is fundamental to creativity, particularly at the beginning of ideation. There are a surprising number of mental locks and restrictions that you'll need to watch out for. Although most of us have an intuitive understanding of what it means to be creative, there's still a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to defining this notoriously tricky concept. Before flexing your creative muscles, it's worth getting clear on what creativity really means. Despite a plethora of definitions on the web, the challenge is to identify a common definition you and your team can all understand and get on board with. A shared definition puts everyone on the same page and helps to set the creative direction for the business.

Feel free to use my definition of creativity: The incubator and cultivator of new ideas, which are born from existing knowledge and combined to form a new neural pathway in the brain, leading to a personal original thought. It might not be the most glamorous definition around, but it describes the nature of how creativity is expressed in a way that people can easily engage with. Creativity is about connecting things in your mind until you come across an idea that is original and useful. Steve Jobs, the late co-founder of Apple, referred to the same principle as 'connecting the dots'. ●

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