

Overcoming Barriers to Creativity

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In the ideal R&D organization, creativity blossoms and successes proliferate. Ideas are welcomed, assessed, and implemented if appropriate. Self-respect and mutual respect flourish, and employees continually increase their self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-esteem.

Only under these conditions can individuals, and the organization, reach their potential. If you're willing to open yourself to the ideas and experiences presented here, and carry them into your organization, you'll help create a structure where:

- Your group operates to capacity (because members have created a structure that elicits and uses everyone's contributions);
- people tell the truth; and
- each person takes responsibility for personal behavior and feelings.

In such an environment, teams can be more effective, organizations more productive, individuals more accomplished, and human relationships more satisfying.

Creative thinking and problem solving is admired and (in principle) generally encouraged by organizations. Although interpersonal and organizational changes can help unleash creativity, psychological blocks can arise at each stage of the creative process. One of the quickest ways an individual can maximize creative potential is to find and overcome these blocks.

Unfortunately these blocks are often out of our awareness, or consciousness. They stem from our uncertainty about ourselves, specifically that we feel—to some degree—insignificant, incompetent, and/or unlikable.

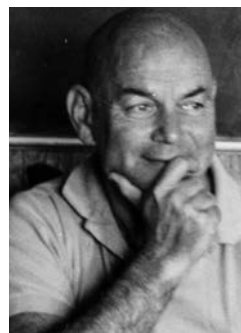
These uncertainties typically distort our creative and intellectual abilities since they lead us to try to avoid, respectively, being ignored, humiliated, and rejected.

Although these feelings may, at first, seem unrelated to the creative process, in fact, understanding them is the key to expanding and enriching our creativity. To make optimal use of these self-insights requires a non-judgmental view of ourselves. It's not "bad" to feel—to some degree—insignificant, incompetent, and unlikable; it's simply human. Recognizing these feelings in ourselves is the first step toward removing the blocks to creativity and, ultimately, toward feeling better about ourselves.

To remove obstacles to creativity and logical thinking, we must first identify the hurdles at each stage of the creative process.

Stage 1: Experience

Before you can discover a creative solution, you must acquire a repertoire of experiences. That requires being open to your environment and your feelings. Why do physicists make the most creative discoveries in physics? Why is it that basketball players invent the new



Will Schutz (1925-2002), creator of The Human Element, FIRO® theory and the Elements of Awareness.

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ways to shoot baskets? Because their rich backgrounds give them more possibilities for new solutions.

But there are blocks to obtaining experience:

- *Fear of not learning.* If you feel unable to retain information, you'll be anxious about new experiences. If you fear being tested on what you were supposed to learn, you may shut down. If your self-concept calls you incompetent, you won't put yourself in a position to be humiliated. And if you are always being compared to people who are supposedly "brilliant," you may be driven away. All of these can limit your experiences.
- *Fear of violating standards.* Were you raised to believe that certain topics are "none of your business," certain actions "impertinent"? If these feelings cause you to feel "out of bounds," you'll avoid investigating a wide range of phenomena and your curiosity will shut down. You may even close off your unconscious and all the creative potential it holds.

Stage 2: Association

You must be able to associate experiences into a useful product. Like science, poetry relies on such remote associations, or metaphors (recall Carl Sandburg's memorable line, "The fog comes/on little cat feet.").

What are the blocks to making associations?

- *Overvaluing rationality.* If you stay in control by being utterly rational, you will reject nonlinear or associative thinking, and forgo using intuition, even though many creative people credit intuition as the source of their discoveries. Equally, you will curtail your creativity for fear of being seen as "flaky" or unacceptable to the establishment.
- *Fear of self-awareness.* To make useful associations, you must avoid self-deception and understand the consequences of your actions. For example, one lab director eventually realized that his unwillingness to acknowledge other people's contributions stemmed from his fear of seeming incompetent.

Denigrating the "competition" helped him avoid feeling uncreative himself.

Stage 3: Expression

Once you've associated diverse experiences or information, you must express your idea: a creative association isn't worth much unless you can communicate it.

What are the obstacles to expression?

- *Fear of embarrassment.* If you're uncertain of your abilities, fear criticism, or fear speaking before a group (or certain individuals), you'll have difficulty bringing ideas to light. Then the ideas will remain underdeveloped for lack of feedback.
- *Fear of assertion.* If you express what you feel, will people still like you? Will you get into trouble? Tom Sawyer always figured that "staying mum" kept him out of a jam; but if you agree, your inhibition about expressing ideas will limit your creativity.

Stage 4: Evaluation

People who undervalue their ideas tend not to follow through, which is when we must distinguish the creative from the bizarre, the productive from the irrelevant. Here, two related hurdles comprise a false dilemma which can cloud your ability to evaluate an idea and force you to choose between proceeding with an unpromising project and prematurely deep-sinking a promising one:

- *Fear of humiliation.* If you rate your solution highly, and other people think it's rotten, you could end up looking like a boaster or starry-eyed fool. (That's why people adopt false modesty or convince themselves that their creations are boring or obvious.)
- *Fear of rejection.* On the other hand, if you are negative about your own solution or product, people may ignore it—and you. After all, if you don't think much of your work, why should they?

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Stage 5: Perseverance

Original ideas and products are fun, but unless you persevere, they won't make anybody rich. The concept of continuous improvement says any process or product should be endlessly revised and improved. Most authors incessantly revise their manuscripts. Artists redo paintings and sculptures until they “work”—give the right feeling.

Perseverance-related blocks include:


- *Fear of failure.* What if you carry your idea to completion and find it's not as good as you thought (meaning you're incompetent)? Therefore play it safe by failing to develop your product to the point where it's a truly creative work.
- *Lack of rewards.* Much of your creative activity is probably motivated by the admiration your creations inspire in others. Unfortunately, for many people, the work needed to turn a creative impulse into a product is less rewarding. Do you regard yourself as an “idea” person instead of a “detail” person? This attitude may partly stem from fear that you are poor at follow-through, meaning your impulse will come to naught.

Reflections

The following questions can help you to assess your strengths and limitations about creativity.

1. For each stage of the creative process, which blocks sound familiar to you? Which do you want to remove?
2. Do you have any blocks to acquiring knowledge? Do you fear that you won't remember information? Are you reluctant to explore certain personal areas?
3. Have you developed the ability to make creative associations? Are you reluctant to let your mind go wherever it wants? If so, why?

4. Are you inhibited in writing or speaking? Are you afraid of ridicule? Of making yourself look foolish?
5. Do you trust yourself to judge your creative efforts?
6. Do you have trouble sticking with things until they are complete? Are you afraid of failure? Of being disappointed when you complete something? Why?

The key to dissolving blocks to creativity lies in the kind of self-esteem that thrives in an open, truthful organization, where everyone can express their concerns openly and their humanity will be accepted. When we can focus on problems rather than defenses, and when we all feel safe to acknowledge our fears, the organization becomes a community that helps each person to identify and remove these blocks—and experience soaring creativity. 

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