

Lessons Learned from Comparing and Contrasting Innovation and Creativity

Recognise, implement & maximise

The Corporate Innovation Club is a community of nearly 120 international and global corporate brands as well as some government departments and NGO's. All the members of the community share a common responsibility and ownership for their organisation's engagement with open and collaborative innovation. The community is by invitation only and has grown now to be one of the largest community of Corporate innovators in the world. The community come together to connect with each other; learn from each other and, at times, collaborate with each other. The community meetup once every two months in London to discuss a topic or theme which has relevance to their innovation vision, strategies and execution. The discussions are held under Chatham House Rules to encourage open discussion and the meetings are always hosted by a member of the Corporate Innovation Club.

Since November 2018 we also launched an online collaborative innovation platform for Corporates anywhere in the world to engage with this community and also share relevant information on programmes, events and open competitions with each other. This has enabled us to take all that is good about the offline community and create a digital platform for all Corporate innovators. The platform will be free to use for all but is a private community where access is by request or invitation only. There are already over 70 Corporates on the platform and they are drawn from across the world. Find more details on the platform and register to participate at www.colinked.io.

Meeting Theme

The first Corporate Innovation Club meeting of 2019 focused on what can be learned by considering how innovation and creativity are related.

Innovation and creativity are perhaps as distinct as they are comparable. For the purposes of the meeting attendees were, on the whole, considering Corporate innovation as a discipline, and professional creativity. But both 'innovation' and 'creativity', of course, carry definitions for their everyday usage. Corporate innovation is often wildly creative, and creative professionals must generally be innovative to succeed.

As such, creativity and innovation can understandably be conflated and confused. At the same time, they are sometimes seen as entirely distinct. One may see that creativity is wholly about expression and the craft of art, while innovation is about process and practicality. And there are myriad other ways to frame the two.

The purpose of the meeting was to explore what Corporate innovators can learn from creative process and creative professionals, while also considering how Corporate innovation practice may help the creative industries. Furthermore, ways to partner creative professionals and Corporate innovation teams were discussed.



Key Takeaways

Defining 'creativity' and 'innovation'

Agreeing on ultimate definitions of 'creativity' and 'innovation' is likely an impossible task, or at least a discussion best explored in a devoted and lengthy study. For the purpose of the Corporate Innovation Club meeting, 'innovation' was largely understood to refer specifically to the discipline. 'Creativity', meanwhile, was used to refer to professional creative disciplines, and the feeling or process of creativity more broadly.

It was pointed out several times throughout the meeting, however, that creativity can exist beyond traditional fields such as art, music and writing. Engineering, coding, problem solving, education, scientific models and even healthcare, for example, can be highly creative.

Exploring the notion of solitary creativity

Invited speakers posited the idea that creativity is often seen as a lone act, while innovation is predominantly understood to be a group activity. Those framings, it was put forward, can be useful to understand how to embrace creativity as part of Corporate innovation, but they are not absolute. Creativity and innovation can both be practiced as a team or in isolation.

It was noted later in the meeting that the work of many of the most famous artists is often quickly identifiable as being from those individuals in particular. Standout painting by artists including Monet, Picasso and Frida Kahlo were discussed, and highlighted because they demonstrate unique, singular and distinct aesthetics and techniques.

Those artists' styles arguably come from each individual's highly personal internal feeling, voice or inspiration. Those artists may be imitated, and may be influential, but the style remains definably their own. Those artists may have been inspired by others, or even collaborate, but they have clearly found something distinct to their personal practice of their chosen craft.

The lesson for Corporate Innovators? While one should not discount collaboration and social creativity, the value in solitary creativity must not be ignored. Creative approaches to Corporate innovation conceived by an individual can still be brought to the collaborative process.

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Understanding the spectrum of creative circumstance

The Club members split into groups early in the meeting to discuss the times in their lives they had felt most creative. It emerged that the context in which people can feel creative can be divided into two broad camps.

- **Constraint:** Many felt they were most creative when a constraint is in play; perhaps a pressing deadline, a limited set of options, an urgent need to solve a problem, or minimal resources. Here the phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention' is particularly fitting.
- **Freedom:** Others felt most creative when away from responsibility (perhaps travelling for adventure), endowed with excess free time, when day dreaming, or – as mentioned more than once – when intoxicated.

Interestingly, after group discussion it emerged that there are two more contexts in which people believed they were more creative. The following exist independently of the constraint/freedom framework. As such, they could individually or in union be part of either 'constrained' or 'free' creativity.

- **Collaboration:** Many felt most creative when collaborating, socialising or simply deep in conversation.
- **Liberated from self-perception:** Many revealed that they are at their most creative when they have 'got over' one's own barriers of self-perception. The greatest obstacle to creativity may be the belief that one is not capable of creativity, rather than any actual capability itself.

All that considered, club members discussed the notion that there maybe a spectrum of circumstances that best engender creativity. Like many spectrums, the creativity spectrum is neither linear nor binary. It might be better understood if imagined as an abstract three-dimensional shape. Across that spectrum we all have our own position with regard to unlocking our own creativity. There is, unfortunately, no hard and fast rule for the ideal breeding ground for personal or group creativity. Thinking about one's past creativity may be the best guide to embracing a more creative approach to Corporate innovation.



Importantly, the circumstances that provoke innovative thinking may be positioned around a structurally similar – if not identical – abstract spectrum.

Equally, it would be a mistake to assume another individual's ideal creative or innovative circumstances are the same as one's own.

Reinventing the creative self, or 'what would somebody else do?'

A spotlight was drawn on those creatives that are famous for reinventing self-image, such as David Bowie or artist Cindy Sherman, who is celebrated for photographic self-portraits where she takes on different personas. Working individually for some time, attendees pondered the notion of considering how somebody else might face a professional challenge one is facing themselves. For example, if one is struggling with an element of a Corporate innovation initiative, is there any value in asking 'if I were David Bowie, how would I fix this?', or 'if I were my most creative friend, how would I fix this?'. It was put forward one could consider being anyone: a friend, colleague, celebrity, politician, athlete and so on.

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Some attendees expressed the idea that it is arguably impossible to view the world from the perspective of somebody we haven't experienced being. It was suggested that having a clear perspective of a challenge – and what one wants to solve or where one wants get to – is the best way to gain from such a role-playing exercise. Equally, one should consider alternative personalities that contrast with one's own perspective of a challenge. Perhaps if one feels frustrated by a challenge, they should consider the approach of a calm, detached personality.

Equally, it is worth considering that the solution coming from a hypothetical alternative personality may not be ideal. As such this exercise can be used to identify and discount imperfect solutions.

Ultimately, this exercise is not exclusively about identifying solutions, but can equally highlight one's own limitations, or perceived limitations. In considering 'what would David Bowie do?' we may actually gain perspective on why we ourselves are already thinking in a certain way.

For example, in considering how an aggressively profit-centric business leader may handle a challenge by cutting headcount, you might help solidify your own commitment to a human-centric approach. That thought experiment might in turn help focus or constrain the scope of possible solution. There, constraint may breed creativity within a Corporate innovation context.

For other attendees, considering solutions from other perspectives simply let them think creatively, free from their own perspective of their creative potential.

Taking the 'what would X do?' approach to C-suite

Regardless of methodology, Corporate innovation teams or individuals may come up with creative solutions that seem to sit outside the culture, convention or approach of the broader corporation. In those cases, there may be a gain in presenting C-suite and other senior staff with a similar thought experiment. 'What would Space X do?' or 'what would Uber do?', for example. Another way of framing the question could be 'why cant we do that as an organisation?'

The value of brainstorming as a creative practice

It was noted that brainstorming as a technique was developed in the 1950s, and grew out of psychoanalysis and ideas around free association. It was initially a tool that a therapist could deploy to help patients explore emotions and ideas that might otherwise be held in for fear of judgement. The notion of being able to speak freely without fear of judgement, and without 'any hierarchy in the room' was gradually adopted by business as a tool to develop new ideas.

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However, it was put forward at the Club that brainstorming has evolved into something contrary to the technique's original intent. Brainstorming sessions today are often framed by a hierarchy, while a focus on achieving results can mean those in a session feel a pressure to deliver solutions, over freeform ideas. Equally, there is a belief that contemporary brainstorming simply reveals what employees think their employer wants to hear, rather than truly innovation or creative ideas. The group nature of brainstorming today can also encourage conformity to general consensus. True creativity, it was posited, may 'start with the art of not belonging'.

As a tool to develop newly conceived ideas, however, brainstorming has much value. In a Corporate innovation context, ideas sourced from a creative individual can be fleshed out in different directions through brainstorming.

How to place creative individuals into the Corporate structure?

Corporate innovation teams may have much to gain by collaborating with professional creative individuals on specific projects. It was hypothesised that for a creative individual to provide a useful function within Corporate innovation – and corporations more broadly – there may be a degree of 'tolerating' the fact they may dress differently, behave in ways not typically seen within corporate culture, and work to hours and structures different from those understood to be conventional.

Care is needed, however, that a creative presence is connected with the innovation team at the right time. It was suggested that the ideal would be letting the creative work in isolation until their idea is well established, before connecting them with the innovation team, and then letting the latter take the lead fairly quickly.



For Further Discussion/Consideration

- Does conversation around 'questions' and 'answers' instead of 'challenges' and 'solutions' lead to a more creative, productive approach to Corporate innovation?
- Can disruption occur if we are only talking about disruption because everybody else is?
- How can we 'tolerate' creative working culture without simultaneously leaving the door open to letting intolerable behaviour go unchecked. Equally, what can be done to ensure a creative presence isn't 'genuinely disruptive' to your business?
- How can we be sure Corporate mechanisms won't 'kill creativity' when a creative individual's project is further developed into a product or service?
- Is there value in hiring non-traditional roles and experts from seemingly distant fields into your innovation team?



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