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Creativity Demystified  
By Dr. Jay L. Brand  
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Psychologist Jay Brand debunks the myths about creativity. Among the good news: You don't have to be a genius, an eccentric or a loner to generate big ideas.

How would you define creativity? Is it something that occurs only rarely within the lives of a few bizarre individuals? Or can anyone be creative, provided they're given the right direction and experience?

Would you argue that creativity is the product of an isolated genius? Or a collective ability to exploit existing concepts and knowledge? And must creativity involve novelty or originality – something beyond or outside any known categories or comparisons?

Just as there are countless definitions of creativity, there are many different ways to measure it, depending on who you talk to. A corporate executive might measure the creativity of her organization by the number of patents secured, copyrights obtained or trademarks granted. On the other hand, writers, artists or musicians would argue that creativity is manifest in unusual skills or unique works.

#### Debunking The Myths

Creativity is so mysterious that we, like the ancient Greeks, have developed myths to help explain it. But the many misconceptions often lead us to believe that creativity is beyond our grasp. Separating fact from fiction in the following 10 myths may help you sharpen your creative-thinking skills.

1. Creativity is a gift reserved for geniuses and eccentrics.

False. Creativity usually comes from an extensive and diverse knowledge base, rather than from eccentric or inherently gifted individuals with a bent toward bizarre imagery. The more diverse a group is in terms of cultural and ethnic backgrounds and areas of expertise the more creative it will likely be. Other important factors in enhancing group creativity include using interdisciplinary, cross-functional teams; giving team members appropriate training; and sharing information about each group member's particular area of expertise.

2. Society isn't receptive to truly out-of-the-box ideas.

False. Creativity depends on both the idea and the audience. Context can be just as important as content. Being familiar with trends can improve creativity by ensuring that your ideas are relevant to your audience. Being creative can involve not just the novelty of your ideas, but also new insights about the recipients of those ideas.

3. Creativity involves combining existing ideas and known experiences.

True. Metaphors and analogies appear to be important in the creative process. Creativity involves incremental progress as much as surprising leaps of logic. Exploring ideas in combination, as well as in isolation, can be a useful strategy.

4. Creatives work best when they hole up and focus exclusively on the problem at hand.

False. Creativity may be related to physical activity and bodily experience. A variety of pursuits and activities may contribute to being creative.

5. Creativity is a solitary pursuit.

False. Creativity may depend on group interaction, particularly to prevent less useful ideas from being pursued. Individuals working alone quickly develop a vested interest in their own ideas, and they tend to overlook or disbelieve information that may discount those ideas. Collective contributions to creativity seem particularly important when tasks are well-defined and participants have a high degree of expertise. Diverse, autonomous, motivated, cohesive groups with a collective purpose can produce very creative solutions.

6. Exercises, games and note-taking facilitate brainstorming.

True. It's important to provide tools to support brainstorming and collaboration to improve the quality of group interaction. And it's critical to capture ideas at the very moment they're generated. Interestingly, once a team solves a problem or settles on a concept, the creative process seems to shut down, making it difficult to re-create ideas after a brainstorm session is over.

7. Creative people have unconventional views of the world.

True. Although creativity doesn't appear to be correlated with intelligence, it does seem to be related to certain personality characteristics. Creative people tend to be independent, nonconformist, even Bohemian. They're open to new experiences, they explore a wide range of interests, and they're flexible and open to risk-taking.

8. A workplace environment of collaboration and sharing fosters creativity.

True. Because creativity often involves unusual associations or novel integrations across conceptual boundaries, open sharing of knowledge and information is very important. Team members who share their mistakes, as well as their best ideas, can help prevent those mistakes from being repeated.

9. Creativity must be nurtured.

True. Creativity is not a periodic activity; it takes lots of practice over time. Design firms should encourage creative, innovative behavior and risk-taking among not only staffers, but also clients.

10. Creatives are daydreamers.

True. Some evidence suggests that daydreaming and fantasy may be related to creativity. Whether creative people daydream more, or daydreaming can make ordinary people more creative, hasn't yet been determined. It seems reasonable, however, that some freedom from tight schedules and everyday tasks may be important to encourage creativity. Regular assignments must be balanced with the time and flexibility to explore and innovate for the sake of creativity.

#### What Creativity Isn't

Psychological research has shown that creativity rarely, if ever, involves completely new or original ideas. Instead, most creative work efficiently integrates existing information and concepts into unusual syntheses or juxtapositions, together with only minimal novelty.

The notion of an isolated genius with special powers who consistently stuns the world with great insights, inventions or ideas, as if by magic, is also unproven. The bulk of the evidence points instead to the many influences that together produce the ability to build on past accomplishments, approach problems in novel ways and entertain multiple, perhaps even conflicting, alternative solutions. As Sir Isaac Newton once remarked, If I have seen farther than other men, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.

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#### About the Author

Dr. Jay Brand is a Cognitive Psychologist for Haworth Inc. where he studies how the workplace affects the way in which people work. During his time with Haworth, Dr. Brand has conducted on-site human factors assessment of office workstations, pre- and post-occupancy evaluations, and work process analyses. He has also consulted on organizational change, transitions to open office plans, strategic facilities planning, corporate culture, measuring knowledge worker productivity, and implementing ergonomics programs. Prior to joining Haworth as an Organizational Behavior Specialist in 1997, Dr. Brand was Associate Professor of Psychology at Loma Linda University, California. He has also served as Chair of the Department of Psychology at La Sierra University in Riverside, California. Dr. Brand remains on staff at Grand Valley State University and Davenport University, where he teaches cognition, general psychology and interpersonal communication. In addition to more than 20 publications, Dr. Brand has given over 150 professional presentations and invited addresses.

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