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The idea of creativity, the creativity behind an idea

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When creativity expert, Fredrik Hären, asked his seminar audience how many thought creativity was important to their work, almost the entire room raised their hands. Next, when asked how many think that they are creative, only a few did.

For Hären, author of "[The Idea Book \(http://www.amazon.com/Idea-Book-Fredrik-Haren/dp/9197547034/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1264644882&sr=8-1\)](http://www.amazon.com/Idea-Book-Fredrik-Haren/dp/9197547034/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1264644882&sr=8-1)" and founder of [the Interesting Organisation \(http://www.interesting.org/\)](http://www.interesting.org/), this is not a surprising response. He has asked these questions at hundreds of seminars in some 30 countries – and the results have been quite similar. Generally, 98% of respondents believe that creativity is important to their work, 45% think of themselves as being creative, while only 2% feel that their organisation is doing enough to help them be creative. He revealed this at a recent [Social Conversation \(http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg/prog_091203.asp\)](http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg/prog_091203.asp), organised by SMU's [Lien Centre for Social Innovation \(http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg/\)](http://www.lcsi.smu.edu.sg/).

The country that comes out tops in self-perceived notions of creativity is Iceland, where almost everyone will unequivocally raise their hands when asked if they thought they were creative. The Icelanders are followed by the Americans and the Italians. In contrast, respondents from Asian countries tend to indicate low confidence in their creativity. China was the exception – an average of four out of five respondents raised their hands.

There were some eyebrow-raising twists in the poll results. For example, one would have thought that with their constant pipeline of high-technology electronics goods, South Koreans, a fiercely patriotic group, would have rated themselves high. No one raised their hands, said Hären. His explanation: "The Koreans think they're not creative compared to Leonardo da Vinci while the Americans think they are creative compared to their brothers!"

What makes an idea?

The concepts of "creativity" and an "idea" go hand-in-hand. According to Hären, an idea is "what happens when a person takes two known things and then combines them in a totally new way". For example, if one takes the concept of a ship and that of a parachute, one could get parasailing. Similarly, photography and velcro are products of "one plus one equals more than two" – resultant of combining separate, previously known elements.

"It shows that creativity is not brand new. There has never been a brand new idea or a person in history that has invented something brand new. Everything is just building on a previously existing thing," he emphasised.

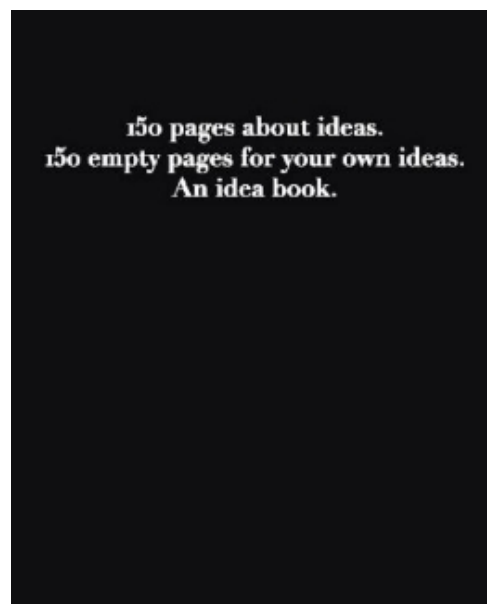
Hären breaks it down to the following equation: $\text{idea} = p(k+i)$ where p is the person, k is knowledge, and i refers to new information. "The ability to combine knowledge and information in a new way is important. Just because you have knowledge and information does not mean you are a creative person. But it is also impossible to be a creative person without knowledge and information."

The increasing importance of creativity

Why is creativity becoming more important? With the increase in population and education, as well as accessibility to the internet, the number of people with knowledge has expanded. But the rate of what Hären terms as an "idea perception" may not be increasing correspondingly.

An "idea perception" refers to the ability to spot the revolutionary, to understand what it means, to understand the need to do something, and then being a part of change. Take the example of the global financial crisis. While many investors realised the widespread implication of the crisis, few sold their stocks fast enough. This is due to a lack of "idea perception" said Hären. Many hung on to their stocks and then sold when they could not bear the losses anymore.

In another example of a different context, consider the widespread prevalence of the internet and the well



established car industry. "After 50 years of the internet, how much of its (influence) do you see in a brand new car? Zero!"

Also, a creative idea without real-life applicability is but an idea. Hårén said he had spoken with the research and development head of the world's largest paint corporation and they told him that they had invented an unusual kind of paint whose actual colour was not the same as its visual colour. While this might be seen as a technological achievement, no one could come up with a "killer application" for such an invention.

"There is only one way to use anything new, and it is with creativity and imagination. So in a world that is changing quickly, the value of having imagination and creativity, so that we can figure out how to use these things goes up," he concluded.

Where did our creativity go?

Creativity does not come overnight. Showing how difficult it was for an individual to think beyond the common, Hårén asked his audience to use their imaginations to come up with a list of ten impossible things that they wish to have. When he compared the answers to his own list of ten things, most of the responses were, as he predicted, similar – the 'the ability to be invisible', 'the ability to fly', etc – perhaps like "model answers" to the question. "There are one billion things we could have used our imagination to say and we don't even have ten unique answers!"

Pre-schoolers, on the other hand, answered differently. They wanted to be able to touch love, to lift a bus without breaking a finger, to see with their fingers, etc. This, to Hårén, is proof that we are born to think creatively, but we lose our creativity along the way as we conform to norms, expectations and institutions. "We're animals of habits, gaps and comfort zones. When we do things differently, someone comes and tells us that we're doing it wrong and we stop doing it," he said.

No right or wrong

Think back to the early 20th century versions of the car – it was essentially a horse-drawn carriage but without the horse. That was how cars were imagined back then. It may look ridiculous today, but at the time, it was held in wonder and awe. Will things that we may worship as inventive or revolutionary today just as easily be ridiculed 50 years down the road?


Hårén noted that modern-day car companies almost always recruit, exclusively, from within their own industry. This lack of diversity in the industry is problematic. In seminars that he conducts for car companies, he finds that executives tend to be unable to think outside the confines of their industry. As a result, they become, over time, very predictable in the way they operate. This is why, Hårén said, that even though the business environment has changed dramatically, the car industry has remained static, in terms of innovation and growth.


"We give our people a lot of knowledge and training, but how much are we focusing on the people?" For an organisation to have a creative environment there is a need to recruit the most creative people. But to attract creative types, organisations need to cast themselves in a different light. The most successful ones to have done so are companies like Apple and Google. "Ask anyone which are the world's most creative and innovative companies, and regardless of the countries I speak in, Apple and Google always come up," said Hårén.

Creativity tests can also be used in the recruitment process to assess candidates on their ability to think outside the box. There should be no right or wrong answers to these questions. The point is to see how they think and react. The American air force, for example, asked the question, "What can you use a brick for?", in their recruitment test back in the 1950s. This was due to the realisation that in World War II, the smartest pilots that were recruited based on academic grades were usually the ones who would perish in their missions.

Since ideas are formed from already known elements, the way to creativity may be just a matter of "copying right", said Hårén. But there are many ways to nurture creative thinking. "I've met thousands of creative people. Some have to be with other people to brainstorm. Most prefer to be alone. I believe the way to teach creativity is to give a few examples and let each individual choose. Some people like to think big then make it realistic. Japanese like to do small improvements all the time. Indonesian innovations tend to follow how nature does things, what the Western world terms as 'bio-mimicking'. There is no one particular technique." So, in other words, go forth, be unconstrained, and, as they say, let the creative juices flow.

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