

# HOW TO LEAD YOUR **CREATIVE** PEOPLE

**Why that's important and what to do about it**

**By Nigel Collin - Leading Creatives**

# Being Creative is Sexy



Being creative is sexy. Everybody is talking about it and everybody is doing it. Being creative is the new black.

And in business, being creative is even sexier. Why? Because being creative drives business. It adds real value to a business. Value to its people, value to its customers, and value to its bottom line.

Log onto any business website, such as Business Week or Harvard Business Review, search for 'creativity', and you'll find a plethora of articles. In his book *Flight of the Creative Class*<sup>[1]</sup>, Richard Florida points out that in the US alone, workers in the creative sector make up 30% of the workforce and earn nearly 50% of the money. Being creative is not some whimsical, intangible thing – it's a major business tool.

Intrinsically, we all understand this.

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[1] *The Flight of the Creative Class*. Richard Florida. Collins 2007. p29.

# The Creativity Gap

But there is a problem – because there is a gap. There's a gap between the value an organization places on being creative and its ability to tap into its creative resources to fully use the talents of its creative people.

How do we know this? Because we asked. Recently, we conducted a survey of both business leaders and creative people<sup>[2]</sup>. One of the questions we asked was, 'In business, should creativity have a commercial value?' Pretty straightforward and, as you would expect, most people answered yes – 90%, in fact. Not surprising, when you think about it. In the commercial world, creativity just isn't that useful unless it leads to a positive business outcome.

BUT... the surprise was the result from another fairly straightforward question: 'Do you fully utilize the talents of your creative people?' Only 17% of people answered yes!

I don't know about you, but that rings alarm bells for me.

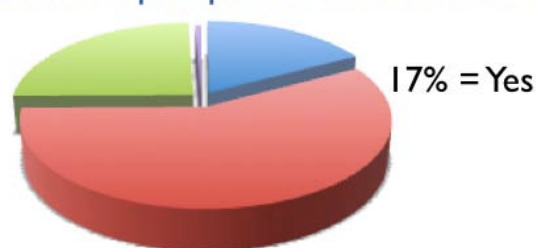
On the one hand, business emphatically understands the need for creativity to be commercially valuable – yet 83% don't make full use of their creative people's abilities and wisdom to achieve this. What's even more amazing is that they know they don't!

It's like building a bridge across a canyon to get a heap of stuff to the other side, but only using 17% of that bridge's capacity. You'd have to limit how much you carry across or do multiple trips. Either way, it's inefficient: you're not making full use of a very useful bridge. You wouldn't utilize only 17% of the bridge's capacity, so why use only 17% of your organization's creative capacity?

In business, should creativity have commercial value?



Do you utilise the talents of your creative people to the fullest?



<sup>[2]</sup> The survey had 182 respondents from a variety of creative industries, comprising both business leaders and creative people

# The Challenge



The answer lies in the challenge that faces organizations in regards to creativity. The challenge is not actually to find creative people and it's not to teach your people how to be more creative. The real challenge facing creative organizations is knowing how to *lead* your creative people and your innovative thinkers. It is knowing how to tap into their talents, harness their genius, and direct it towards viable business outcomes.

Hollywood is a great example of this. Why? Because Hollywood is all about the business of creativity. It taps into the potential of very creative and very

clever people, it lets them do their thing, but it directs and funnels that potential to become commercially successful. When we think of Hollywood, we often think of the actors, directors, writers, set designers – all of whom are immensely creative. But we also need to focus on the producer. Their role is to bring the creative talents of those people together, let them do what they do best, but then steer it and direct it so that the film pays dividends.

Like it or not, Hollywood is about making money from creative people. And that's not a bad thing: it allows many talented people to do what they love doing. Sure, you can train up your actors, directors, and set designers (and you should) but the key to business results is to orchestrate their talents and genius.

It's important to focus on building individual talents, but it's even more important to focus on building the right leadership skills, the right environment, and the right processes that allow your creative people to thrive – with all their creativity, thoughts, and ideas. That is where the future gold of your business resides.

# Monkeys, Zoos, and Ducks

To do that, you need to consider 3 things.

## **1. Leadership**

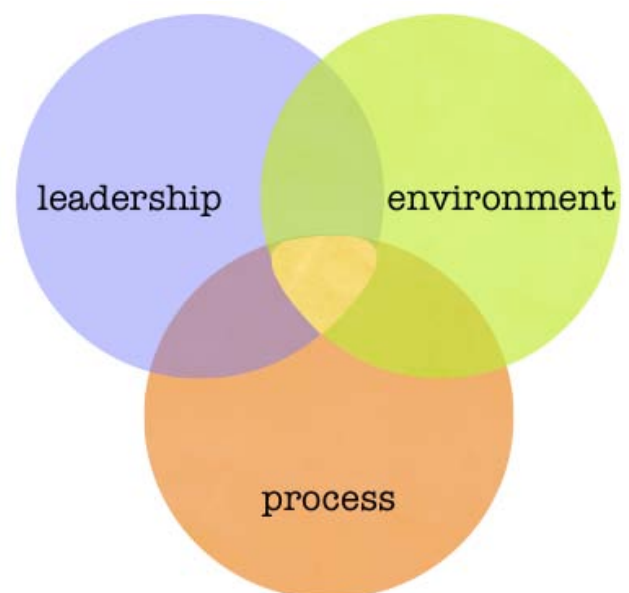
Leading creative people is a completely different game. It's like herding monkeys.

## **2. A Creative Environment.**

You need to build an environment that supports and stimulates creativity. You need to build a Creative Zoo.

## **3. The Right Creative Process**

You need to have a process in place where coming up with ideas is like shooting ducks at a carnival.



# Herding Monkeys - Leadership



Leading creative people is like herding monkeys. Creatives often appear to be all over the place, off in a world of their own, but they're also very communal and enjoy hanging out with other creative types. They're brilliant at slinging stuff; they're always throwing ideas, designs, and concepts around. They are incredibly smart. And we need them.

They think, feel, and act very differently, so leading them requires a different set of leadership skills. We need to know and understand what frustrates them, what motivates them, and how to help them be their best.

So the old style of leadership, where you rally the troops and expect them to follow you as you head off into the wilderness with your blunderbuss in one hand and a machete in the other, simply won't work with creatives. You need to be a conductor – someone who knows how to orchestrate their talents and bring them together in a beautiful symphony.

That takes understanding and it takes vision.

You need to understand how creative people work, what they need, and what obstacles you need to break down. In many ways, the leader's role is to support and guide, not interfere or constrain.

You also need to have and maintain a vision, to ensure that their talents are directed towards your and your client's expectations and goals. They

need to know what the task at hand is. Robert Davis of Davis Advertising Inc<sup>[3]</sup> put this beautifully when he said, 'My job is to develop and communicate my vision.'

'You need to be a mentor and a coach. You need to know how to empower them, guide them, earn their respect... the last thing you want to be is their boss'

Creatives love having clear direction, knowing what the rules of the game are and what boundaries to play within. But they also need the freedom to figure out how to get it done. Part of the leader's job is to be very clear in setting those guidelines and establishing the vision. But the leader also has to be brave enough and smart enough to let their creative teams do what they do best without getting in the way – just steering and guiding them occasionally when they get off-track.

It's like standing on a mountain and telling your people that you need to get across the valley. Let them figure out how – it's what they do best.

To lead creative people effectively you need to be a nurturer and custodian of their talents. You need to be a mentor and a coach. You need to know how to empower them, guide them, earn their respect, and let them play. The last thing you want to be is their boss.

Perhaps we should change the word 'lead' to 'nurture' or 'empower' or 'be guardian of' and perhaps we should change the term 'Creative Leader' to 'Creative Conductor'.

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[3] Robert David is the owner of Davis Advertising Inc in Atlanta, USA.

# Creating Zoos - Environment



You also need to provide your creatives with the right environment that will support and stimulate their creativity. You need to create the Zoo.

A good Creative Zoo is a place where creative people love to hang out. It's where they feel they belong and can interact with other creative people. It's a place where they feel inspired and are free to try new things, explore possibilities. A good creative environment is a place where people can take creative risks, make mistakes, and put ideas on the table without fear of ridicule.

A really good creative environment is not just about providing your team with the resources they need, but about giving them the permission they need to do what they do best: be creative.

How do you do that? Is there a standard template or design for the Zoo? Not really. It will vary for everyone. But certain attributes have to be in place to make it work.

## Space

Your physical environment greatly affects your mindset, so having the right physical space is vital. That doesn't necessarily mean you need surreal rooms full of beanbags; it *does* mean you need a space conducive to being creative. You need to have a place that welcomes being creative.



## Time

Let's face it: the creative process doesn't work 9 to 5. It needs time to do its thing. So leaders need to harness its potential by providing environments that let their creative people be flexible with time. Am I saying come and go as you please? No, but there needs to be a certain amount of flexibility to harness time to your creative advantage.

## Resources

Whatever you do, you need to have the right tools. Providing your creative teams with the right resources is vital. As Robyn Munro, Marketing Director of Atlassian, points out, 'We give them (creatives) awesome resources to do their jobs with - fast computers, large monitors, comfy Aeron chairs.'<sup>[4]</sup>

## Exploration

You also need to allow your creatives to explore and be open to new possibilities, because from possibilities come great ideas. Alan Fletcher<sup>[5]</sup> talks about the need to be like helicopters. – about seeing the terrain of a problem from many different angles, hovering over details but soaring high to see the whole picture. Allow your creatives to be helicopters by building them heliports.

## Creative Risk

One of the biggest frustrations creatives have, believe it or not, is working for organizations that are risk-averse and have a low tolerance for failure. To be creative and explore possibilities, you need to step out and take creative risks. Again, this is something that Atlassian understands well, according to Robyn Munro: 'We try to create an environment where it's okay to try something and fail.'

**Creating the Zoo** is about building the right environment to allow them to thrive, not about caging your creatives up and restricting their abilities.

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[4] From an interview I conducted with Robyn in August 2008. Atlassian is a software company based in Sydney with offices in San Francisco and Amsterdam. It's apparent that they lead and support their creative people well. Robyn mentions a staff turnover rate at Atlassian of less than 1%, 'which means that are staff are very happy working with us'. Impressive.

[5] *The Art of Looking Sideways*. Alan Fletcher. Phaidon 2001. p421. This is one of my favourite books. If you don't have it – get it.

# Shooting Ducks - Process



Lastly, you need a process in place where coming up with ideas is like shooting ducks at a carnival. Because, when you think about it, there's no shortage of ducks. They just keep on coming. The trick – the *art* – is knowing how to hit the ducks, and even more importantly, hit the ducks that will pay you the really big prize.

As a young lad, I wanted to be a filmmaker. I remember attending a seminar with film producer Michael Weiss (of *Dirty Dancing* fame, among others) and he was talking about how to get a project up. He said that you need to keep talking about your ideas, partner with others, just keep banging away. Someone then asked, 'What happens if someone steals your idea?'

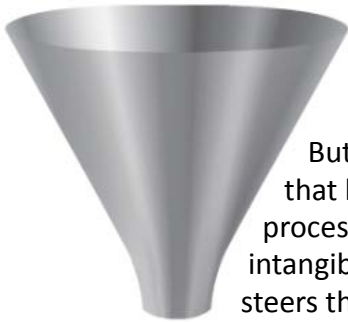
His answer was brilliant; it summed up a very real issue about being creative. He said (and I paraphrase, because this was a long time ago) 'Firstly, you should be very happy you've had an idea worth stealing. And secondly, go find another one, because the world is full of ideas.'

I just love that. I love it so much, because it is true. The world is *full* of ideas. Ideas are everywhere and it isn't actually hard to come up with them – you can find people who do that brilliantly, you can teach your people to do it better still, you can even pay someone else to do it for you.

The issue is not coming up with ideas, it's coming up with ideas that make a difference. That's another matter altogether. Yes, you need to set the ducks in motion, but the real talent lies in hitting the right ones and hitting them consistently.

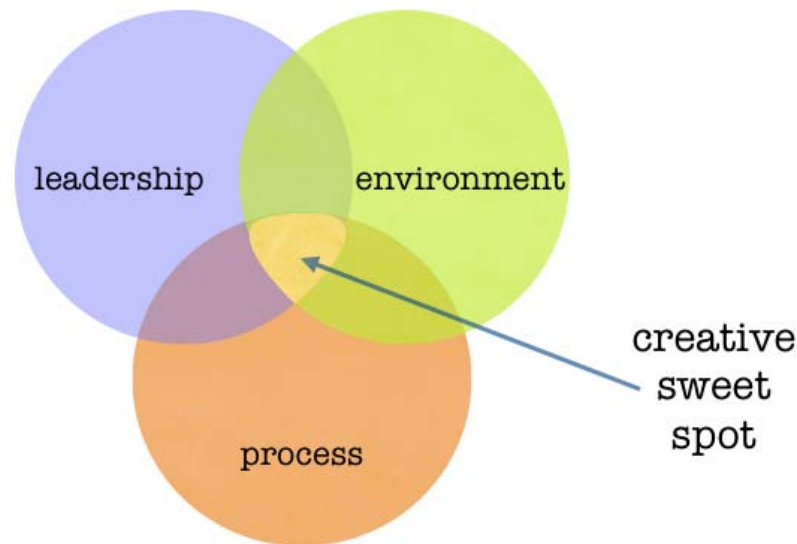
To do that, you need to have the right processes in place. Alarmingly, most organizations don't! When asked in our survey, 'Does your organization have a process in place to harness and direct creativity?' 47% answered no and only 31% answered yes.

This is partly because so much about creativity is intangible. It simply isn't black and white; it's full of contradiction and paradox. The very notion of locking into a 'process' is often seen as restrictive. And indeed, if you adopt a cookie-cutter step-by-step approach it can be.



But creativity thrives on structure. So you need to have a process that knows when to turn the creative controls on and off. A process that allows your creative people to explore and play, to think intangibly in order to find possibilities – but which then funnels and steers those possibilities towards tangible ideas and solutions.

# Hitting the Creative Sweet Spot



Here's the exciting bit. If you get each of those three things working together and in harmony, what you'll discover is a beautiful, creative sweet spot. When you hit the sweet spot, everything just clicks and works synchronistically.

This is where everything falls into place. Where being creative, seeing possibilities, and coming up with really good ideas is simply part of what you do. Where everyone, on all levels, works together and understands each other's role and value. I know that to a certain extent it's a utopian ideal, but it's worth striving for. And even if you get close, this is where creativity really rocks.

This is where being a creative organization pays really big dividends. This is where you outpace your competitors and become a market and industry leader.

And that is very, very, sexy.

# About Nigel Collin



Nigel helps businesses and people lead their creative people. He has a knack for creating synergy between creative people and business outcomes – a knack which, happily, he is able to teach to others.

With genuine knowledge and experience on the front line of working with both creative people and business leaders, Nigel understands how to use the creative talents and genius of your people. This brings creativity to life in an organization and achieves commercial value.

A highly sought-after speaker, author, and facilitator, Nigel has over a decade as Creative Director in the events and entertainment industries. He draws on the best of his extensive business and creative experience, as well as his training in film and television. Dynamic, interactive, and practical, Nigel's genuine knowledge and experience set him apart from others.

As an Entertainment and Creative Director, Nigel has worked on a multitude of corporate and public events. These include the 2000 Sydney Olympics and Paralympics, The Sydney Royal Easter Show 1997-2003, and Australia's largest-ever corporate event in Sydney in 2005, for which he was Show Director. For nine years he owned and run Absurd Entertainment, one of Australia's largest corporate entertainment companies, before passing the baton on in 2004.

His great passion is helping people understand and support their creative teams, in order to get the best from them.

Nigel now runs 'LeadingCreatives', providing coaching for businesses and their leaders. He also helps companies gain valuable insight into their strengths and find any missed opportunities to use the talents of their creative people better, with a unique 360 assessment service 'LeadingCreatives360'.

## Get in touch

For more information about coaching, Leading Creative 360 assessments for your business and leaders, or speaking engagements please contact us at:

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