

## You can be a more creative professional, CEO and manager

Published in Expert magazine (USA)  
January 9 2003 ([www.expertmagazine.com](http://www.expertmagazine.com))

It is said that creativity, expertise and leadership are a great team. Yet, working in a creative industry, I have heard so many in senior management positions say; "I just can't be creative". My view is that creativity can be learned, it is not a gift from the gods (for most of us). The best place to learn is from the creative departments of advertising agencies. I've employed or contracted many creative teams and have learned many leadership lessons from "the tricks of the creative professionals". For the successful professional, manager or Chief Executive, being creative represents both their greatest opportunity and hardest challenge. Many need to change their preconditioned thinking about creativity.

For a start, I know for certain that becoming creative is not necessarily about become another Einstein or Picasso. Many quite average and ordinary people have found their creative side. If you lock into your own creative juices, you will become a better leader. You'll also be more fun, more interesting, happier and more of a contributor. Overall, that makes you a better communicator.

Creativity can be as simple as new ways for old situations. For example, at home, your creativity might produce a new way for the family to have fun together, or a new approach for the sporting club. On the board or with management, you might get new energy by changing meeting formats, or seeking to solve old problems in new ways.

Here are some quick creativity tips from my observation of the professional creative teams:

### Re-build an open mind

When we were kids everything was new and we had an open way of looking at things. It's worth trying to get this back now that you are in leadership. As you become more open and more creative, your leadership persona will develop.

### Don't censor yourself

One of my colleagues would be the one to say "I know this is a dumb question, but..." and then he'd ask the very question that was on everyone's mind. We don't ask these dumb questions because our mind acts as a censor. It says "you should know" or "they will laugh at you". Just because you are in a leadership role, this does not mean you know everything. Importantly, you are not expected to know everything, so you'll lead better by being the first to say; "I don't know".

### Move on from mistakes

I watched a creative team of art director and copywriter working on an advertising campaign. Some of their words or ideas were clearly ridiculous. As they talked, one or the other would come up with a lousy line or a weak joke. They just

moved on. They did not keep reminding each other of the pathetic effort. They did not fear mistakes; nor should you as a leader.

### Keep active, be involved

Creativity needs feeding, and the best food is the wonderful diversity of human life. If all you do is work and attend board meetings, you will become dull. To keep your creative energies growing, get out of the chair. See a movie. If you must watch TV, watch something you would normally reject. You don't have to sit glued to the business news or current affairs. Buy a different magazine. Don't keep closing more and more doors on the outside world; start to smash some of them open. That's a big step towards real leadership.

### Leave things alone

Sometimes you need to get up from the boardroom table, walk away and not come back to the issue for a while. "Let's sleep on that" can be good advice, and it takes a leader to know when to say it.

### Act on the idea

Once creativity arises, you have to put it to work. Pass it on, write it down, take the action, share the idea with friends or colleagues or take any action that commits the creativity to memory. One of the big differences between real leaders and the rest is the courage to put ideas into action.

To get ahead in leadership today, you need more than technical or professional skills. You need to be more than a well-read lawyer or accountant, more than an MBA, and more than a management expert – you also need creative communication, the ability to get the message across. Even in sports, the most successful sporting figures are also good, highly trained, communicators. It is also vital for those who want to get more out of community involvement. A good communication skills course could give you a competitive edge, and it is never too late to start.

The beauty about learning good communication is that you win in both ways – you'll be more likely to be a leader and you will be happier. So, how long since you chose a communication course? It's your move.

One thing that could hold you back here is that many of us have created a "mirage" in our minds about what creativity and successful communication is. Because communication plays such a pivotal role in successful leadership, it is important that directors see through these mirages and move forward.

**Mirage number one** is that communication and creativity is for the stars. "He or she is a born communicator", we tell ourselves. We, on the other hand, (we tell ourselves) are not stars. This is negative and false. Everyone can communicate. Everyone has ideas. Everyone can use communication to improve inter-personal relationships, and

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many of your colleagues are not looking for entertainment-style communication, but want a real and easily understood transfer of information. Most of the people we admire as good communicators have actually been through some form of training. If they have learned the art of communication, why can't you?

**Mirage number two** is that communication is all about instant results. This mirage says that since my own communication does not give me the power to get what I want, it must have failed. In reality, all communication produces results. Something will happen when we communicate. What is important is how you communicate, how you behave, how positive are your thoughts for others and so on. For directors, rather than impressing colleagues with your wit or entertaining them with humour, the key is to get a complex message across in simple language. Also remember that the greatest results from communication are the "intangibles" such as friendship, respect, intimacy and involvement.

**Mirage number three** is that any new communication approach is better than the old one. This becomes "creativity for its own sake". To move from a failure to a success, according to this mirage, we need a totally new communication approach. This view suggests out with the old, in with the new. In this ruthless quest for success, we can erode friendships, reduce trust and

create an atmosphere of tension and competition. Improved communication is a gradual process. Take one step at a time on the path to better communication.

**Mirage number four** is that to communicate well you must conform. This is the "yes" man syndrome, and kills creativity. We know that corporations where people are just clones do not go too far, and it is the same at a personal level. Be yourself. Differences are exciting; they make us strong as groups. From an individual perspective, these differences can become their strongest rationale for choosing you as Chief Executive.

We are living in a time that is uncertain yet creative. Leaders need to think about the wonderful opportunities ahead. Knowledge is exploding. We can talk to anybody, anywhere and anytime. Even corporations are looking for friends and partners. Nothing is impossible. A sense of creativity will make this century great. The human spirit can make it different. To develop as a leader, get out of your seats. Talk to someone. Talk to employees you've hardly even met. Talk to your family. Communicate. The future awaits: what are you going to do?

**By Stephen Manallack**

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"You Can Communicate", Pearson 2002