

Creativity by Choice, Not by Chance: Developing Imagination in the Intelligence Community

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The 9/11 Commission Report declared that it is “crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination.” And so, this month, Congress called hearings to discuss the intelligence community’s “failure of imagination” and the “requirement for imagination and creativity” going forward.

As the head of an education foundation that advocates the value of applied imagination, I was pleased to see this focus in the House of Representatives Committee on Intelligence hearings. Unfortunately, it took the 9/11 attacks to raise a serious national conversation about the importance of imagination. It’s a well-overdue conversation and one that should continue.

Contrary to some of the testimony on August 4, imagination and judgment are not mutually exclusive. Mr. Mark Lowenthal, assistant director of central intelligence, said that intelligence requires discipline, not “simply flights of fantasy.” In fact, both are necessary for effective and productive creative problem solving. Creative thinking does not mean an absence of judgment. Rather it requires a disciplined and dynamic flow between imaginative generation of ideas, solutions and actions – and critical evaluation in each of those phases.

Developing one’s creativity and imagination is not an untested area. And it is not simply the realm of artists, Hollywood-types and geniuses as was often implied in the Congressional testimony.

Following World War II, multidisciplinary researchers and practitioners began developing ways for stimulating creative behavior and applying imagination in industry, education and psychology. Three leaders in this endeavor include one of the

founding principals of BBDO, Alex Osborn. In the late 1940s, he began articulating creativity as something that can be nurtured and developed for producing more innovative outcomes. In 1950, as president of the American Psychological Association, J. P. Guilford addressed his colleagues about the lack of research in creativity, thus launching the formal academic study of creativity. Following that period, educator E. Paul Torrance began exploring at the University of Minnesota how to deliberately develop creative talent in children and adults.

Creativity is present and available in all persons. How that creativity is expressed varies widely, depending on the individual. We all can become trapped by “functional fixedness,” which blocks our ability to take risks, think outside of the box and ask new questions. We all get stuck in our “habits of thought.” But nearly everyone can learn to tap into more of their imagination to deliberately apply creativity to real-world problems.

Creativity and imagination are not simply the domain of the Good Guys. Creativity can be used for good or for evil, which is why there is a strong element of ethics about creative thinking. Many have argued that the Nazi’s campaign was a masterful example of creative thinking. And it was. Al Qaeda has been extremely innovative in how they organize, plan and execute their terror. We simply cannot afford to be unimaginative.

This is why people must deliberately learn how to imagine what might be, define the right problem, generate solutions, create solid action steps for implementing those solutions, and evaluate results. Each of these phases are a fluid dance between imaginative, divergent thinking – to generate many

problems, many solutions and many actions – and analytical, convergent thinking – to evaluate the problems, solutions and actions.

Divergent and convergent thinking should not happen concurrently, as they so often do when groups attempt creative thinking and problem solving. This is like stepping on the gas and the brake in the car at the same time – you use a lot of gas, but go nowhere. Rather, these two types of thinking should be separated by deferring one's judgment so that the generative thinking happens first – and then the judgment and evaluation follows.

Creative breakthroughs can and do happen by chance. But if this kind of thinking is taught, creative outcomes can happen by choice – not only in fighting terrorism, but for developing a country that deliberately chooses to think creatively personally, professionally and globally. Doing so will produce innovative ideas for new products and industries, will build stronger and inclusive communities, will engage people in meaningful work, and will educate children in a life-long skill that can be applied to any endeavor.

How can creativity and imagination specifically be applied to improving the intelligence community? They can have better outcomes if they apply a solid process for imaginative thinking in the right culture with the right people and leadership. Creativity can be taught, nurtured and applied by focusing on creative development in these areas:

- **People:** Teach creative thinking skills and behaviors that encourage divergent thinking, convergent thinking and deferral of judgment. Encourage attitudes of curiosity, risk-taking, tolerance for ambiguity and openness.
- **Processes:** Teach a complete process for creative problem solving – not one that only endorses either brainstorming or analytical thinking. Instead, one that applies both imagination and judgment consistently throughout the process of problem finding, idea finding and solution finding.

- **Culture:** Creative leadership within the intelligence community can set a culture for encouraging imagination. Those leaders need to personally possess attitudes that encourage creative thinking and allow for creative problem solving. They also need to create the conditions that motivate others to do the same.
- **Outcomes:** The results of people applying creative thinking skills and processes will lead to innovative solutions – including imagining the way that terrorists might strike next, integrating diverse intelligence across agencies or managing the individual intelligence workers.

In 1977, creativity researcher Sidney Parnes said that “research has shown that all of us can learn to better understand and appreciate our own creative potential, as well as to nurture it more fully in individuals and groups for whom we have responsibility. This is the exciting challenge of our age – to help more and more people in our society to achieve the ‘delicate balance’ of productive creativity.”

This is still our challenge – not just for fighting terrorism but for engaging people in meaningful activity so that they can contribute their creative thinking and efforts to making the world a better place.

Dahlberg's work focuses on applying creativity to improve the well-being of individuals, organizations and communities.

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By Christopher Farrell, Contributing Economics Editor, BusinessWeek