

Episode 042

Thinking Creatively As Leaders

Leaders need to think. Effective leaders learn to think creatively. Innovative leaders need to excel in creative thinking. Leaders are called to lead, to solve problems, to advance the group forward. The group they lead will be unique. Many of the problems they are confronted with will be unique to their context. In order to accomplish this effectively, leaders must learn to think creatively. It is not possible to simply follow a set of prescribed steps to be effective leaders.

However, it is important to realise that being creative does not necessarily mean having totally original ideas. In fact, most creative thinkers build upon the ideas of others. Creative thinking can involve taking an existing idea and tweaking it. To contextualise it, or apply it in new ways.

Perhaps you may be thinking that you are not creative. In reality, creativity can be nurtured. You can develop to be a creative thinker. Let me share how.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CREATIVE THINKERS

What are some key characteristic that enable thinkers to be creative? John Maxwell proposed 5 key characteristics, which I will explore.

1. Values Ideas

Annette Moser-Wellman, an acclaimed expert in the field of innovation and leadership, observed, “Highly creative people are dedicated to ideas. They don’t rely on their talent alone; they rely on their discipline. Their imagination is like a second skin. They know how to manipulate it to the fullest.”

In other words, creativity is about generating ideas and lots of them. Not just because we have talent but because we developed a discipline in generating them. By learning how to utilise our imagination to the fullest. However, it is crucial to realise that we will only be motivated to pursue ideas if we value them.



In pursuit of ideas, we seek out ideas, we surround ourselves with ideas, we stimulate ourselves with ideas. Yet I have observed that most people explore ideas only in areas of their interest. We can expand beyond that intentionally because ideas can be found far beyond our usual span of interest.

For that reason, I like to read widely. I often browse through magazines, articles and media that reveal creativity. It feeds my interest in ideas. It can range from theology to ministry. From leadership to literature. From engineering to architecture. From technology to fiction. From innovations to fine art. From preaching to people. From organisations to churches.

When I used to work as a research Scientist at CSIRO, I worked in a building where the architect strategically designed the building to maximise the cross interaction of scientist of different fields. The concept is that it will help cross-pollinate the scientific experts and their ideas. Sometimes breakthrough ideas come from other fields outside of our normal interest.

2. Explore Options

Creative people are often eager to explore possibilities. They are not afraid to go beyond the norm. In fact, our imaginations are stimulated by exploring many possibilities. Albert Einstein astutely noted that, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Prof Einstein was able to develop the Theory of Relativity because he was able to imagine theoretically that space and time are interconnected and how gravity affects the fabric of time-space. He was able to proceed beyond existing knowledge to offer a theory that was only confirmed experimentally many years later.

Good leaders do not only identify problems alone, they find answers. Not a single solution, but multiple solutions from which they can find the best. The best solutions come from good thinkers who often consider a plethora of alternative possibilities. Hence, they enjoy a freedom that others lack. As a result, they usually end up influencing others.



Daniel offered an alternative to the chief official to avoid eating the non-kosher food of the Babylonians. Dan 1:12 - 14 (NIV) 12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see.” 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.” It was Daniel who was used of God in innovative ways to influence the different nations he served in.

Apostle Paul advocated exploring different options in his approaches towards different groups of people. So that he might be “all things to all men” (1 Cor 9:22).

3. Embrace ambiguity

The American writer H.L. Mencken declared, “It is the dull man who is always sure, and the sure man who is always dull.” That is why often, creative people refuse to be bounded by rigid norms and expectations. It is a straight-jacket for them. They enjoy uncertainty and embrace ambiguity. They view it as a space that provides an opportunity to explore and create.

While some struggle, feeling unsure in the midst of ambiguity, a creative leader is able to thrive in the grey areas of ambiguity. Such leaders are able to exploit the opportunities it offers to create fresh narratives, build new bridges, innovate different approaches for their context. They make captivating preachers, entrepreneurial pastors, prophetic teachers that shake the status quo.

I enjoy preaching through narrative passages in the Bible because its inherent ambiguity offers opportunities to discover multiple facets of God’s divine interaction with His people.

4. Celebrate the offbeat

Creativity often explores off the beaten track and goes against the grain. Creative people feel less constrained by the norm. They are comfortable with the road less travelled. As a result, they sometimes come across different, even odd. To foster creativity in yourself or others, be willing to tolerate a little oddness. After all, look at one of the most famous genius, Albert Einstein who has a unique iconic look, that has become associated with genius professors!



5. Connect the Unconnected

Being creative does not mean coming up with totally original ideas out of nowhere. Instead, often creativity utilises the ideas of others by connecting one idea to another, especially in seemingly unrelated ideas, to extend it into a new idea.

As a former scientist, I often built upon the ideas, theories, experimental results of others. Sometimes taking ideas from other fields to apply into my field of research to explore new ways to describe a phenomenon. During my doctoral studies, I took a newly proposed and relatively untested experimental method to measure rock fracture and broadened its usability extensively. I was able to demonstrate its benefits, effectiveness, reliability and flexibility. Consequently, over the last 3 decades it became a well-known and popular method for fracture measurement, even beyond rocks. To my pleasant surprise, my work has been increasingly cited in recent years even after 3 decades.

We can do this by applying a series of steps.

Think – Collect – Create – Correct - Connect

Think about the big objective is the starting point.

Hence, if you are working on a project it is crucial to identify clearly the key objectives. It should state the issues/problem to be addressed, the outcome sought, the constraints within which this is to occur. For example, in developing a sermon series, I would consider carefully its objectives. What are the issues we seek to address? Whether theological, ethical, relational, social, etc? What is the outcome we seek? A better theological appreciation? A clearer principle of ethics or behaviour for certain situations? Improved relational understanding? What constraints exist amongst my hearers? In terms of demographics, life contexts, current situational environment, etc.

Collect material that relates to that objective.

Having framed the objectives, it provides a filter to search and collect more information and ideas as well as home in on the most helpful ones. For example, when we were considering the design of our church building, I compiled auditorium designs that fit our cost and usage criteria.



Create from the materials compiled, appropriate ideas that moves towards the objective.

For example, for the auditorium I began to design possible options for our context. A major consideration was an auditorium design that allowed it to expand when our congregation outgrew its size. For I had noted many churches having to relocate to a new building when that occurred.

Correct, refine the ideas.

The initial ideas we develop often requires refinement to be better optimised. This is a critical phase to obtain feedback from different stakeholders and experts to ensure it can best meet the objectives.

Connect the various ideas we have gathered in a whole.

Often the overall project has different components and parts which must be brought together as a whole. For example, even in the auditorium design, it is part of the larger building. Its design impacts upon other parts while other rooms, amenities, structure etc also impacts upon it. To obtain the optimal overall design, all these separate elements must be considered as a whole.

The process above is not linear, it is usually iterative in a somewhat organic way. Done creatively and properly an optimal solution can be found after a few iterations.

BENEFITS OF CREATIVE THINKING

1. Adds value to everything

Creativity is being able to see what everybody else has seen in part, yet think what nobody else has thought so that you can do what nobody else has done. This leads to innovations and inventions. Innovation is often doing old things a new way.

Joseph proposed an innovative way to storing up over the 7 years of prophesied plenty in preparation for 7 years of famine. An approach that showed great wisdom and creativity.



Gen 41:34 - 36 (NIV) 34 Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance. 35 They should collect all the food of these good years that are coming and store up the grain under the authority of Pharaoh, to be kept in the cities for food. 36 This food should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine that will come upon Egypt, so that the country may not be ruined by the famine.”

2. Creative thinking compounds.

The more creative ideas we accumulate, the more our creativity increases. The more we use our creativity, the more it increases. It is like a mental muscle. So we need to cultivate a safe creative environment amongst our team.

3. Creative people learn more

Because creative people love ideas, they will learn more while working through new ideas. They will learn to better understand the fundamentals and how to go beyond.

4. Will challenge status quo.

Status quo and creativity are incompatible. Creativity and innovation always walk hand in hand. A key principle we must appreciate is that we cannot achieve more by doing more of the same things. Leaders who had brought their organisation into a whole new level of effectiveness or breakthrough had often been innovative.

In my experience as a scientist, a good scientist will challenge the status quo. That is how the boundaries of knowledge are pushed into new frontiers.



HOW TO DEVELOP CREATIVITY?

1. Remove creativity killers.

Deal with attitudes:

- Just follow rules
- Don't ask
- Don't be different
- It has never been done
- There is only one way
- Failure is final

2. Ask the right questions.

The uncreative mind can spot wrong answers because they are good at spotting what is outside the preferred answer. But it takes a creative mind to spot wrong questions, wrong assumptions. Instead, they ask right questions. Here are some questions that they ask to open up greater inquiry.

- Why must it be done this way?
- What is the root issue?
- What were your assumptions?
- What does this remind me of?
- Can we have a different perspective on it?

3. Develop a creative environment.

How do we do that?

- Encourage creativity.
- Have trust to allow failure. The fear of failure will hamper creativity.
- Embrace the creative people. Yes, they may be different, harder to harness, even a bit odd but you need them.
- Focus on innovation. This will drive creativity forward.
- Value options.
- Let people draw outside the lines.



4. Spend time with creative people.

Creativity is contagious and it can be absorbed. By continually interacting with creativity people, we can learn their thought processes and challenge our own thought processes. They can inspire us.

5. Get out of the box.

It means that sometimes we have to break some rules. Expose ourselves to new paradigms. Explore other cultures, other ways of doing things.

CONCLUSIONS

Creative thinking will help your leadership to be more effective, to deal with unique circumstances, to innovate better ways of doing things.



Discussion Questions

These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. How much do you value ideas? Even ideas that seem very different to what you are used to? How much has this article inspired you to value ideas and to surround yourself with them?
2. How comfortable are you with ambiguity? Are you able to find opportunities in the grey areas?
3. How much creativity killer attitudes exists in yourself and your team? Why do you think such attitudes exists? What can you do about it?

Actionable Steps

Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. How good are you at connecting dots, even between seemingly unrelated ideas? Consider the suggested steps and work out how you can apply such a process for yourself.
2. What steps can you take to nurture a more creative environment amongst your team? Work through some action steps to implement this in the coming months. What would you need to teach and model to create a culture conducive for creativity?





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