

Everyday Creativity

We all marvel at other people's artistic achievements and ingenuity. But most of us fail to nurture our inner innovator. Start living creatively and reap the benefits—including fewer relationship headaches and more fulfilling workdays.

By Carlin Flora, published on November 01, 2009 - last reviewed on June 13, 2011

The tattoo artists throughout Russia's prison system have never had lessons in painting technique (nor, apparently, hygiene training). They don't have ink and tools at their disposal. And yet they create entire murals on one another's chests and backs: onion-domed cathedrals, intricate cobwebs, chilly grim reapers. And they're not just beautiful decorations—they are coded biographies, telling those in the know their bearer's history and affiliations.

One would be hard-pressed to find a tougher environment than the jails where these artists work. Their ink is made from soot shaved off their shoes and mixed with urine. It's injected via guitar strings attached to electric shavers. The tattoos are a brutal mafia ritual. But they're also a mark of determined resourcefulness and self-expression.

When we think of creativity, we think of Mozart, Picasso, Einstein—people with a seemingly fated convergence of talent and opportunity. It's too narrow a set of references, because the truth is that all sorts of people, possessing various levels of intelligence and natural ability, are capable of engaging in fulfilling creative processes. Just because you'll never be Brando or Balanchine doesn't mean that you can't harness your idea-generating powers and make your life your own masterpiece.

Some do so every day. Pete Herzog noticed that his three kids rarely drove the expensive battery-powered toy car he had bought them for Christmas because it was always out of juice. One afternoon he spotted a broken solar-powered garden lamp rolling around and took off its panels. He hooked them to the toy-car battery, using parts he melted off the lamp's circuit board. Now the car, left to bake in the sun all day, is always ready for joyrides.

Herzog is director of the Institute for Security and Open Methodologies, a nonprofit dedicated to researching how security works in all aspects of our lives. His job requires him to think like a top-notch computer hacker. So it's not surprising that he can solve nagging problems in his own backyard. But he doesn't think of himself as a creative person! Buying into a limited definition of creativity prevents many from appreciating their own potential.

That would be a shame in any era, but in today's economic environment, no one can afford not to innovate, whether it's doing more with a shrinking budget (household, corporate, you name it, it's contracting), or positioning oneself to join a new industry. You may have to be creative to survive right now.

The good news is that you can build up your innovative abilities in many ways—by doing things (noticing details in your midst, wearing your hair in a new style) that don't sound intimidatingly ingenious. You can simply get to know your personal problem-solving style—everybody shines at different stages of the process; understanding where you fit in gives you a big advantage. And perhaps most important is adjusting your overall attitude toward life—approach your experiences with an open mind and cultivate the belief that possibilities and solutions are always within reach, and you'll be equipped to handle any challenge with flair.

I: What Is "Everyday" Creativity?

"Every day, we use language to speak sentences that have never been spoken before. We express thoughts that have never been expressed. All of this is so deeply ingrained that we don't notice how creative it is," says cognitive scientist Art Markman, co-editor of the book *Tools for Innovation*.

The concept of everyday creativity was defined, assessed, and validated in 1988 by Ruth Richards, Dennis Kinney, and colleagues at Harvard Medical School. They defined it as expressions of originality and meaningfulness. Rebecca Whitlinger, the executive director of the Cancer Caring Center in Pittsburgh, tapped both areas when surveying her voluminous and seemingly useless collection of bridesmaid gowns, in all their gold lamé and satiny peach splendor. The clichéd promise "You'll definitely wear this again!" swelled into an evil chorus each time she opened her closet. She resolved not only to wear them again, but to wear them everywhere. Whitlinger enlisted friends to take snapshots of her wearing her maiden gowns to construction sites, to passport photo sessions, to the voting booth, and even on a parasailing expedition.

Then it occurred to Whitlinger to translate the shenanigans into a fund-raising event for Cancer Caring Center. At "Ushers Unlimited and Bridesmaids Revisited," guests were encouraged to wear an outfit (such as a bridesmaid dress) that they would ordinarily be unable to wear again. "A couple got married at the event, making it the World's Largest Wedding Party," she says. Novel? Check. Meaningful? Well, the fund-raiser grossed \$90,000 between 1998 and 2001.

"It's too bad that when considering what endeavors may be creative, people immediately think of the arts," laments

Michele Root-Bernstein, co-author with Robert Root-Bernstein of *Sparks of Genius*. "It's the problem-solving processes they exhibit rather than the content or craft that make them so. Just about anything we do can be addressed in a creative manner, from housecleaning to personal hobbies to work."

Imagine you wake up one morning and put on electric-green eye shadow instead of your usual beige tint. Then you call a friend and invite her on a spontaneous road trip to a city you've never visited. While there, you order dessert for lunch at the local diner. Then on the way home you tell a long, hilarious anecdote that makes your friend laugh for two minutes straight. Would you call such a day merely interesting, or an expression of your creative self?

Zorana Ivcevic, a postdoctoral fellow in psychology at Tufts University, is a scrupulous collector of everyday creativity. By quizzing college students about the frequency of hundreds of potentially creative acts from joke-telling to road-tripping, she was able to come up with a taxonomy of expressive behaviors anyone can easily try. Making wacky recipes and dyeing your hair an unusual color qualify, as does working on a scrapbook of memories for a friend or making oneself the center of attention.

While some students fit into more traditional creative slots, as amateur dancers or musicians, or serious scholars and budding scientists who had already contributed to professional fields in some way, many others expressed themselves through more routine acts. About 30 percent weren't creative by any standard, which marked them as "conventionals."

Ivcevic found that students who practiced forms of everyday creativity share, on average, certain personality traits with their "officially" artistic classmates—qualities lost on the conventionals. They share a tendency toward open-mindedness and curiosity, they are persistent, and they are positive, energetic, and intrinsically motivated by their chosen activities. Whether engaging in everyday creativity could foster such personality traits in the conventionals remains a question, but other studies show that taking up creative pursuits actually makes people more flexible and less judgmental.

Adaptability, in fact, is what Jennifer Schweikert considers the source of her own creativity. A Virginia-based interior "re-designer," Schweikert reinvents and reworks what a client already owns to make rooms functional and stylish. "I was a military brat and married a military man," she says. "I've moved 28 times in my life, so I have a tendency to accept what I'm given and to make it work."

When Schweikert encounters a new space, she quickly sizes up what needs to be done and then, in a serenity prayer of sorts to Ste. Martha Stewart, she determines what she can change and can't change about the space. Recently, at a temporary women's shelter apartment, the problem was a door with an uncovered window facing a common room, violating the tenant's privacy.

The most obvious solution—installing a curtain rod—was ruled out since she couldn't drill through the steel door. "I took a piece of Plexiglas, spray-painted it black, and cut it to the size of the window opening. Since it would be good for the residents to still be able to use the door window, I glued heavy-duty magnets to the four corners to make it removable," Schweikert says. The shelter's director reproduced her innovation in all of the building's apartments.

The first step to increasing your creativity quotient is believing you can. Even if no one has ever assigned the adjective "original" to anything you have ever done, you must acknowledge that you have inventive powers. Don't think about making something from nothing or exposing your deepest feelings—just acknowledge that you can solve problems better if you approach them with a different mind-set.

The Root-Bernsteins cite playful experimentation, a willingness to learn from mistakes, and persistence as keys to unlocking creativity. Laura Bergman, a mother who lives in rural Pennsylvania Amish country, began an odyssey by picking up discarded glass she found when out running errands. She felt compelled to collect the shards and didn't censor her dumpster-diving impulse. One day she spread her shards across the dining room table and was taken aback by their sparkling beauty. "This old glass is as pretty as any gem," she thought.

Bergman slowly taught herself how to cut, drill, and wrap glass. As she started to sell her pieces in town, she noticed that customers loved to hear the history behind the jewels, so she began including a "story of the glass" with each item. Eventually, she was able to leave her job of 15 years as an advertising manager to run a jewelry company.

When psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi studied eminent people, he found that they held almost contradictory impulses and qualities within: a desire for solitude but also a need for social stimulation; superior knowledge on a subject but also a childlike naïveté. These qualities seemed to fuel their ability to come up with great ideas and their ability to execute them—quite a combination. Exploring the less-prominent parts of your personality could activate the same yin-yang nature found in creative geniuses. If you're usually a busy bee, slow down and explore your lazy side. If you're very girly, dress like a tomboy.

Creativity coach Eric Maisel suggests that those who want to up their extracurricular creativity output figure out what really turns them on and cultivate the quality of creative desire. "You need to distinguish between interests and passion, because mere interest won't sustain you over the long haul," Maisel says. "People are convinced they need to become more disciplined, but when you are passionate, you don't need to cultivate discipline; it follows naturally."

Take the tiny town of Holguín, Cuba, where a hip-hop group dazzles audiences without the track-making and mixing software on which their American counterparts rely. Such programs are not commonly found on the island, and anyway an hour in a cybercafé costs as much as a month's worth of food. The group has devised a low-tech solution for creating melodic loops to rap over: They literally cut and paste together repeated sections of cassette tapes. The ultimate result is just as affecting and danceable to fans. The behind-the-scenes process is tedious, but for them, it's a small price to pay to do what they love.

II: Problem-Solving Styles

The real question isn't "How creative are you?" but rather "How are you creative?" Innovation is rarely a one-step deal; the trick is figuring out how you solve problems. That way, you can build on your strengths and team up with people who compensate for your weaknesses, says educational psychologist Donald Treffinger.

Brainstorming often launches the process, as does framing the dilemma at hand. We've all heard that there are no such things as bad ideas during initial brainstorming sessions. But during office meetings, barely-formed suggestions are often immediately shot down.

If you want to come up with truly original schemes, it's essential to separate idea generation from idea evaluation. Otherwise, you'll be too quick to dismiss seemingly implausible yet brilliant notions. Tina Seelig, executive director for the Stanford Technology Ventures Program and author of *What I Wish I Knew When I Was 20*, asks her students to come up with the best business idea they can muster and the most horrendous start-up idea imaginable. She then dramatically rips up the "good" ideas and redistributes the "losers" among the students, with instructions to turn them into viable proposals. One student's joke of a bikini shop located in Antarctica was morphed into a jet-set-friendly exercise camp called "Bikini or Die," designed to get clients in top form for the beach. A "cockroach sushi" pitch became an exotic restaurant featuring non-traditional foods: "La Cucaracha."

Find a Therapist

Stumped? Get out the eraser board: Visual thinking can yield more initial ideas than written lists, says Markman. "It's often easier to sketch relationships between concepts than to describe them. You can use arrows and boxes to say things that would be difficult to put into words." And since many different areas of the brain are involved in vision, sketching essentially calls in more brainpower to fuel your abstract-thinking abilities.

Treffinger and colleagues at the Center for Creative Learning provide an online test to help their clients in the nonprofit world figure out their personal problem-solving styles. "Explorers," in their framework, are great at coming up with completely novel ideas but not as good as "Developers" at executing and making them work. "Developers may have gotten the idea that they are not creative," Treffinger says—think engineers—"but both groups are equally creative."

Another style point turns on whether you are "Internal"—meaning you like to gather and think about information quietly, by yourself—or "External," drawing energy from talking and sharing ideas with others. The final dimension to Treffinger's test gets at what you emphasize when making creative decisions—harmony among people or the demands of a task. Those who conform to the "Person" style seek decisions that all involved can comfortably buy into, whereas "Task"-oriented people base their decisions on facts and what makes logical sense. Work groups made up exclusively of developers (detail-oriented craftsmen with no architect to give a big-picture plan) or explorers (a film director and set designer without a producer to tell them what's possible and within budget) would both be at risk for total dysfunction, which is why a balance of styles yields the best collaborations.

III: Start Innovating

Even if your heart is fully in it, you still need to get into the habit of creating. Creativity coach Maisel believes that your waking hours are best since they enable you to apply your "sleep thinking" to glitches in your haiku-writing, furniture-designing, or quilting. (Studies confirm that "sleeping on it" indeed allows for stellar solutions to make their way to the forefront of your mind.) Furthermore, Maisel sees carving out morning time for a creative pursuit as a way to infuse the rest of your day with existential meaning. The boost you get from your 7 a.m. compositional breakthrough could propel you through a rote desk job.

If you take up a creative project you may soon fall prey to what Maisel calls unfriendly self-talk: "I'm not talented," or "Why should I bother with this—there is too much competition out there." First, listen to what you're saying to yourself, then dispute the utterances that don't serve you. Lastly, substitute more affirmative statements and get back to work.

The most important thing anyone can do to improve creativity is to find unsolved dilemmas to address, says Robert Root-Bernstein. He suggests starting today at work: Why not force yourself to come up with 10 ways for your office manager to save money, or take what your team is good at and think of 10 new ways to turn those skills into a new service you could sell.

We spend so much mental energy either avoiding or unproductively mulling over problems that the idea of chasing and embracing them seems strange, and yet it is a hallmark of the creative orientation to life. Seelig warms up her students by telling them to solve a problem they have with an object already in their homes. Last semester a young woman faced the headache of a looming moving date and no way to haul her boxes to her new digs. She sifted through her half-packed possessions and found an unopened case of wine, left over from a party. She put an ad on Craigslist—"Case of wine in exchange for a ride with my stuff across the Bay"—and quickly secured a willing man-with-van.

Just because a solution is orthodox doesn't mean it's not excellent. Take one of the winning teams in Seelig's challenge to earn cash over a weekend with just \$5 of seed money: The students were told to make as much as they could and to report back to the class on Monday in a quick presentation. A sharp observation of their college town yielded one team's plan to make reservations at popular restaurants and later sell them to hungry parties waiting in lines. The enterprise raked in \$200. (And it's perfectly legal.)

One team generated much more—\$650—by turning the problem inside out. "Their insight was that their most precious resource was their three-minute presentation time on Monday," Seelig reports. "They decided to sell it to a company that wanted to recruit the students in the class. The team created a three-minute 'commercial' for the company and showed it to the rest of the students during their allotted three minutes. They recognized that they had a fabulously valuable asset just waiting to be mined."

IV: More Benefits of Creativity

Stumbling upon a way to eliminate a nagging concern or pushing your abilities to new heights is wonderful for its own sake. But living life imaginatively comes with additional benefits—and can even enhance your most important relationships.

"Personal problems usually result from people having mismatched expectations of each other," says Robert Root-Bernstein. "Imagine yourself in the shoes of the person with whom you are having problems. Try to imagine why they respond to you the way they do. Look for patterns of behavior that solve or avoid the problem you are having. Playact the new behaviors in your mind, and try to select the best ones." The attitude shift alone, from "Oh God, we're fighting about this again?" to "What's a new way to handle this argument that keeps being replayed?," is in itself calming and therapeutic.

Parenting can be the ultimate opportunity for exercising creativity. When Seelig's son was 15 years old, the avid athlete asked for an expensive bicycle. She was reluctant to shell out the cash and could have just said no. Or she could have said yes and then felt resentful about the purchase. Instead, she asked him to come up with a creative solution: "What do you think you could do for me to make this worthwhile?" she asked. He countered with an offer to do laundry and cook dinner three times a week for the rest of the year. They both felt very satisfied with the innovative arrangement.

The hectic routines facing parents of little children can sap any desire to do extra work. But Gretchen Rubin, author of the forthcoming *The Happiness Project*, found that if she went to the trouble of getting up early on holidays, dying her children's food (black on Halloween, red on Valentine's Day), and spreading treats and decorations on the table, the girls' delighted reactions to their novel breakfasts actually energized her.

Ruth Richards, one of the researchers who coined the term "everyday creativity" and a psychology professor at Saybrook University and Harvard Medical School, has uncovered even more reasons to start innovating. Expressive writing has been shown to improve immune system functioning, for example, and older people who think more innovatively tend to cope better with aging and illness. Engaging in creative behaviors, Richards argues, makes us more dynamic, conscious, non-defensive, observant, collaborative, and brave.

Creativity provides opportunities for self-actualization. "It makes you more resilient, more vividly in the moment, and, at the same time, more connected to the world," Richards says.

Ivcevic's study supports Richards's idea: Students who were engaged in everyday creativity had a greater sense of well-being and personal growth than non-creative classmates.

One day last year, in another constrained prison environment, the Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center in

the Philippines, Warden Byron Garcia noticed a horde of orange-uniformed prisoners clustering in the yard and found the bright waves of colorful forms in motion intriguing. Since he wanted to start an hour-long exercise program anyway, he began leading the inmates, many of whom are accused of committing violent crimes, in group dance numbers set to disco and pop classics. The inmates' interpretation of Michael Jackson's Thriller leapt over the barbed wire and spread throughout the world via YouTube.

After Jackson's death last July, 1,500 inmates rehearsed a routine to the song "Dangerous" for nine straight hours, delivering exactly the kind of tribute that fans wanted—a sincere expression of joy and freedom. It didn't get them out of jail, but it got them somewhere.

One Bright Day

Here are some tested tips for injecting powers of innovation into your routine.

Wake 'n' Write:

Creativity guru Julia Cameron swears by free writing (no self-censoring) until you fill three pages. Get intrusive worries out and productive ideas flowing.

Relationship Shake-Up:

Practice creative loving: If your partner annoys or upsets you, react the opposite way you usually do. You might be pleasantly surprised with the result.

Disrupt the Daily Grind:

Jolt your brain out of automatic pilot by taking a new route to work.

Don't Compete, Collaborate:

Team up with a coworker who has complementary skills: If you're a detail-oriented person, find a big-picture partner, or vice versa.

Daydream in Long Distance:

Psychologically distant thoughts spur creativity. Think about designing a new product in Bali and your perceptual abilities will soar.

Search for Inspiration:

Go to a museum or sit for a few minutes in a beautiful building or park on your lunch break. Try to notice all of the aesthetically pleasing details surrounding you.

Get Ahead:

Start tackling big projects now. Procrastination does not fuel creativity, despite what procrastinators tell themselves.

Hit a Blue Note:

Decorate your cubicle or home office in blue, since a study showed that blue surroundings boost creativity.

Be an Aficionado:

Creative people often have hobbies, and those who play musical instruments are better at associative thinking. So dust off your old guitar or stamp collection.

Sleep on It:

Think about a thorny problem before you go to bed. REM enhances creative problem-solving and may even deliver the answer to you at dawn.