

# HOW LEADERS LEARN TO BOOST CREATIVITY IN TEAMS

## Innovation Catalysts

Dr Rob Sheffield



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University of the West of England, UK



## About the Author



**Rob Sheffield** is a coach, consultant and trainer, specialising in helping leaders enable creativity and innovation in their organisations. He holds a PhD (Organisation Studies) from the University of the West of England, where he is also a Visiting Fellow.

He writes, researches, teaches and has consulted with organisations including EY, GE Healthcare, Mercer and the UK National Health System. His current research is focusing on the Leadership of Innovation in Health and Social Care.

He presents at networks and conferences throughout Europe and UK. Recently, he presented at the *International Society for Professional Innovation Management* (ISPIM) in Porto and the *Developing Leadership Capability Conference* (DLCC) in Bristol. He co-wrote a chapter, with Prof. Carol Jarvis and Jane Hadfield, which was shortlisted and included in the *Paris Innovation & Entrepreneurship Teaching Excellence Awards 2017*.

Rob believes that creativity is being learnt and applied, judiciously, in many organisational contexts.

(Unfortunately, he's not the much more famous 'Rob Sheffield', who works for Rolling Stone magazine in New York.) Instead, this author can be reached via [www.bluegreenlearning.com](http://www.bluegreenlearning.com) or at [rob@bluegreenlearning.com](mailto:rob@bluegreenlearning.com).

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# Chapter 1

## The Creativity Convergence — A Meeting of Need, Means and Want

We have to continually be jumping off cliffs and developing our wings on the way down.

**Ray Bradbury**

This is an optimistic book, arguing that leaders are playing a key role, in bringing diverse people together, to develop novel solutions that fit the needs of the people they serve, and make those people's lives better. Many are doing this, through their focus, determination, skills and collaboration with others, and in ways that rarely make headlines. Mostly, these leaders are not interested in making headlines, but they're doing the work anyway. And this is timely, because, as we'll see, the need for, means of and motivation for creativity are converging.

The ideas in this book have evolved at the boundary of organisational research and practice in working with leaders and teams. The work has covered 30 years, and spanned the UK, Continental Europe, USA, China and India, working with global companies and smaller, vibrant ones across healthcare, professional and legal services, education and technology. It's been a fascinating and fortunate time to be involved in this work, because the paradigm of leadership has altered, away from the taken-for-granted focus on the leader as a heroic individual, to one of leadership as a more distributed and relational process.

My colleagues and I work with many leaders who are learning and applying lessons in their teams, organisations and collaborating beyond their organisational boundaries. Part of the motivation for writing this book is fuelled by the dissonance experienced between our everyday work with leaders, and the news-grabbing headlines around leadership:

We now observe a huge divide between the modest trust in institutions of business and government and a pitifully low level of confidence in their leaders. Over two-thirds of the general population do not have confidence that current leaders can address their country's challenges. The credibility of CEOs fell by 12 points this year to 37 percent globally; in Japan, it is 18 percent.<sup>1</sup>

Much of this distrust is driven by an increasing sense that current systems of wealth creation and redistribution are perceived to be meeting the needs of only a small minority. At more local levels, corrupt leaders damage the reputation of their organisations, and leaders elsewhere, as officers of organisations, are tarred by association.

But there are also grounds for hope from this report. Around 75% of the survey respondents believed that business could both increase profits and improve the conditions in communities where it operates. And, of those unsure as to whether the system works for them, 58% trust business the most. Many people want business to do more social good.

We know how easy it is for leaders to stimulate cynicism, anger and suspicion. And, once freed, these genies are not easily contained. Hope, optimism and pride in results take longer to cultivate, but are present in the lives of many leaders who are currently doing good work. And we encounter many examples of leaders who work hard to serve their customers, clients, patients, service users and wider communities.

This book is an attempt to give those learning leaders a voice. I want to point out that much good work is being done by mature leaders, who are learning to use their power, to energise the people around them, making things better for the people they serve.

That's about the 'why'. As for the 'what', the focus of this book is on creativity as it feeds into a wider innovation process. I have tried to integrate previously separate strands of research and practice from the fields of creativity, innovation and leadership, into a coherent framework.

The emphasis is on informing leadership practice, illustrating principles through the real-life experiences of organisational leaders.

The intended audience is people in leadership roles, who are being challenged to develop innovative approaches to work, delivered through the teams they lead.

Some of the stories in the book are illustrations of work done well, and, sometimes, not so well. The cases in Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 come from interviews with people with whom my colleagues and I have worked in recent years. All of these people have delivered noteworthy change in their organisations. Other interviews through the book provide contextual examples of what's changing in this growing area of work. These people are engaged in developing substantial, often leading-edge, work, applying human and/or machine technologies which are often based on solid research. In total, I interviewed 15 people, 12 in recorded interviews and 3 by email. Some of their names and organisations' names are changed to meet their organisational policies on anonymity and confidentiality; some are shared in straightforward interview formats; some are retrospective accounts, co-written by me and verified with others; some are written-up interviewee accounts, responding to questions asked by me.

## Relevance for the Reader

You will find the book useful and inspiring, if you

- are a leader, at frontline, middle or senior level, in business, the public sector, government or community organisations;
- are curious about how to develop ideas with your team, from first insights to proven concept;
- are studying creativity and innovation and want both an overview of research and practical examples of real people applying learning in their work;
- want to grow your own capacity for creativity and innovation, but don't know where to start. Have faith! There are well-tested ways to do this, developed through decades of research and practice;
- intuit that the importance of creativity and innovation is growing, but don't know why. You're right! Read on...

You'll also know that you can't deliver innovation by yourself. Other people probably have better ideas — there are more of them than you! The energetic commitment of your team to introducing new ways of working is crucial to seeing things through and delivering value. The work is simply too complex for any one person to solve.

You will know that your people demand a certain degree of challenge and want to keep learning, partly for the 'buzz', but also to safeguard their future employability. You feel responsible to help them with that.

Moreover, for yourself, you have a life outside of work, and you value it. Working 14-hour days does not appeal. Perhaps you belong to the so-called sandwich generation — looking after your children and your parent(s). Either way, work is vitally important but it's not everything.

Equally, your team needs you, in your leadership role. How you conceive your role, and think about using your power and authority, will have a clear and sustained impact on others' commitment and performance.

## The Topicality of Creativity and Innovation

Innovation is today's equivalent of the holy grail. Rich-world governments see it as a way of staving off stagnation. Poor governments see it as a way of speeding up growth. And business people everywhere see it as the key to survival.<sup>2</sup>

But as the terms *innovation* and *creativity* have become more commonplace, their meanings have become a little foggy. Exploring the academic literature, creativity is most commonly described as the generation of novel and useful ideas,<sup>3</sup> while innovation involves the successful implementation of creative ideas by the organisation, leading to value creation for stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

In this view, creativity is an essential early stage of the innovation process. Our experience suggests that, in many organisations, creativity is not really trusted. It's the black sheep of innovation, which sounds more business-like, solid and incontestable. But, as Isaksen *et al.* put it:

Our position is simple. You can have creativity without innovation, but you cannot have innovation without creativity.<sup>5</sup> (p. 14)

Thinking of creativity as a necessary sub-set of the more complex innovation process is useful. As a broad simplification, being able to conceptualise novel and useful ideas at an early stage is an essential

precondition for innovation. And novelty needn't mean new to the whole world. The consensus is that new-in-context is novel enough. And think of 'useful' as having the potential to bring value to relevant stakeholders.

In this book, when I'm referring to the early stages of the development of novel and useful ideas, I'm talking about creativity; when we're referring to the whole process, or to value realisation through implementation and spread of ideas, I call it innovation.

At this point, let's review Rhodes' model which has had an enduring impact on the field of human creativity. In reviewing the creativity literature, Rhodes collected 56 definitions of creativity and synthesised them into 4 main themes of *Product, Process, Press and Person*.<sup>6</sup>

- *The creative product*: How creative is the outcome produced? Whether that is a product, service, process, business model, market and so on. And what are the qualities or attributes of creative outcomes that make them 'creative'?
- *The creative process*: This looks at *how* ideas develop, as well as the development of thinking tools, rules, tips and practices to nurture ideas through phases of development. This is where much training and consultancy work focuses, and with good reason, since this is most closely connected with explicit idea development.
- *The creative press*: Work context makes a difference. Sometimes, ably-skilled individuals and groups just don't apply their talents because of factors in the local environment.
- *The creative person*: What are the traits and styles of people that seem to influence the number, variety, originality and detail of their ideas?

Rhodes was interested in the integrative nature of his framework. He believed that these themes, in combination, could provide a useful governing structure for creativity that could be helpful for the deliberate and meaningful application of creativity in our everyday work.

## The Demand for Innovation is Growing

However, it works and whatever we can learn about it, the demand for innovative solutions is growing, and several factors are driving the need. First, of course, organisations need ideas. Anyone working can barely

spend a week without confronting the need for idea development. This is a widespread phenomenon, driven by strong, sometimes, global, market competition.

Innovation may also be demanded by other stakeholders in our work. A 2015 poll for Lithium Technologies showed that 65% of the US large-corporate executives report that consumers have higher expectations for them to innovate. Approximately 42% of respondents noted that consumers use social media to shame their company into doing what the consumer wants! 'The consumer is forever changed' asserts Rob Tarkoff, CEO and President.<sup>7</sup>

Also, the widespread and rapid proliferation of digital platforms has boosted change. Most organisations report that their digital initiatives are aimed at strengthening the existing business, rather than driving growth through new businesses. But don't doubt the short-term potential for digital becoming a source of value. In McKinsey's 2015 survey, their high-performing organisations are more than twice as likely to dedicate their best people and resources to their digital initiatives.<sup>8</sup>

And work problems seem to be growing in complexity. In their 2013 survey of 821 respondents across 14 countries, EY note that:

Almost 9 out of 10 companies surveyed for this report agree that the problems confronting them are now so complex that teams are essential to provide effective solutions. To achieve superior performance, companies need to tap into the full range of skills and expertise at their disposal. More than 6 out of 10 respondents say that their companies' teams have become more diverse in the past three years and 55% say that their teams are more geographically distributed.<sup>9</sup>

One of the effects of this increased demand for ideas in organisations is that the search for ideas has broadened. Previously, innovation seemed to be the domain of people working in research, development, probably marketing and perhaps, sales. Now, ideas are needed from all the workforce, to develop new products and services, process efficiencies, start-up business models, new strategies and markets and more. This was foreseen:

In the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world of electronically connected organizations, everyone will have a part to play as the creator and implementer of new

ideas. In this respect, older notions of the exceptional individual as a creative genius...will become obsolete.<sup>10</sup> (p. 55)

We're moving from creatively being a mysterious, even sacred, process, in the province of the few, to one which is becoming more widespread and more democratised.

As the conversational volume of organisational demand for innovation has increased, so is the demand from individuals. There is emerging a 'ground-up' drive from employees who want to learn the skills of idea development. This is disorganised and fragmented, and sometimes missed by their learning and development functions. But, what was a weak signal 10 years ago, is now growing more assuredly.

On a global professional services organisation learning programme that endured over 15 years, we ran client-skills training for young graduates. In 1:1 conversations, which typically roamed into considerations of skills, personal qualities, short and longer-term career considerations, these early-stage accountants, auditors, tax specialist and consultants increasingly enquired about opportunities for developing and applying their own creativity.

Often, their worry was that their role constrained their opportunities to demonstrate creativity. They were worried that their creative capability would shrink. Some wanted to live a more creative life. Some alluded to the routine and repetition in their role that denied them the opportunity to show imagination. Many wanted to do good work that developed the reputations of their clients and themselves. While a mix of motives was at play — personal and social — what was clear was that the demand for creativity was growing.

In a 2014 survey by Deloitte:

78 percent of Millennials were strongly influenced by how innovative a company was when deciding if they wanted to work there, but most say their current employer does not encourage them to think creatively.<sup>11</sup>

In his book *Working More Effectively with Millennials*, (people born after 1981), Karl Moore argues that, millennials have shifted strongly in their interests, away from a narrower pursuit of income, which he argues, characterised the 1980s and 1990s. Now they want to have more life



balance, at work and home, and to contribute to something bigger than themselves. They want direction to aid their longer-term thinking and more purposeful work.<sup>12</sup>

They want their organisations to contribute to greater good. Specifically, they mention four global challenges: unemployment, resource scarcity, climate change/protecting the environment and income inequality. They also believe that business can, and should, aim to have positive impact in these areas. They see a role for business in creating new products and services to deliver benefits to broader society. In effect, they are challenging the limits of what their organisations are there to contribute.

One of the implications for large businesses is that millennials are loyal to purposeful work, but not to specific jobs in particular organisations. In one way, that's just as well, because there's another factor driving the demand for innovation skills.

Siu and Jaimovich released a paper in April 2015, describing how all employment gains in the US since 2001 have been in the area of non-routine work.<sup>13</sup> They categorised jobs as falling into one of four types. Routine roles are more 'rule-based' and divide into two types: routine manual (e.g. forklift operators, home appliance repairers), routine cognitive (e.g. book-keeping, bank tellers). Non-routine roles focus divide into non-routine manual, such as janitors and home health assistants, and non-routine cognitive, including programming and marketing. These contain fewer repetitive or rule-based activities, contain more variety within the role and require more flexibility (either cerebral or physical), and involve more human interaction, communication or decision-making discretion.

Their analysis shows that in economic recessions since 1990, routine roles have been falling in numbers, and not replaced with economic upturns. This trend accelerated after 2000. The authors conclude that this is partly because of outsourcing but mainly because these more routine roles are prime candidates to be replaced by new technologies such as robots and broad computing technology.

In the future, which jobs are more likely to need people? Martin Ford, futurist and author of *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of*



a *Jobless Future*, argues that humans will be needed in the following three areas:

First, where human creativity is needed, such as in artistic and scientific work, and in developing new businesses strategies (although Ford cautions that none of us know how creative computers may become). Second, in roles where complex relationships are needed between people, and which require trust building. Examples include nursing, teaching, leading others and building client relationships. Third, Ford also includes work that is more unpredictable, such as a plumber who may receive calls to irregular locations at unpredictable times.<sup>14</sup>

*The Wall Street Journal* agrees with this broad argument:

Even as robots become more skilled at more complex tasks, for decades to come it will be the province of humans to program and manage these machines. Many more jobs have critical elements that are creative, interpersonal, social and persuasive.<sup>15</sup>

No-one knows for sure how many and which jobs will be around in 2030. Most agree that the ones remaining will deliver value through creative and critical thinking, leadership, and the quality of human interaction.

My view is that part of the increased demand for broad innovation skills comes from people who foresee that these skills can, to some extent, safeguard their future. Add to this a desire for self-actualisation — creativity applied feels good! Plus, a growing wish to develop innovative approaches to benefit broader society. This is a considerable, collective, if fragmented, bottom-up force demanding that organisations develop their learning offerings around creativity, innovation and enterprise.

And where demand grows, supply is usually alongside. The number of courses offering learning in creativity, innovation and enterprise has rocketed in the last 10 years. A search on <https://www.coursera.org/>, a popular supplier of online courses, shows 200 offerings for the search term ‘creativity’, 261 for ‘innovation’ and 289 for ‘enterprise’. These terms are well represented in a list of Coursera’s 50 most popular courses in 2016.<sup>16</sup>

The need for innovation is also being driven at a more macro level. Meg Whitman, former CEO at HP Enterprise, wrote:

We're now living in an Idea Economy where success is defined by the ability to turn ideas into value faster than your competition.<sup>17</sup>

Whitman's prescription can be scaled from team to country, especially when we start to note the prevalence of an increasingly educated workforce. In the USA, the percentage of the over-25 population with 4-year bachelor's degree, or higher, rose from 28% in 2007 to 33.4% in 2017. In the census bureau survey of 1940, just 4.6% said they had a 4-year degree.<sup>18</sup> In 2013, the proportion of working-age adults in the UK with a degree had more than doubled in two decades — rising to 38%. The same source claims that around 60% of the inner-London working population have a degree.<sup>19</sup>

*We are developing better educated, idea-literate people, who care about the places where they live, and beyond, and want to make things better.* And, while many pilot programmes are *ad hoc* and piecemeal, the broad move is towards greater involvement of more people in decision-making. For example, the Decide Madrid scheme was launched in 2015, aiming to give voters greater voice in local law and policy development.<sup>20</sup>

At national levels, for advanced Western societies, one of the challenges is how to deliver economic value without resorting to becoming countries of lowest-cost labour, and easily-substitutable production processes, whether of manufacturing or knowledge creation. In my view, countries will rely increasingly on the imagination and scalability of wealth-creating ideas. The working population's capacity to develop smart ideas, from initial insight to tested proposition, will become an increasingly-utilised item of social capital.

## **Delivering Innovation is Proving to be Difficult**

While few contest that the need for innovation is growing, the quality of delivery seems to be lagging. Accenture's 2015 survey<sup>21</sup> of USA

executives highlights that innovation performance does not match the rhetoric:

- Around 82% of respondents equate incremental performance improvement with more radical gains. While executives are stating a need for more radical change, the great majority of changes improve what is already there.
- Furthermore, and worryingly, 60% admit their companies do not learn from past mistakes (compared to 36% in 2012).
- About 67% believe their organisations are more risk averse (versus 46% in 2012).

The report argues that the discipline of innovation is in a state of rapid development. They note the increasing number of chief innovation officers (up to 63%, from 54% in 2009); of formal processes for idea development (74%, compared to 62% in 2012); 86% use ideation platforms to support collaboration with internal and external stakeholders, with 91% noting that customers are a valuable source of new ideas. Clearly, USA organisations are experimenting with formalising support structures for innovation. Part of the challenge may be in developing an integrated approach. The same report concludes that:

...these enabling technologies can do little on their own. They need to be part of a clear innovation strategy and support well defined innovation processes to be most effective.

The link to strategy is important. Wazoku is a growing, UK-based open innovation business. Their 2015 survey, invited views from executives through to frontline UK workers. Its results are arresting:

Over 90% of those we spoke to said improving customer experience and making cost savings were two of the most important strategic objectives for their employees. 85% agreed these areas could be improved through more innovative ideas and approaches, but almost the same amount stated innovation ambiguity and barriers meant this benefit is unlikely to ever be realized (80%).<sup>22</sup>

While organisations are experimenting, and rapidly, with new approaches to innovation, an interesting *Forbes* article gives an insight as to the possible effect on employees. The article discusses a survey from MindMatters and shares that:

Only 5% of respondents report that workers in innovation programs feel highly motivated to innovate. More than three of four say their new ideas are poorly reviewed and analysed... The lack of recognition for contributions to innovation is also striking: almost half (49%) believe they won't receive any benefit or recognition for developing successful ideas.<sup>23</sup>

All of this points to an innovation truism: it is easier to state the need for innovation than deliver it. Indeed, our understanding of how ideas actually develop in real time, with real people on real work, is decidedly patchy:

There are remarkably few studies of change that actually allow the change process to reveal itself in any kind of substantially temporal or contextual manner...episodic views of change not only treat innovations as if they had a clear beginning and a clear end but also, where they limit themselves to snapshot time-series data, fail to provide data on the mechanisms and processes through which change are created.<sup>24</sup> (pp. 93–94).

## Innovation and Reification

It is clear that the need for innovation has been growing, while the process of delivering it is fragmented, experimental and poorly understood. What's more, we humans have a tendency to use concepts that are simultaneously convenient and distancing. Reification is one process by which we achieve this. It refers to our tendency to make something 'real' — to objectify and make phenomena into a thing. For example, we may conceive ideas as moving upstream through various stages of the innovation process — from someone's initial insight about a market need, to the acceptance of a genuine problem, to the building of solutions that might solve the problem, and so on. The imagery, like fish moving upstream, is captivating.

We talk as if ideas were real, tangible entities. If we're fortunate, the products and services they eventually yield might be. But ideas are convenient concepts around which we may find common agreement, to aid discussion. They act as psychological 'holding mechanisms', to frame our attention.

The downside of our tendency to reify phenomena is that we lose an understanding of how innovation actually happens in organisations. Birdi *et al.*, note this lack of understanding of how ideas are actually developed within organisations. They make the powerful point that it is not economies or sectors that innovate but individual firms within them. They go on to state that 'opening the black box' of the firm and understanding how innovation really works can help countries as a whole, through enhancing positive trends and reversing negative ones.<sup>25</sup>

I'd extend their point further to state that it is some people within organisations that innovate. Most people's everyday experience of life in organisations relates to being part of conversations. Some of these are repetitive, stale and risk averse. Others revolve around possibilities for doing something new. Many conversations combine patterns of repetition with glimpses of the new. If we can become more attuned to how conversations develop between people, then we're getting nearer to sensing how innovation succeeds.

Our tendency to reification can blind us to the everyday realities faced by people trying to innovate in their work. What we gain in linguistic convenience, we lose in empathy with innovators.

## The Innovation Bind

A corollary of working on complex challenges that require creative solutions, developed through imagination, is that no-one knows these solutions in advance! Assuming that a group has agreed the problem, the process can be thought of this way.<sup>26</sup>

We might think: 'If we're doing something *new* to our context, there are no obvious "right" answers and we have to accept uncertainty, ambiguity and surprises along the way. This is exciting and liberating...how can we possibly go wrong? There is no "wrong" — only possibilities...'

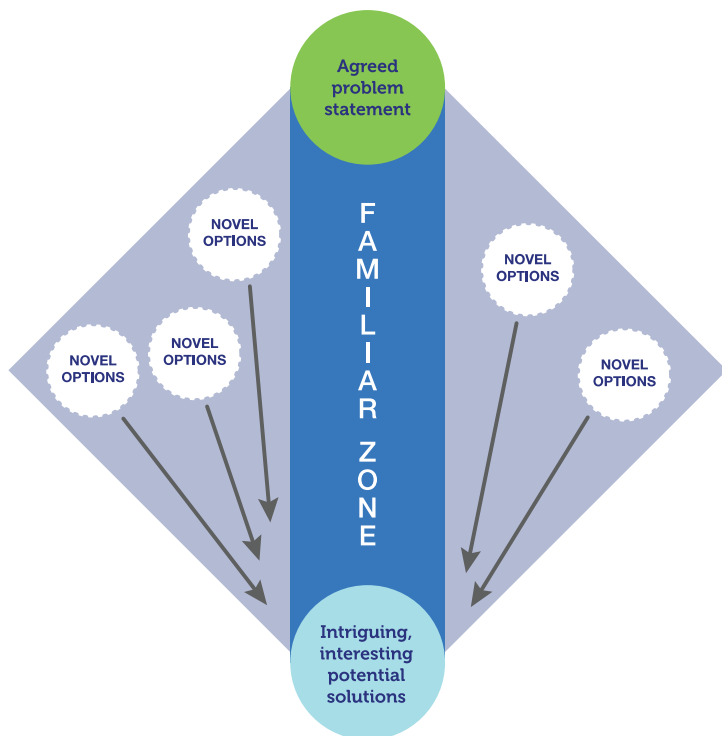


Figure 1.1: Incorporating novelty (Adapted from Ref. [26])

But this not knowing can also bring anxiety, which, can be a strong force for closing down our perception, feeling and thinking. Through experiencing processes of research and consulting with groups, there seem to be work environment factors which are experienced by people, in ways that lead us back to the road of the more familiar, and away from the novelty that is needed (see Figure 1.1).

There is a wealth of evidence to confirm the common impression that when people feel threatened, pressurised, judged or stressed, they tend to revert to ways of thinking that are more clear-cut, more tried and tested, and more conventional: in a word, less creative.<sup>27</sup> (p. 76)

This was supported by Goleman and Boyatzis<sup>28</sup> who describe how chronic stress increases cortisol and adrenaline levels affect memory,

planning and creativity. In short, these thinking processes narrow down, reducing our quality of exploration and returning people to habitual thinking.

Broadly, there seem to be a series of factors that are unhelpful for creativity:

- High uncertainty about desired outcomes and/or working process. Too much uncertainty of information and ambiguity about the meaning of messages.
- Too high a workload, and too little resource, can lead to the feeling of being on the proverbial treadmill, rushing from one deadline to another. In the UK, at least, the perception is that we are also working longer hours. And more of us believe our productivity has reduced rather than increased.<sup>29</sup>
- The perceived threat of evaluation and potential exposure if the work is perceived to 'fail'. This is closely linked with a perceived lack of support from more senior leadership.
- Poor work relationships across the work units concerned, reducing trust and perceived psychological safety.

Any of these factors can generate an anxiety that limits exploration and imagination. In combination, they are exponentially more likely to lead people to withdraw their energies and avoid any risk taking. When people feel like this, teams weed out novel ideas, leaving the safer ones that are likely to be palatable to powerful, more senior people.

What is striking is that several of these factors seem to be on the increase: the demand for innovation, in sectors with increased regulation, and increased involvement from stakeholders like consumers, clients, parents, carers, families, etc., add to this the existence of social media and the potential for widespread public criticism is increased. It can build a negative anticipation that leads people to retreat and seek safety.

This is the bind: the very factors contributing to the need for innovation may provide the uncertainties and pressures that can make this thinking difficult. They are examples of the confluence of emergent, complex trends in society, planned by no one, but powerful all the same.

But innovation outcomes are not inevitable. What helps groups continue to explore, and why, sometimes, does it all fall apart?

On the client-skills learning programme I mentioned earlier, our team was helping young graduates to learn about client-management skills. Typically, a programme would involve 18 participants over two days working in three groups of six people. Each group would work with a facilitator whose role was to help people learn aspects of client management, and, aim to raise their awareness of, and maximise, their personal strengths. A feature of the 2-day programme was that we worked with UK charities who would provide real work challenges for our participants. Examples included:

- ‘We have a publicity event in 6 months, and are including auction lots — please find us two auction lots that people couldn’t find elsewhere’.
- ‘Help us refine our marketing and promotions strategy’.
- ‘Help us raise new sources of funds because our previous ones are “drying up”’.

Quite often, the challenges were open ended and charity clients encouraged the course participants to generate as many unusual ideas as possible, and sometimes, highly original ones. In working with the group of six over two days, I observed how they worked together. There were two aspects to their work: one was the charity task itself — providing some value to the client; the other was the more nebulous work concerned with participants learning something about the skills of client management which may build transferable skills for their ongoing practice.

As facilitator, my role was to stop the group working solely on the task and help them reflect both on their current task and their personal learning. With one team, I noted that:

There was a limited diversity in this team, as judged by a measure of interpersonal preference style. There was some discussion of ‘what we are expected to do here’, but this was not sustained. The groups stuck with what the client has asked for — not clarifying or challenging it. Anxiety levels are high throughout much of day 2. The more the course



progressed, the higher the anxiety levels and the less prepared was the group to stop and reflect on its way of working. There was little psychological safety in the room. I felt a palpable sense of the group wishing to be left to 'get on with it'. As a facilitator, my presence was unwelcome, because, I think, I brought an uncomfortable reminder of the other things the group should be considering. Even though the group may have believed its output was mediocre — as the client later remarked — they also perceived it was too late to start again. The more anxiety rose, the lower became psychological safety, reflexivity and group efficacy, and the stronger became the cornered fixation on task: 'rabbits in the dead-line headlights'.<sup>30</sup>

But it wasn't always this way. Innovation was sometimes experienced as exciting, challenging, ripe for exploration, with the opportunity to learn new approaches. When there was trust and a sense of psychological safety between group members, then there tended to be more open sharing of ideas, and joint development of ideas, and better use of differences within groups. And, if the group is supported in its innovative work by more senior people, this gives a 'safety net', knowing they can't go far wrong. On this programme, I tried to do this, as the facilitator, and I encouraged the charity clients to do the same. With another group, the story was different:

...the quality of direct, frank communication was remarkable. One member of this group — L — was sincere in asking for honest feedback from others in the team. His directness was shown in both asking for feedback on his performance, and giving others feedback on their own. The effect in the group was to 'up' the challenge for all of us. Others rose to this challenge, and the quality of their communication and feedback increased to rare levels. The mood in the group changed for the better, as people realised that something unusual was happening. The quality of discussion rose sharply. Once achieved, people wanted more of this. What was happening, as far as I was concerned, was that a sense of excitement filled the room. People knew that the others were taking time and effort to help them with their learning goals, and trust in the group was high. There was little of the hedging, generalising and being careful that often reflects the climate of a group where trust is lower. The effect was to 'buck-up'

everyone, as people felt a mutual obligation to ‘go out on a limb’ and tell others what they’d done well and could have done better.<sup>31</sup>

This group were prepared to take remarkable risks with their learning. In a short time, they achieved a rare level of mutual support and openness. They learnt new and significant things about themselves, and they’d done this in rapid time.

### ***A Cri de Coeur for the Age of Creativity***

The opportunity is that this could be a golden age for creativity, with leaders acting as catalysts, accelerating group processes. But, evidently, times are challenging. There are four governing issues here:

First, while technology reshapes our world of work, so the demand for, and supply of, creativity capabilities is growing. These different trends, for efficiency and creativity, provide a present-day tension felt across many societies. Two men, born within two years of each other in the 1850s, would have recognised the pattern. Frederick Taylor, the founder of so-called Scientific Management, was born in Germantown, Philadelphia on 20 March 1856. One of the principles of Scientific Management was to increase the efficiencies of work methods, by studying and training workers in the ‘one best way’ to do the job. Typically, this led to a specialised division of labour, such that unskilled workers could learn their part of the workflow well enough for overall productivity to soar. Scientific Management was largely a convergent process: identify the best approach; organise and equip workers to be able to carry this out in the most efficient way; and monitor for adherence.

Once the variability of the human factor is lowered, Taylor’s approach gives the promise of more predictable work methods. (Indeed, he seems to have had an abiding concern around control and predictability. At the age of 12, and suffering from nightmares, he invented a harness to prevent himself from sleeping on his back.)<sup>31</sup> His work has been widely applied and hugely influential, but what Taylor did not foresee was that the practice of deskilling work would lead to increasingly easy substitution of workers. Once work was deskilled and broken down into simple

components, it might be carried out by anyone, rather than an originally skilled craftworker; then by offshoring, as globalisation allowed for work to be carried out on other continents; and finally, by automation, as routine tasks might be performed by non-humans.

Graham Wallas was born two years later, in Monkwearmouth, near Sunderland, UK on 31 May 1858. He was a social psychologist, educationalist and a co-founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science. He also produced an early and influential articulation of the stages of the creative process in his 1926 book, *The Art of Thought*.<sup>32</sup>

Wallas outlined four stages of the creative process — preparation, incubation, illumination and verification — and we'll look at these more in Chapter 4. One of the interesting aspects of his work was his insight that creativity cannot be rushed, and that we weave an elegant path, through the interplay of conscious and unconscious thoughts. As an educator, he was also stating that these steps can be learnt. Wallas would be excited by the current increase in demand for creativity skills. He would also sense the opportunities for a more systematic approach to learning these skills.

Second, there is a hype phenomenon. Innovation, of course, is not a new concept. What is new is the breadth and depth of expectation. It seems as if innovation has become the prescription for most of our organisational and societal ills. The word is applied freely to the need for new products, services, processes, business models, strategies, markets, cost-efficiencies; in degrees from incremental to radical, disruptive and breakthrough. It sounds like a secular promise that can deliver us from the perils of stagnation and declining living standards.

However, right now, the need for innovation is most certainly not ingrained into employees' everyday work. The innovation volume is turned high, but there is a gulf between the shouting and most people's everyday, lived experience. The overworked in our societies may experience this growing demand as yet another pressure on their already-overloaded selves. Cynicism and suspicion are relatively easy states to activate. It would be easy to dismiss innovation as another over-hyped, groundless concept. Those of us involved in innovation education need faith and resilience.

Third, there are grounds for optimism. For example, we already know a lot about learning the skills of creativity. Research and teaching have been carried out fairly systematically since the late 1960s, and we look at this through Chapters 3–6. Focusing on these metacapabilities makes educational sense:

Lifelong learning starts at school. As a rule, education should not be narrowly vocational. The curriculum needs to teach children how to study and think. A focus on “metacognition” will make them better at picking up skills later in life.<sup>33</sup>

Creative thinking is one such metacognition — a skill in thinking about how to think. I explain in Chapter 4 how creativity skills include the capacity for both divergent and convergent thinking. Traditional school and workplace education tends to focus more on the latter. Both are learnable. And creative thinking is not setting specific. It has the potential for being applied across occupations, meaning that it can be an aid for multi-disciplinary working and collaboration within and across organisations.

Another source for optimism is that organisations can be pioneers of learning which shape international conversations. More so than most governments, universities, and public bodies, our small, medium and large organisations are developing new ways of delivering value.

And there is potential for a ‘spread’ factor, led from the ground up. With increasingly educated populations, people are transferring their learning from work to other domains of their lives, such as their communities and cities. Work learning can have a multiplier effect, as it ripples into other areas of our lives.

Finally, as I aim to show through the examples in this book, good learning is already happening. Leaders are acting as innovation catalysts by thinking carefully about the power they have, and acting in mature ways to engage and involve others around a purposeful change. As we’ll see in the next chapter, doing so requires the leader to work with the team, not above them.

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