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Creativity: the Antidote to the Argument Culture

We tend to talk about 'Creativity' as though it is a single, indivisible entity, admittedly with many diverse applications in the arts, science, business, education and so on - the whole of life, in fact.

I would like to 'unbundle' creativity a little and distinguish three quite separate, though related, facets: Creative Thinking, Creative Behaviour and Creative Action:

- *Creative Thinking* is the familiar process of generating new ideas, new concepts, goals and wishes, new perceptions of problems, by brainstorming, synectics, lateral thinking, 'out of the box' thinking, etc. Whatever label you choose, the output is new *thoughts*, which in themselves do not change anything in the real world until they are implemented in some way.
- *Creative Behaviour*¹ is the set of behaviours that have been developed to facilitate the creative process - initially the 'suspend judgement' rule which is the foundation of brainstorming (and subsequent creative techniques, including Synectics) plus all the additional behavioural methods which have been added over the last 70 years.
- *Creative Action* is doing new things, ranging from things the individual has never done before, like a first parachute jump, to things that are new to the world, like the Wright Bros. taking to the air in a heavier-than-air machine. Creative Action is experiment and innovation (the Department for Trade and Industry in the UK restricts 'innovation' to the *successful* implementation of new ideas, but experimental action is an essential precursor to innovation).

Of the three, I have come to regard *Creative Behaviour* as the corner stone of creativity, because it underpins both the others - you will not generate truly new ideas without an environment that permits speculation and emotional risk-taking. And equally, experimentation requires a supportive environment that encourages steps along the learning curve. 'No such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes' (a widely repeated saying attributed to Buckminster Fuller); we have to treat experiments in a way that reflects that meaning of the word.

However, what excites me is that *Creative Behaviour* has much to offer outside the specifically creative field - you have only to re-label it *Constructive Behaviour* to highlight its potential for everyday situations of all kinds. In the creative process, the behaviours are made explicit and specific and their productive potential becomes manifest - which is why training in creative techniques is such a good route to learning how to behave constructively.

'It is truly astonishing', writes Edward de Bono² 'that Western culture has never developed an idiom of "constructive" thinking. We have the absurdity of "argument" as our basic idiom. We worship the absurdity of "debate"'. Strong words, but undeniably true. Deborah Tannen³, in her book *The Argument Culture*, assembles a mass of evidence, particularly from politics, the media and the law, that entirely supports de Bono's position. My own experience, mostly in business, does the same (unfortunately, de Bono makes his point in such a polemical way, he evokes exactly the adversarial response he is criticising!).

Not only is it astonishing, it is wasteful and destructive. Debate and argument are essentially adversarial activities and, regardless of the outcome in terms of the subject of

the debate, the relationship between the protagonists will probably have been damaged. One party may think they have 'won' the debate, but they are likely to have paid a high price: the loss of the respect/affection of the other. The loser, in my experience, will nearly always set up a return bout, on their own ground, which they are sure to win. It may not be another debate; it may be as unilateral as a withdrawal of co-operation or reduction in commitment to shared activities (when I encounter debating at work, I have an image of factory chimneys belching smoke into the atmosphere - wasting energy and polluting the environment!).

Our political institutions (such as Parliament and Congress), our legal system and our education system are all inherently adversarial. The media aids and abets the argument culture because argument is deemed to be entertaining. The prevailing assumption is that 'debate' is a good thing and the habit of debating is widely encouraged in school debating societies and university unions (a training ground for future politicians). Small wonder that managers, especially graduates, unthinkingly turn to debate to resolve issues - 'we must debate the issue', they say, automatically and with relish. The habit is ingrained from their education and they are not aware that constructive alternatives exist.

Of course, debate has its place. I see it as a form of intellectual sport, analogous to boxing or the martial arts in the physical world. As with sport, it can valuably develop intellectual muscles and skills (perhaps there is a Tai Chi of debate?). That is probably why it is so highly and excessively prized in our education system. Like any sport, it can be an enjoyable activity for those who are good at it and want to participate in it. It is appropriate for the pub, dinner party or debating society; at the highest level of skill, it can be entertaining for an audience to watch (like sport).

However, the participants need to be *consenting* adults - nobody should be forced to debate any more than they should be forced to box. Many people dislike the activity. The participants also need to be reasonably well matched and to operate within an agreed set of rules (as in boxing or fencing). These preconditions are rarely met in the everyday working of organisations, so debate can have only a very limited role as a working tool.

I am *not* suggesting that differences of view should be ignored or swept under the carpet. On the contrary, I see them as a source of richness and diversity (Ray Croc of McDonald's is reported as saying 'if two members of a Board agree about everything, one of them is redundant'). Differences can usually be resolved constructively, provided we bring our creative skills, particularly *Creative Behaviour*, to bear on the issues. We do not have to agree on how the world is, but we do have to reach agreement on how we will deal with the situation we are facing.

I am conscious that debating is much loved in the academic world, where it is believed that it is a way to arrive at Truth. De Bono⁴ attributes this belief to the influence of Aristotle 'with his word-based inclusion/exclusion logic. Each side claims the truth and seeks to attack the other claim. This way we are supposed to arrive at the truth through triumph or synthesis'. Whether he is right to attribute responsibility to Aristotle (aided and abetted by Plato and Socrates) is not for me to judge. We know that, today, better alternatives exist, as described below.

Resolving conflict creatively

Creative Problem-Solving (particularly the Synectics model) has four characteristics that combine to maximise the chances of inventing a win-win outcome:

1. A positive field/climate
2. The concept of ownership

3. High quality communication
4. Generating a wide variety of ideas.

I would like to examine each of these in more detail before going on to describe how they map on to the variety of situations which may arise.

1. *A Positive Field/Climate*: Creative problem solving works because it establishes an environment in which participants feel free to speculate and generate ideas which are not yet feasible solutions, without fear of rejection by critical judgement. In brainstorming, the field is created by the basic rule 'suspend judgement when generating ideas'. The Synectics model extends this protection to alternative ways of looking at the problem, wishes, and associations, so that participants feel free to voice any connections and embryonic ideas that occur to them. The use of a skilled facilitator, who sets and monitors the observation of appropriate behavioural rules, ensures that the positive field is maintained. *Excursions* (idea-getting strategies that take a brief holiday from the problem to generate fresh material) also reinforce the positive field, because they involve taking mental and emotional risks together. Participants find it a bonding process, as barriers are lowered, both in their minds and between them.

Synectics also extends the protection against rejection to the convergent 'idea development' stage, during which responsibility for selecting avenues to explore, evaluating ideas and setting the target for further ideas, is vested in one individual, the *problem owner*. That individual must follow a strictly enforced protocol, with three components, to sustain the positive field:

- 'understand before evaluating' - the problem owner must paraphrase the idea and check with the idea-giver that the paraphrase correctly captures the idea intended (as often as not, it does not)
- 'find value in every idea' - specify all the potentially attractive aspects of the idea, giving it the benefit of the doubt and also, incidentally, illustrating the qualities the problem owner is looking for in the solution
- 'convert negatives to a direction for improvement' - we do not want to know what is wrong with an idea (this is *not* a plus/minus evaluation) but rather how it needs to be improved to achieve a solution.

2. *The Concept of Ownership*: As described above, the problem owner has the responsibility for evaluating ideas constructively, so that when a solution is reached it will have the commitment of the person who will have to implement it. The underlying philosophy is that judgements and opinions of individuals are truths about themselves, not truths about the world. Given that we all have had different experiences in our lives, we are likely to see the world differently. The differences need to be respected and used as a source of possible enrichment for both parties. If I can listen to and understand your view of the world, maybe I can find something in it that I can incorporate into my view, but the choice is mine, not yours. To try to force someone to change their view, by argument and persuasion, infringes their ownership of their life and is in fact disrespectful. 'I see it differently' is respectful; 'You're wrong' is not!

Only on questions of *fact* can one party be right and another wrong; if a disagreement is identified as a question of fact, an agreed decision can be made to check the facts or investigate the situation in some way (if it is sufficiently important). If the facts cannot be verified, it may be necessary to agree to differ and explore the implications of *both* alternatives.

But most arguments are not about facts but about the future (and there are, by definition, no future facts⁵ - only probabilities of various degrees). So the arguments are about matters of opinion, often the likely outcome of a course of action, which cannot be

known. Even though the action may have been taken before, there is no guarantee that the outcome will be the same - circumstances may have changed or different people may do it differently. And people can legitimately hold different views on the likely outcome; neither is right or wrong until the action is implemented.

Or the disagreement may stem from different values about matters of morality or ethics. Again, it is not a matter of right and wrong but of holding *different* sets of values. It is not, in my experience, very fruitful to try to persuade anyone to adopt a different set of values; the energy is much better used in trying to invent a course of action that might be acceptable to both parties.

3. *Care with communication:* Misunderstandings are much more common than is generally believed because we *assume* we have understood, without checking that our understanding is correct. Only when understanding is checked by means of a paraphrase (playing back the listener's understanding of what has been said) does the frequency of misunderstanding become apparent. My experience of applying paraphrase in the context of Synectics meetings suggests a misunderstanding rate of 50% (some communications researchers put it higher).

In the context of argument, checking understanding becomes even more vital than in less emotionally charged situations. In the heat of debate, participants are often not listening to understand; they are listening for flaws or opportunities to score debating points. Not surprisingly, there are many misunderstandings - in fact a common debating trick (among politicians especially) is deliberately to misunderstand and misrepresent the opposing point of view, to make it easier to discredit it! By insisting on a paraphrase which satisfies the speaker that his or her point has been understood, we can eliminate such dirty tricks! The process also usefully slows down (and calms down) the discussion.

Moreover, taking the trouble to check your understanding of what someone has said is a way of demonstrating *respect* for that person. It says 'I value you and what you have to say - that's why I want to make sure I have understood it'. Whether this message is successfully delivered can depend on how the paraphrase is made: to make it in an incredulous tone of voice, for example, does just the opposite! It has to come over as a genuine attempt to restate the other's point in one's own words, to show that it has been 'taken on board', even though it may or may not be agreed with.

So the use of paraphrase in the context of differences of view has a double benefit; one functional - it removes the danger of misunderstanding - the other as a contribution to maintaining a positive field.

In addition to paraphrase, other communication skills encouraged in creative problem solving are:

- headlining - putting the main point first, as in a newspaper headline, without build-up or justification, which are not needed in a protected environment
- open-minded listening - a way of listening that filters out judgmental reactions to focus on understanding
- crediting - the acknowledgement of the value of another's thought
- building - using one person's contribution as a stepping stone to a new thought
- clarifying the purpose behind a question - questions are often used adversarially, to put the other party at a disadvantage. Stating why you are asking ensures that only 'clean' questions are asked!

All of these contribute to the maintenance of the positive field/climate.

4. *Generating a wide variety of ideas:* When people argue, they are usually in a binary frame of mind; they are either 'for' or 'against' a proposition or 'for' one proposition,

against an alternative. There is an implicit assumption that these one or two propositions are all that exist (or all that are worth discussing). Switching into the creative problem solving mode of working forces participants to generate and consider many alternatives, some perhaps previously known, some still to be invented. It compels them to engage in *plural* rather than *binary* thinking and to shift from a closed-minded, adversarial mindset into an open-minded, co-operative one.

To make the switch, it is necessary to take a step back from the propositions under discussion and look at the objectives they are trying to achieve. The propositions are set aside, temporarily, while the protagonist and some colleagues (they will probably need help with the shift!) use their creative skills to come up with a variety of alternatives, some of which they will develop into alternative propositions. These are then evaluated constructively along with the original ones to see if an agreed solution can be achieved.

While there is no guarantee that it can be, the chances are good because the creative process has broadened the agenda; there is a wider and richer range of options in play. More importantly, the protagonists will have experienced a co-operative and mutually respectful activity that will have enhanced rather than damaged their relationship.

The pre-conditions for creative resolution of conflict

Any creative problem solving session needs careful planning, but in the case of conflict, the need for planning is particularly strong. Its purpose is to establish that the preconditions for successful conflict resolution exist, namely:

- the protagonists are motivated to resolve the conflict, if possible - there is no vested interest in prolonging the conflict, or belief that they have no need to resolve the conflict because they can win the argument
- there exists some common ground between them, in terms of ultimate goals and objectives
- the protagonists are prepared to enter the session with open minds and a willingness to follow the disciplines specified by the facilitator.

Planning involves individual in-depth interviews with each of the protagonists to find out their perception of the situation and their ideas for a solution, i.e. their starting position. The opportunity can also be used to encourage them to start visualising a future state when the conflict no longer exists. In this way, the facilitator can build his or her own map of the territory to be covered and decide on the most appropriate process to use.

The planning interviews are a critical stage of the process. The facilitator needs to be listening for hidden agendas and to challenge any apparent inconsistencies in what the respondents are saying. Done well, they can get the whole process off to a flying start and begin to establish a relationship of trust between the facilitator and the protagonists. They can also ensure that the whole process is terminated if there is no reasonable chance of success.

A model for the creative resolution of conflict

Although conflict situations will vary in their nature and consequently require different methods to deal with them, it is possible to identify a basic model, from which variations can be made as necessary. The following model, derived from the Synectics Creative Problem-Solving Model, is described from the perspective of a facilitator charged with

managing the process of a conflict resolution session - following a series of successful planning sessions with each of the participants. It divides into four phases:

1. Climate setting
2. Information sharing
3. Mutual evaluation
4. Idea generation and solution development.

Climate setting: Any of the wide range of techniques used for creative problem solving sessions can be used, depending on the degree of risk-taking the facilitator judges to be acceptable to the group. There need to be some personal introductions; if participants already know one another, the introductions can become a creative exercise by asking them to imagine they are different people, animals, plants etc. and introduce themselves as such. Other 'right-brain' activating techniques, such as drawing, collage making, story telling can be used to advantage - provided the group is willing to 'play' briefly.

It will also be necessary to brief them on the behavioural ground rules for the session and obtain their agreement to operate accordingly; not difficult, if the rules make sense. The facilitator's role as a neutral referee needs to be understood and accepted by all.

Information sharing: Each party in turn outlines their basic position briefly. The 'opposition' are then asked to paraphrase their understanding of it as objectively as they can (without judgement or evaluation, explicit or implied). The speaker checks that the paraphrase correctly expresses his or her position; if it does not, he or she identifies in what respects it is correct and how it needs to be modified to be 100% accurate. The listener plays back the new understanding with another paraphrase and the process is repeated until both parties are satisfied that they have mutual understanding.

This process may seem laboured and time-consuming, but it is fundamental. When people are in conflict, they tend listen judgementally and react emotionally; the danger is that they hear their own prejudice rather than what is actually being said. And the slowness is an advantage - it helps to calm people down. Successful completion of the paraphrase ensures a shared understanding of the issues and introduces the participants to the (possibly unfamiliar) experience of agreeing with each other!

Evaluation: Having established a shared understanding of one another's positions, we can move on to the exchange of opinions - in the most constructive way possible. Each party makes a constructive evaluation of the other's position, identifying all the aspects they agree with/can accept, in as much detail and as generously as possible (giving the benefit of the doubt). This process articulates the common ground between the parties and puts issues in a different perspective from a normal argument, where the focus is on differences only. My experience is that 90% of the emotion is about 10% of the content.

It is then necessary for each party to identify the issues they have with the other's position, but they must express them not as negatives but as problems to be solved: 'we would need to find a way to...' overcome the problem. The list of the issues so generated becomes the agenda for the creative phase of the session, in which everyone tries to generate ideas to solve them, one at a time.

Idea generation and solution development: This is familiar ground to the creative problem solver and any techniques can be used as appropriate to the situation. Syntectics excursions can be particularly valuable, because they enable participants to explore contentious issues by metaphor and analogy, which may be less threatening than discussing them directly. And the excursions can have a bonding effect.

Responsibility for directing the development of the solution rests with the 'owner' of the issue under discussion, but the solutions will need to be acceptable to the other parties.

There is, of course, no guarantee that all the issues can be resolved, but in my experience if the creative abilities of all parties have been successfully harnessed, the chances of achieving a win-win consensus are quite good. Even if it is not achieved, the group will have experienced working co-operatively, rather than adversarially and will have a far better understanding of one another's positions than they had originally. They will also have developed a greater respect for one another and improved their personal relationships. So even if a win-win solution cannot be achieved, the chances of reaching an acceptable compromise are greatly enhanced.

The model may sound long-winded, but in practice events can move very quickly, owing to the positive dynamics involved, for example:

- a skilled facilitator ensures that the discussion is clearly structured and each participant knows what kind of contribution is required at each stage
- each type of transaction-information exchange, expression of opinions/judgements, idea generation and decision-making is handled separately, so that the group is working in the same mode at any time
- understanding is checked out, by paraphrase and check, and not assumed
- judgements are suspended while ideas are being generated
- judgements are made constructively at the appropriate time by the appropriate person
- the group's creative skills are harnessed to ensure that a wide range of options is available
- an emotionally safe climate is created by application of all the creative behavioural rules of a creative problem solving session.

Argument and conflict signal an opportunity for the application of creativity. The message is 'invent your way out of conflict, rather than try to fight your way out of it!'

- 1 I first came across the expression in *The Practice of Creativity* by George Prince (Harper & Row, 1971).
- 2 Edward de Bono, 'Away with the Gang of Three'. *The Guardian*, 1997.
- 3 Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture*, Virago Press, 1998.
- 4 Edward de Bono, *op cit.*
- 5 From the Latin 'factum' - that which has been done.