

COOKING THE BOOKS

'Can you teach creativity?' A colleague posed this question to me the other day, wondering if you could teach it to students as you do a subject like project management or accounting.

To answer the question you first have to define what you mean by creativity. According to Dictionary.com, **creativity** means: the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.; originality, progressiveness, or imagination.

At first glance that looks like one of those gifts we are either born with or not, like the ability to paint or a talent for music. Yet we teach art and music in schools so why not creativity?

While I agree that creative people go beyond the traditional way of thinking, they do not have superhuman qualities to help them become creative. Creative people train themselves to be creative. Just like any other new way of thinking requires you to learn the methodology and techniques first, thinking creatively also requires you to *learn* to think creatively.

There are many variations of 'creativity.' Look at it this way; the world has accountants, and then the world has accountants. One could be more 'creative' than the other in their problem solving...willingness to think outside the box. One might simply have a broader set of definitions as to interpretations of rules...and that makes him or her 'creative.', does it not? Society tends to look at the word 'creativity' and immediately conjure up images of artists, actors and photographers, architects, musicians, artists and writers – anything to do with 'The Arts'. But creativity can be present in any profession.

According to a recent article appearing in the Independent newspaper, business schools are increasingly working hard at getting their students' creative juices flowing. At Lancaster University Management School, for example, Sabine Junginger, a visiting expert in product design management, has given MBA students a master class in creativity and innovation.

People make and design things all the time, she points out, whether it is a business plan or a recipe for what is in the fridge. "But people often don't learn to engage with their creativity," says Junginger. "I try to encourage them to do this by making them more aware of how they think," she says. Students in her recent class were given a mound of objects – from kitchen equipment through to staplers and hammers – and asked to sort it out, thinking about their category judgments as they did so.

If you want to know if you are operating creatively ask yourself; Are you caught up in a mundane way of living? Do you follow a predetermined routine in your day-to-day activities? Have you ever thought you can change the way things happen to you? If your answer to first two questions is yes, and a NO to the third one, you probably haven't tried to be creative.

What do you do when you feel thirsty? You probably go and drink water. Problem is, drinking water is not a very creative idea. When you feel thirsty, your brain decides for you that you need water. It's an automatic response that you instantly accept.

Now if you feel thirsty and think to yourself "*Hmm.. I drink water whenever I feel thirsty, let's try something new today*", you reject your brain's ready-made suggestion and switch to a creative mode of thinking. You weigh your options and decide that you'll get yourself a coke to quench your thirst. There. You just ditched a conventional way of thinking and went through a creative process of thinking to get yourself an alternative thirst-quencher. But beware. If you start taking coke every once in a while to satisfy your thirst, it too becomes an unoriginal idea again so you have to go back to the creative drawing board. How about you try another brand of soda that tastes differently or a fruit juice?

Then analyse which potential thirst-quencher was most effective and draw your conclusion and you've just completed the initial process that an advertising team goes through when coming up with a new ad campaign. And advertising was traditionally thought to be the major corporate creative outlet.

Was, but not any more. There is so much talk about creativity and innovation these days. A quick search on the internet reveals a growing industry of consultants and specialist companies seeking to make the workplace a more creative place. My whole life I have been called creative (at the expense of practical, realistic and down to earth, I might add).

I think I got the label because I have created shows on stage and produced things in my personal and business life that has been out of the ordinary. There is certainly a mystique about being labelled creative – as if creative people are a select few who are privy to thought processes others don't have. It's all too easy to think that others are creative and you are not, that creative people possess extra-ordinary mental qualities that transcend the normal way of thinking,

But if we accept Junginger's premise that everyone is potentially creative if they just learn to engage with their innovative and questioning sides and we acknowledge that creativity and innovation, in most cases, are simply the ability to look at traditional ideas from a different angle and come up with different solutions accordingly, or build upon unoriginal ideas to evolve original ones, then the answer to my colleague's question is quite simply – yes you can.

What we have to learn is how to firstly find and focus our creative side and apply it to innovative problem-solving, smarter solutions and progressive design ideas in every aspect of life and work, be it balancing the books or ballet dancing. It would certainly make a good title for a new self-help manual. 'Accountancy – the new art form' and would put a new twist on the dodgy old concept of creative book-keeping!

