Whose creativity? Leadership and followership in the culture of the ideal

1   Creativity

You will be familiar with my project's starting assertion: as a species, humans are biologically and psychologically bound to their group(s) of belonging, and this inevitable membership constitutes both an opportunity and a hindrance. In Bion's words, 'man is a group animal at war with his own groupishness' (1961: 131). The project seeks to understand the causal relationship between organizational dynamics and individual and collective creative output. As a subset within creative activities, design is the thinking that human species apply, consciously or otherwise, to every activity, and this project researches the production of creativity in design teams.

Design studios or groups are specialized commercial enterprises set up to devise artefacts (material objects, tools, communications, buildings or cities). Sustained creative output determines their survival. They are constituted by groups of people with varying, complementary and, sometimes, competing roles. Some theorists postulate the existence of a number of constituent features of a designer's personality, and a design group is made up of individuals all with a particular interest in creative practice. These groups develop supporting and hindering dynamics in line with the assertion by Bion I mentioned before, and a number of differentiated management systems (production, administration) have developed to enable the task. Organizational ethos and practice vary enormously, and design organizations range from large to small, simple to complex, multidisciplinary to single discipline, virtual to concrete, etc.

Design organizations are set up to offer original, desirable, unique, and innovative creative solutions – where creative is not just a quality or a valued added component but half of the offer. We do not notice a communication simply by its effectiveness – creativity is part of its alluring attraction. And, in order to generate creative outcomes, creativity is foregrounded in the production process itself of communication design (information, signage, web design, branding, advertising). It operates in a continuum between technology and aesthetics, driven partly by function and meaning but also by ideas of what is pleasant or satisfying.

The choice of design organizations as the research setting is therefore, due to the hypothesis that creativity may be advantageously observed and studied here, as it is an **explicitly intended outcome** of the work of such organizations. In effect, the reification (and commodification) of creativity is not just a by-product, but part of its actual purpose,

as evidenced in the narrative used by design enterprises in the communication disciplines in the presentation of their services.

My current main research question is: **how do organizational structures and dynamics assist or hinder design enterprises towards the production of creative outputs?**

Creativity is defined as 'the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, and relationships; in order to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.' It is aligned to originality (i.e., uniqueness) and to imagination.

As opposed to the romantic notion, creativity is not the prerogative of a particular type of individual (the artist) but an innate human capacity manifested in every human endeavour – bringing about improvement through innovation.

Winnicott (1971) stated that it is necessary to separate the idea of **creation** from **works of art**. Creativity belongs not to the manufacture of artefacts (which can be called creations) but to the relationship (engagement) of the individual with external reality.

Art is a maker-centred practice predicated on the aesthetic qualities of the object, and the brief for the artwork emerges in the process of its making. Unlike art, design – defined as 'the process by which existing situations are transformed into preferred ones' – requires an explicit **brief**, a usually short and concise account specifying purpose or outcome beyond the attributes of beauty. The brief must identify

a) the situation to be transformed, e.g. lack of knowledge by a certain group of a particular event, product or service; and

b) the criteria for evaluation of any proposed solution, i.e., what characteristics the solution must have to be acceptable as valid. The solution (e.g. a poster, brochure, website, TV commercial) must be able to improve the original situation. The design solution, which does not exist until the problem has been formulated, is arrived at through an intuitive rather than just a purely rational process; and it is expected to display creative features, such as originality and innovation.

Creativity is a component of all human activities because of our capacity for imagination and, therefore, for symbolization – biologically determined by the shape and function of different parts of the human brain. Imagination originates in the L. *imitare*: imitate. Imagination is the action of forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses – of actions, objects or events not yet in existence. Human beings can translate (re-present) concepts into symbols. This capacity to articulate thoughts in language is what gives humans the ability to think.

Thinking is a mental process whereby concepts are formulated to build abstractions that model the world, in order to deal with it more effectively rather than solely by trial and error. We do not need to gather twelve apples and throw away five to get to know how many apples would remain. We abstract the quantities represented by the symbols and represent this by the formula $12-5=7$. This involves the mental manipulation of information to formulate problems, in order to reason and make decisions.

Creative thinking does not follow a logical **algorithmic** pathway (i.e., considering and testing every possible solution step-by-step, as computers do) but devises **heuristic** approaches (i.e., a common sense set of rules intended to increase the probability of solving a problem in a more efficient way). Creative thinking cuts through to the solution by making use of intuition or a direct perception of truth, independently of the reasoning process. Economy – this cutting through or directness – is at the centre of the creative act, hence the concept of elegance, i.e., quality with limited means, aligned to beauty. Elegance is never excessive but 'just right'. When we say 'what a brilliant idea!' we are also implying 'and so simple!', 'how did it not occur to anyone before?', etc.

The unconscious (in both its cognitive and psychological senses) also plays a part, and solutions may be arrived at, wholly or partly, without a fully conscious involvement by the thinker. You will be familiar with the process called **incubation**, when a period of waiting between setting a problem and proposing its solution assists the emergence of previously unseen answers – the Eureka! moment. The mind continues to attend to the problem even without conscious awareness of our engagement.

In a culture that tends to split terms into opposites, the unconscious is cast as the domain of the artist, while consciousness (or logical thinking) as the domain of the scientist. These mutually exclusive categories obscure the fact that both modes are engaged in creative production. Both artist and scientist depend on reasoning through existing tools (experience, technique) as well as intuition (a direct perception of fact or truth) if they are to have the ability to go beyond the confines of the known description of the problem. In designing, **the solution** does not arise directly from **the problem** – the designer's attention oscillates between the two, and an understanding of both gradually develops. Creativity is in operation both in **defining** and in **solving** the problem.

Two broadly different models of thinking have been proposed. In **convergent** thinking one brings material from a variety of sources to bear on a problem, in order to produce the correct answer. In **divergent** thinking, traditionally associated with creativity, one elaborates on possible solutions, prompted by a stimulus.

I'll give you an example (which is probably an urban myth) of the difference between these two approaches. When the National Aeronautical Space Agency (NASA) started the space program in the 1960s, they were faced with the problem of writing while in space. NASA spared no design efforts. The resulting **Fisher Space Pen** cost over one million dollars to develop and is a true wonder of engineering – it writes at all angles in extreme cold and heat, works efficiently underwater and in zero gravity, has an estimated shelf-life of 100 years, and refills are available in ten different colours.

It is reported that an enthusiastic NASA engineer showed off the Space Pen to a team of Soviet space engineers and asked them how they had solved the problem of writing in space. They replied: 'We use pencils'.

The American designers where rigidly set on their own brief ('design a pen that works in space'), and in convergent mode applied all their know-how to solve the problem

by reasoning. Their Soviet counterparts asked a different question (how to write in space?) and cut straight to the answer.

It has been argued that artists and designers function mostly in divergent mode while engineers and scientists work in convergent mode. But while dividing the world in categories may be a function of a higher thinking – as it allows the species to differentiate, classify, connect, and prioritize events – it also limits creativity. Assumptions construct rigid categorizations which impede thinking 'outside the box'.

It has been suggested that scientists are concerned with understanding the underlying rules of a problem and use a problem-focused strategy, while designers are obsessed with achieving a desired result and display a solution-focused strategy. I would argue that both scientists and designers work through a series of problem-solving moves which alternate between formulating units of factual knowledge, and connecting them in both rational and intuitive ways. Creativity, in this sense, would be the ability to connect apparently unrelated entities towards a new relationship that results in new artefacts, practices or meanings. The oscillation between reason and creativity towards a solution also reshapes the problem, which gets more clearly defined as the design process unfolds iteratively.

How can we get closer to the actual experience of creativity? What is this creative moment, this illumination, when the light bulb of the representational convention for 'idea' lights up?

Fittingly, I am going to tell you one of those light bulb jokes to call attention to a particular cognitive aspect of the creative act.

Q   How many organizational change consultants do you need to change
   a light bulb?
A   Only one, but the light bulb must want to change.

As you are aware, jokes function by describing a situation which we make sense of through a particular frame of reference. And, suddenly, the punch-line introduces another frame on the same event, equally valid, which we were led to ignore in the first hearing.

In my example, there are two contrasting meanings implied in the word **change**. How many consultants are needed to 'change' (we hear) a light bulb and we infer 'replace' a light bulb. But the answer suddenly shifts the frame, by referring to the willingness of a client group to engage in the necessary struggle towards change (which, in its second meaning, we infer as 'develop'). When we restructure the situation by shifting vertex between different conceptualizations of the same event (i.e., from 'replace' to 'develop') first we get confused and then something happens, a sort of jolt.

That jolt, for reasons that are unclear, produces laughter. It must be unexpected – hence we really laugh only the first time we hear a joke, and in subsequent hearings we may enjoy the shift of vertex but do not get confused. I think that the core of this experience is connected with a primitive fear of annihilation. We get frightened by the change brought about by a re-conceptualization, the same way we play with little children

and frighten them gently (peak-a-boo!) and, in the realization that the threat is only a game, they (and us) laugh out of relief.

o   o   o

o   o   o

o   o   o
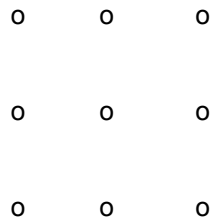
Here is another familiar example of cognitive rigidity. You see nine dots arranged in three rows or columns. Could you join **all nine dots** with not more than **four continuous straight lines**?
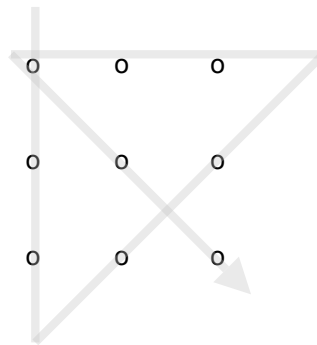
Did you notice your own sudden shift of frame of reference? The brief I gave you does not state that one should only work within a square, but we are perceptually anchored to the square shape that we unconsciously perceived the moment we first see the configuration of dots. So, we may restrict ourselves by the rules we formulate to manage our distress at the uncertainty implied in any search. Restructuring, however, does not guarantee a discovery – we may have to go through several of these shifts before we arrive at a workable solution.

So I propose to refer to creativity as **the capacity to function without being limited by our assumptions about the constraints of a problem**. This requires that we know enough about the problem not to be disabled by misinformation or lack of fact, but also that we do not avoid uncertainty by allowing the known facts to overly structure our thinking. A tension indeed.

My presentation so far describes creativity as a characteristic of the species but – what about the reciprocal impact between group and individual? Does their mutual interaction modify, assist or limit thinking outside the box? This question then brings us to the experiential activity.

2   Activity

The purpose of this activity is to explore – through direct experience – issues of creativity in a group.

- Please self-select into groups of [three *or* four?] members, each group making a circle of chairs at some distance from this circle and from the other groups, anywhere in the room. Please proceed.
- Please number yourselves in each group as 1, 2, 3 and 4.
- Number 1 will undertake the role of Observer, and no. 2, 3 and 4 will take jointly the role of the Creative Team.
- On this table there are a number of sealed boxes. In a moment I will ask one person from each group to collect a box and return with it to the group
- The tasks for each group are as follows:

a) The task of the Observer is **to observe and note any dynamics,** and to report when we later return to the circle of chairs.

b) The task of the Creative Team is **to find out what is there inside the box,** without opening, or tampering with the integrity of the box in any way.

c) The exercise will end in exactly 15 minutes.

3   Discussion

4   Creativity and the organization

The human species are organisms that seek adaptation through feedback, aiming at controlling the rate of exchange between organism and environment. Performance is determined neither solely by the individual organism nor by the environment, but by their interrelationship.

Emery and Trist (1969) proposed that environmentally-suited modes of engagement are a necessity for an enterprise to achieve its objectives. In effect, since organizations within the same culture have access to similar technology and sources of information, optimum organizational functionality becomes crucial to compete in a turbulent (i.e., saturated) environment. The key attribute providing a leading edge is, therefore, the ability to develop a permanently adaptable organizational culture. This fit between task and organization has been a constant preoccupation of organizational theory and practice.

Creativity in an organization is not just individual creativity at the place of work. From a systems perspective, the structure and dynamics of the organization as well as external components such as their circle of colleagues, progress in their field, and societal dynamics, contribute to determine the individual's performance.

It has been posited that creativity at work is related to employee's attitude rather than ability, and that the characteristics of the creative organization are that its members have

- considerable freedom on what they do and how they do it
- good project management
- sufficient resources
- encouragement
- an atmosphere of cooperation and collaboration
- ample recognition
- sufficient time for creative thinking
- a sense of challenge, and
- internally generated pressure to accomplish important goals.

In general terms, organizational models of creativity emphasize flexibility and integration within the organization.

With few exceptions (Halton 2004, Obholzer 2004) research on creativity has been traditionally focused on trying to understand creativity as observed in individual performance, how it works at the interface of individual and the environment, and what happens within systems of groups of individuals collaborating on creative products within organizations. This project is concerned with the latter and intends specifically to study the approaches that design enterprises use to undertake their task – how individuals produce communication design solutions, within an organizational environment, to supply the communications field.

Typical of design practice is the acknowledged and tacit wish to produce ideal artefacts beyond a solution to a problem. To this must be added the narcissistic attachment that a creator has to the product of his/her own (perfect) imagination. This is emphasized in a narcissistic culture and exacerbated by the commodification of creativity as a product. Anecdotal information suggests the commonality of conflict within creative environments between different roles such as creative vs. administrative or production; and follower vs. manager.

Following an initial literature search, semi–structured one-hour recorded interviews were carried out (Feb–July 2007) with the principals or senior members of ten small, medium and large size graphic design organizations within 50 miles of Central London. Organizations were identified according to variety of structure, number of employees, known quality of output, professional prestige and position in national ranking tables. Different patterns in the management of the creative process were noted from the narratives, ranging from high reliance (dependence) on the lead designer, to practices involving all members, including non-design staff, and from distant to very close daily engagement amongst the members of the design team.

The pilot study resulted in some expected findings, typical to any organization, and some unexpected findings concerning the bases of creative production. These were:

A) Concerning task

- A clear design brief – in systemic language, **a clearly defined primary task**.

- However, while most designers were definite about having a **criteria** to identify a creative solution – i.e., they knew one when they saw it – they could not articulate its features beyond originality, unexpected connections, innovation, and precision.

- Every interviewee referred to the crucial **participation of their clients** at different stages in the design process, not just as the commissioner of the work but as a key participant in identifying the problem to be addressed (solved) by a (creative) design solution. This seemed to indicate that some designers made an emphasis on problem-defining as a preliminary to problem-solving. However, others used the client for reflection on the tentative solutions, involving them in the problem-solving process itself. Interestingly, this bears similarities with the Democratizing Innovation approach of von Hippel (2006).

B) Concerning organization

- The space and the time for **playing** (with materials and ideas) to explore unconventional solutions.

- Interviewees stressed the importance of a **secure work environment** where designers feel secure to offer their ideas in raw form (as visuals, text or verbally), and provide critical responses to those of others, by establishing scheduled safe spaces for exchange within a team and within the organization. What we may call a containing environment, where the containment was provided by both the manager and the team of designers.

- A sufficiently flexible **organizational structure**, to allow involvement and yet sufficiently differentiated to avoid an unclear delegation of tasks.

- **Incentives** for creative production – recognition as career progression, financial reward, profit sharing, bonuses, and appreciation within the team and the community through professional awards.

C) Concerning context

- The importance of a **stimulating work environment**. Those organizations with dedicated premises had designated 'nurturing' areas outside or within the studio space, including considerable well-provided and regularly updated libraries of samples of work by competitors and valued practitioners as well as, in one instance, inspirational objects of desire or collector's pieces.

- The use of **wider references** from all areas of life, to stimulate lateral thinking. As communications is particularly involved with the construction of discourses, any references that enter visual language are to be noted and explored. It is only through a detailed knowledge of the broader cultural field that the practitioner will discover innovative combinations that produce new meanings.

D) Concerning (creative) leadership.

- All principals interviewed indicated that while they encouraged their teams to think creatively 'outside the box', the team and themselves had a **clear notion of hierarchies** – it was the principal who ultimately approved or vetoed a tentative solution and managed the secure environment where any proposal could be considered without loss of face. This allowed designers to take risks and challenge the brief. Some principals indicated that, because they had to hold in mind the broader picture, the solution was often likely not to be their own. Other respondents stated they had to be entirely responsible for the outcome, setting **boundaries** for the designers to operate creatively within.

E) Concerning interpersonal dynamics

- An acknowledgement of **conflict** when it occurs, although respondents by and large indicated that this was a phenomenon similar to conflict in any other type of organization.
- Interestingly, an explicit, playful and joyful valuing of **competition** – both amongst team members and with other design organizations. Competition was referred to by some as a dynamic that energizes practice, e.g., through brainstorming, whole team evaluation meetings and permanent exhibition of work in progress. In one case, competition was described as the key motivator of the organization's creativity.

This initial picture obtained from a set of single interviews may tend towards idealization of the praxis and the organization by both interviewee and researcher. It is envisaged that the framework of the empirical model will focus the research from larger samples to smaller and more detailed observations, possibly with ethnographic and grounded theory approaches. Access will now be sought to attend creative meetings in two organizations, on a weekly basis, for an extended period. The purpose is partly to ascertain the concordance of accounts gathered from the interviews with the structure and dynamics observed, but mainly to study emerging team and organizational dynamics in relation to creative output.

It might be hypothesized that an organization that foregrounds creativity as an output will organize its psychic energy in particular ways. For instance, through a less fearful engagement with competition as observed, or a more efficient management of its paranoid anxieties concerning uncertainty, or making use of those anxieties as task-oriented drives. In effect – might design methodology (as a design approach to organizational practice) assist to harness primitive fantasies towards the task, in the same way that the Work group requires enlisting Basic Assumptions states of mind? This would be the ill-defined problem strategy that Rust observed in designers, connecting with Feyerabend's proposal 'Against Method' (1993) or Stacey's notion of creativity being located at the edge of chaos (1996).

However, a design approach does not always result in creative practice, shown by the fact that design organizations are not equally creative. It may be argued that the drive for mastery of work is present in all activities and a determining factor is the commitment to the ideal embodied in the object of the work, and a driver in the struggle for the ideal solution. And the conflict between leader and follower a necessity of challenging adherence to known recipes. This would have a dialectic purpose. What happens when the creativity of the leader operates to the exclusion of the follower's, and vice versa? This may be similar to any organization.

A formulation of overlapping areas of a study of design organizations may now look something like this:

(Roberts 2008)
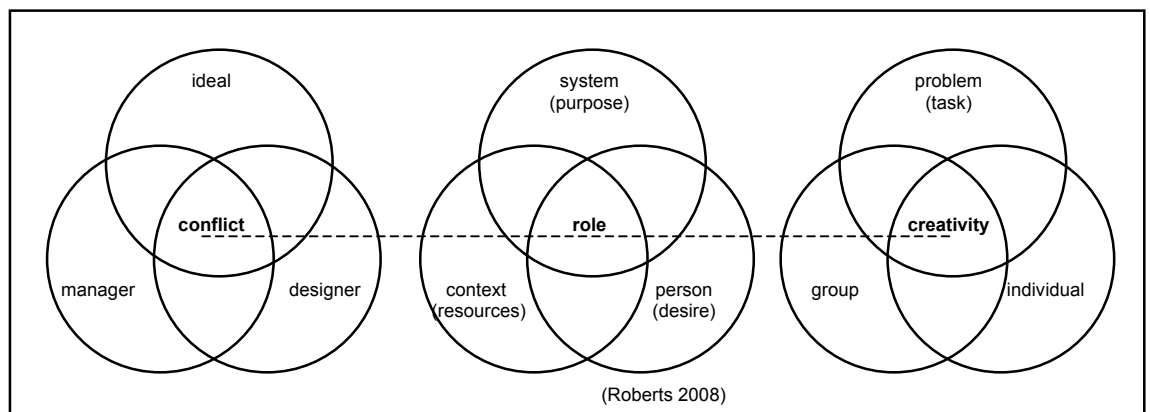
A number of questions arise:

• What happens with conflict around leadership and followership in a creative organization, when both leader and follower are attached to their respective ideal?

• If creativity is a natural human behaviour, are the system psychodynamics of an organization the only limitation to its manifestation?

• Are recipes for creativity such as those of the 'requisite organization' (Jaques, 1989) still valid?

• Or if creativity is to be found at the edge of chaos, as Stacey (1996) affirms, is this not about a creative 'undisciplined' approach to practice, as Feyerabend (1993) suggested? Can then design practice offer any useful representations?

• Would a similarly structured enquiry (interview and observation) of a non-design organization produce similar data about the management of creativity?

And I can hardly wait to find out...

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