

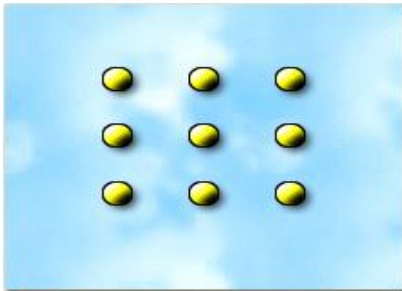


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## Connecting the Dots of Creativity

By Bo Charles Abiodun



The familiar mindbender to the left challenges one to connect all the dots using four lines without ever raising the pencil from the paper. To accomplish this task, it takes a modest amount of creativity. There is also a more subtle parallel lesson in the same challenge. Connecting these dots to get the desired results is like traveling the path of encouraging creativity in

others. Let me explain. As a leader of creativity, one has to refrain from keeping people in a box (4 lines). Leaders also have to know how to touch each individual in a specific way to stimulate the desired results (3 lines). This is the essence of leading creativity. Unfortunately for some leaders and their organizations, they lose sight of this essence, and do more harm than good when it comes to fostering creativity. For instance, Trudy DiLiello and Jeffery Houghton in their Creativity and Innovation Management article, *Creative Potential and Practised Creativity*, identify leadership and organizations that restrict choices and discourage risk taking amongst other things can hinder creativity.<sup>i</sup>

### Organizational Leaders

Leaders can restrict choices that end up stifling creativity, when demonstrating a resistance to change, a failure to take risks, and by an attitude of instilling fear. These attributes often have roots that trace back to the leader's intrinsic shortcomings. According to Michalko, "Nothing is more harmful to a positive, creative attitude than fears, uncertainties, and doubts, also known as FUDS; yet most people let FUDS control their lives."<sup>ii</sup> Unfortunately, when organizational leaders project personal struggles onto their organization, they are not only harming themselves, but also those around them. For creativity in leaders and others around them to occur, leaders must

get beyond those basic obstacles. Now that we are aware of three organizational leadership barriers to creativity: resistance to change, a failure to take risks, and by an attitude of instilling fear, here are a few simple suggestions to remove those barriers in order to leverage innovation and drive organizational success:

1. *Resistance to change.* Getting past resistance to change takes courage in order to accommodate new outlooks. Accommodation is the ability to accept new inputs rather than suppressing them. In that regard, leaders that embrace divergent thinking spawn creativity.<sup>iii</sup> Participating in the creative process by gaining knowledge about new discoveries is one way for leaders to move forward in both their thinking and their actions. When leaders are engaged in forward-thinking, they are more inclined to adopt changes. To this end, leaders must accept environments of constant organizational renewal and that means facing change by participating in the origin of change found in creativity.

2. *Failure to take risks.* Once in the flowing current of creativity, leaders also need to learn to take risks and prepare for failure that often follows. Leaders should take note that the domain of risk is where new ideas and competitive advantage resides. Taking risk involves creating an environment that embraces promising discoveries that fail rather than ignoring or abandoning them. According to Todd Dewitt in his *European Journal of Innovative Management* article, *Employee Creativity and the Role of Risk*, he stresses how in certain instances, employee creative efforts lies in the positive judgment of relevant others like supervisors and leaders during failure that comes with risk. For example, at Hershey Foods rather than ignore failure, they celebrate failure as a good try on the road to success.<sup>iv</sup> Under those conditions, Hershey Foods thrives in harnessing creativity that leads to their successes. In short, leaders need to change their outlook of failure. Courage is the attribute to just that.

3. *Instilling fear.* While directing the flowing current in the mist of creativity, leaders should avoid instilling a fear of failure in those around them. Fear of failure is one of the biggest barriers that can block creativity. In fact, fear paralyzes creativity.<sup>v</sup> Way too often, leaders go on needless tirades during the quest for creativity and innovation. They create atmospheres of intimidation with words like, “what were you thinking”, “I guess that’s coming out of your pay”, or “you’re well on your way to the unemployment line.” The use of these phrases is not the way to garnish inspiration for creativity. As a matter of fact, phrases like these not only harm the individual that is the direct target of a leader’s wrath, but they also send a clear message to those who are

witnesses. Even worse, the message spreads throughout the organization that there is no room for failure. This kills the creativity and innovation within an organization. Thus, it kills the aim of dozens of formal messages on creativity and innovation at director's call and staff meetings with one swift stroke of informal scolding. The Bible provides teachings on the power that we, as individuals, have to generate creativity or destroy it with our words. Thus, leaders should always be mindful of the words they speak. Up to this point, understand a key theme that an important aspect for leadership improvement is their ability to properly handle work conditions along the journey of creativity.

### The Rewards System within an Organizational Design

While leadership within an organization can pose hindrances and barriers to creativity, another potential obstacle within an organization could be its organizational design. When the rewards system in an organizational design is based on conformity and the status quo, complacency settles in. Mayfield argues against faulty politics and other design policies that reward non-creativity.<sup>vi</sup> Williams adds on, when he exposes that antiquated things brought from history such as a latent rewards system and structures can be blocks that hinder creativity.<sup>vii</sup> Finally, DiLiello and Houghton wrote that misaligned extrinsic motivators, which reward rote behavior "restrict creative performance by undermining intrinsic motivation".<sup>viii</sup> Since innovation is a continuous journey, not a destination, the rewards system must progress along as well, providing appropriate incentives for creativity.

To cultivate creativity, wise organizations must refine informal and formal rewards system, providing incentives for individuals who acquire new skills and competencies in lieu of tenure. These measures can build capacity for creativity rather than complacency. Symbolic rewards for conforming are a mechanism to get others on board. When taken along with personal recognition for constructive behavior, it can make all the difference. With newfound competencies, organizations can give life to creativity and close performance gaps. In fact, organizational creativity can take on a life of its own. When an organization has a creative spirit there are no insurmountable limitations.

The clear message at this point is that when leaders and the organizational design unleash people's natural creativity, the fresh ideas will flow. With that said, it is an understatement to say there is significant impact that leaders and organizational designs can have on creativity. Simply

put, competitive forces outside the walls of an organization are difficult enough challenges; as leaders and an organization's design should not pose threats to creativity. The leader and the organizational design should work in such a manner that instances of creativity and innovation are increased, thus increasing the organization's overall success.

#### New Face of Creativity: Vehicle Rentals

The vehicle rental industry is a fine example of how organizations can benefit from creativity. For years, the vehicle rental industry worked off a false face premise that they brought the vehicle up to the client outside the rental counter. Today, in order to increase throughput and reduce labor costs, they have clients walk out to their rented vehicles. In fact, in certain instances, they sell a new face by telling the client that they now get to pick their own specific vehicle out of the ones available in a particular category. Now, the industry could have further submerged themselves in the 'weight of the history' by continuing to add more labor and operating costs, which would transfer more cost to the customer. In these economic times, they would have doomed themselves. But someone's creativity reversed longstanding assumptions and found a new face for vehicle rentals. This success reaps the benefits of an environment of creativity, which was absent of resistance to change and failure to take risks.

The vehicle rental industry clearly illustrates the importance of organizational creativity. Beyond that example, others can reap the benefits of more efficient operations, new revenue streams, and a more competitive business. Building the capacity to take advantage of opportunities like those, after removing barriers of creativity, takes the courageous leaders, supporting the following 6 steps:<sup>ix</sup>

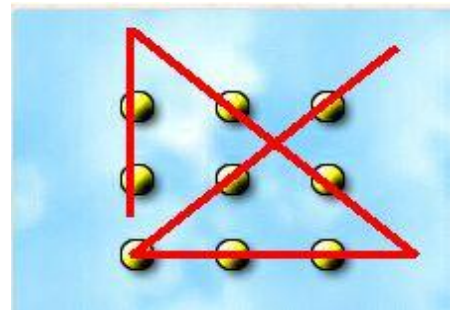
1. State your challenge
2. List all your assumptions
3. Challenge fundamental assumptions
4. Reverse each assumption
5. Record differing view points
6. Ask yourself how to accomplish each reversal

Taking the suggested steps can help leaders and their organizations use their untapped creative resources, once they get past the tyranny that misguided leadership and misaligned

organizational design can bring. More specifically, the 6 step brainstorming technique can squeeze out valuable ideas of creativity, when permitted to challenge assumptions and think outside the box. Taking that chance at creativity to heart, leaders and organizations should not put their workforce creativity in an imaginary box because of resistance to change, failure to take risks, and instilling fear. This should be coupled with a rewards systems based on conformity and maintaining the status quo.

## Conclusion

The dot connecting solutions of creativity can appear elusive. Similarly, the path to workforce creativity is a seemingly elusive mind-bending element that many an organization strives to grasp.



Going forward, leaders need to remove resistance to change, failure to take risks, and instilling fear that are certain barriers, which can stifle creativity. After that, leaders need to spend time adding fresh nutrients of creativity like the 6 step brainstorming technique for new ideas to grow. Spending time working on those suggestions can improve a leader and its organization's chances to help connect the dots of creativity and reap its benefits.

### **About the author:**

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<sup>i</sup> DiLiello, T & Houghton, J. (2008). Creative potential and practised creativity: Identifying untapped creativity in organizations. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 17, 1, 37-36

<sup>ii</sup> Michalko, M. (2006). *Thinkertoys: A handbook of creative-thinking techniques* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press., 3

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- <sup>iv</sup> Tushman, M., & O'Reilly, C. (2002). *Winning through innovation: A practical guide to leading organizational change and renewal*. Boston: Harvard University School Press.
- <sup>v</sup> Tushman, M., & O'Reilly, C. (2002). *Winning through innovation: A practical guide to leading organizational change and renewal*. Boston: Harvard University School Press.
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- <sup>viii</sup> DiLiello, T & Houghton, J. (2008). Creative potential and practised creativity: Identifying untapped creativity in organizations. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 17, 1, 37-36, p. 38
- <sup>ix</sup> Michalko, M. (2006). *Thinkertoys: A handbook of creative-thinking techniques* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press., p. 48