

**MYKEL DIXON**

**EVERY**

**A DANGEROUS GUIDE**

**DAY**

**TO MAKING**

**CREA**

**MAGIC AT WORK**

**TIVE**

**WILEY**

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# Introduction

Over the last few years, I've asked hundreds of people to describe what comes to mind when they first hear the word 'creativity'. The following are a small collection of real responses:

- ≈ endless possibility, borderless thinking, joyful expression
- ≈ fun, freedom, playfulness, curiosity, energy, excitement, colour, vibrancy, authenticity, vulnerability, uniqueness, originality
- ≈ letting go of control, hands in the air, challenging the norm, thinking outside the box, living life on your own terms, making yourself and others smile.

I then ask them to describe *their* relationship to creativity. Here are some of the responses:

- ≈ love/hate, long-distance, frayed, tortured
- ≈ 'It's something I love but don't prioritise enough in both work and life'; stigma around it being frivolous, indulgent and a waste of time
- ≈ 'I crave the time to dream up new solutions and play with interesting ideas but almost always suppress it because of the constant pressure to deliver.'

- ≈ 'It's something I know I have but often squander to get the job done. And whenever I do that I'm never satisfied with the result.'
- ≈ 'It's the thing that brings me the most joy but also the thing I find most difficult to dedicate time to.'

And when I ask them to define their *company's* relationship to creativity, I hear this:

- ≈ nonexistent, complicated, misunderstood, delusional
- ≈ 'There's a desire for more creativity but it's mostly suffocated by process and bureaucracy.'
- ≈ 'It's encouraged, especially on training days, but it often gets lost in the day-to-day pressure to get results.'
- ≈ 'There's an openness to it and a recognition that the traditional path won't get us where we need to go. However, there is a dominant, well-established operating model supported by people at all levels of the organisation who primarily value safety and certainty.'

**So here we see the dysfunctional love triangle that exists between creativity, business and us.**

We love it, we value it and we want more of it in our work and life. But we can't seem to squeeze it into our overflowing task list. And despite our company calling for more innovative thinking, the systems and processes that hold the business together don't seem to enable it.

This book sets out to solve this sticky situation. To give you simple tools to recover your innate creativity (if you feel you've lost it) or amplify it in your work and life (if it's just a little blocked). To reaffirm for you that creativity is the foundation of finding and forming new value, which makes it the strongest driver of your competitive advantage and commercial success.

By the time we finish our conversation, it is my hope that you become more than just an Everyday Creative, but a loud, vocal advocate for its value in life and *especially at work*.

## Defining Everyday Creativity

To try and define creativity is like trying to hold smoke. It's as elusive as it is essential. As personal as it is universal. Which makes writing a book about it delightfully difficult.

The most widely accepted definition is that creativity is the process of combining two separate things to produce something original and useful. For the purpose of this book, let's start there.

Our intention is to become masterful at remixing and repurposing the world around us into something useful, meaningful and *beautiful*.

And why 'everyday'? As Annie Dillard famously said, 'How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives'. It's easy to get swept up in grandiose visions of big projects, global domination and org-wide transformation. But the biggest dreams and most beautiful working lives are built on the back of small, conscious and consistent actions.

But to be clear, we're not necessarily talking about art here. We won't be working on your watercolour technique or practising scales on the guitar (unless you choose to). Having said that, if during our discovery you decide that your future lies on Broadway, I'm all for it. But our focus is on developing a mindset that has:

- ≈ a natural bias for the new and the next
- ≈ the courage to consistently choose alternate possibilities over predictable approaches
- ≈ the discipline to do it every single day, in the smallest and largest of ways.

The underlying essence of this book, however, is that you will come to define what creativity is for *you*. You'll decide, through your own lived experience, what it is, why it matters and how best to use it.

By exploring the ideas and exercises presented in these pages, you'll have the tools to rewrite your own relationship with creativity. You'll start to redesign your life so that you can more easily access it. And begin to reimagine the infinite number of ways you can apply it in your work and career to tremendous effect.

Ready?

## **Choose your own adventure**

First, I want you to understand why this book is different, and why it's *dangerous* ...

Most books on creativity fail to demonstrate how fundamental it is for success and fulfilment in business *and* life. Nor do they express the urgency with which I believe all of us should be pursuing our own creative sensibilities.

They often leave readers with little more than a few tired platitudes, a bunch of boring anecdotes, and a handful of generic 'brainstorming activities' (that almost always involve coloured markers and post-it notes).

This book is different. It doesn't attempt to reduce or generalise the creative process. Because creativity can't be reduced to a generalised process. It's subjective, idiosyncratic and infinite. And besides, despite my best efforts to help get you there ...

**finding your way back to your  
creativity is itself an act  
of creativity.**

Your journey will be different from mine. Which makes it all the more meaningful. Therefore, it's best to think about this book as a series of provocations, not prescriptions. There is no 'one way' to read it, and no 'right outcome' as a result of it. However you feel and whatever you create while reading, it's entirely personal and reassuringly perfect.

Every exercise or example is taken from my own lived experience or the experiences of people I know and trust. People who found the courage to put a little more creativity into their life. A little more personality into their work. A little more humanity into their workplace.

You will have your own stories to tell. Your own roadblocks to overcome. Your own style of perceiving and processing the insights and inspiration you encounter. My recommendation is that you make the process of reading this book creative.

What does that mean?

It means scribble on the text, dog-ear the edges, tear out pages and make them into paper planes if you must. Get yourself a journal and rewrite passages you love in your own words. Draw pictures of the monsters that have been preventing you from creating. Write poems and songs and sonnets and short stories. Write business ideas, draw stage setups and design marketing plans as you go.

**If you want this book to make a  
difference to you, you've got to make  
it work for you.**

Just to reassure you, this book won't tell you to quit your job. It doesn't demand that you take up the violin or move to Berlin. But it will ask important things of you — things that might be uncomfortable to confront or inconvenient to apply. But that's why you're here, isn't it? To step beyond the obvious and into the outrageous. To leave the confines of convention and fully embrace your rare, radical and resplendent self.<sup>1</sup>

So let's get to the heart of it.

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<sup>1</sup> How good is that word! If you, like me, might not have been fully up to speed with 'resplendent' until this moment, it means 'attractive and impressive through being richly colourful or sumptuous. To shine and to glitter'. Well, if that ain't the perfect description of you and your everyday creativity, I don't know what is.



# **This book is a cold shower wake-up call for people who want a more meaningful experience at work.**

It's for the people who are tired of the uninspired, risk-averse, bureaucratic bullshit that is rife within most corporate workplaces. It's for the courageous few who have a deep desire to put more play into their work, more joy into their job and more meaning into the relationships they share with their colleagues and clients.

This book can be the answer to the question we've all been asking about our work: 'Is this it?'

When you commit to your creative recovery you become a powerful participant in a radical revolution. You'll join a colourful cast of misfits and mavericks, rebels and renegades, outsiders and originals who are changing how and why we work.

Don't for a second underestimate how important this is. We live in crazy times. The world is burning, the robots<sup>2</sup> are coming and the challenges we face are too fast and fierce for us to follow the rules.

The world we live in used to value those who could ace the test. The ones who could memorise information, master instruction and make exact replicas of the original. Now we have machines for that. Machines that don't need to be fed or need a break. Machines that don't get upset or ask for time off. They just produce, consistently and efficiently.

What the world values now are those of us who can dream. Those who can reinterpret and reinvent the world in new and exciting ways. To survive and thrive in the emerging economic landscape you must:

- ≈ reclaim your wild, untamed self-expression
- ≈ redefine your unique, authentic value
- ≈ rewrite the way you make a meaningful difference to those around you.

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<sup>2</sup> And viruses! As this book goes to print, it's April 2020 and we're up to our eyeballs in the global COVID-19 pandemic.

## A word of warning

There's a reason why the tagline of this book is 'a dangerous guide for making magic at work'.

Recovering your creativity is powerful. It changes you and the world around you. And change is unnerving. When I say 'dangerous' I mean it's dangerous for anyone or anything that is too small for the person you will become.<sup>3</sup>

It's dangerous for your boss (if you have one) because they will have to shift the way they see and value you. It's dangerous for your colleagues (if you have them) because they will have to evolve themselves with you. It's dangerous to your ego because you will have to think and act in ways that are outside what you know and have grown comfortable with.

But it's worth it. You weren't born to just tick boxes, await instruction or to simply follow the rules. None of us were. You were born to make things. To change things. To improve the world in all kinds of ways that only you can.

Now is the time. Now is *your* time: to remember, to realign with and to re-create who you are and how you're going to bring more beauty, intimacy and humanity to the world around you.

The future of work will be written by those with the courage to think, feel, act and be more creative, every day.

And if you're reading this, that means you.

Welcome to the ride of your life.

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<sup>3</sup> To paraphrase a quote from the great poet and philosopher David Whyte.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Courage To Seek

### *Rekindle a sense of wonder*

Most people book a holiday based on the brochure. They prearrange their airport transfers. Reserve a hotel massage. Curate a list of the best restaurants (as voted by Google). They'll post photos of popular landmarks and jump on organised tours, unconsciously seeking the familiar in the unknown. *We call them tourists.*

There are others, however, who revel in the uncertainty of new experiences. They eat where the locals eat. Adapt their plans according to how each day unfolds. They feel quite at home without a map or a compass. They're more likely to buy one-way tickets, venture off the beaten path and be guided by the rhythmical dance of choice and chance. *We call them travellers.*

**Everyday creatives are travellers,  
not tourists.**

They view their work as a pilgrimage. A sacred quest of self-discovery. They don't come for the hype or the highlight reel. They see the hiccups, mishaps and setbacks of the road as central to their reason for travelling it.

And this restless desire to go further, listen deeper and stay longer gives them an uncanny ability to transform and transcend whatever circumstances they might encounter along the way.

## **From contempt to curiosity**

To become an Everyday Creative you don't have to quit your job, sell all your possessions and book a one-way ticket to the other side of the world. You do have to summon and leverage the same restless curiosity a traveller uses to begin and sustain their journey. But apply it, instead, to the trials and tribulations of your everyday work.

When I speak about finding the courage to seek, it's about:

- ≈ harnessing the agitation you feel after walking out of another pointless meeting
- ≈ channelling the irritation you experience when faced with the snail's pace of your company
- ≈ leveraging the disappointment of watching your work be compromised yet again.

An Everyday Creative uses curiosity and contempt in equal measure. They marinate their frustration in fascination. They seek the seeds of new ideas in the daily annoyances they feel in their job. They recognise that...

## **frustration is fuel.**

When you embrace the dissatisfaction you feel at work, and use curiosity to transcend your contempt, you'll realise that most of the rules, systems and processes that confine you are not immovable objects or natural laws; they were just someone else's idea. Something that worked once or was agreed upon way back when. Something that can just as easily be challenged, adjusted or evolved.

This perspective is the driving force behind every product innovation, brand decision and strategic mission.

Unlike creativity, at least in a business context, curiosity isn't just about solving problems. It's about exploration and expansion. Curiosity can start and lead us anywhere. And that's exactly the kind of mindset we need in business. But equally, it's what scares the life out of many organisations and leaders—unless, of course, you're someone like Michael Houseman.

## **Firefox vs Safari**

In 2013, Michael Houseman, the chief analytics officer at Cornerstone, led a project to find out why some customer service employees stayed in their jobs longer than others. His team collated data from over 30 000 employees across multiple industries in the United States.

Following a hunch, he decided to test whether there was any correlation between an employee's choice of internet browser and the length of their tenure.

Surprisingly, the employees who used Firefox or Chrome to browse the web stayed at their jobs 15 per cent longer than those who used Internet Explorer or Safari. Even more surprising was that the pattern was the same for absenteeism: Firefox and Chrome users were 19 per cent less likely to miss work.

But the real kicker came when the researchers measured performance. Using over three million data points on sales, customers satisfaction and average call length, they found that the Firefox and Chrome users sold more stuff, in less time and had happier customers than their peers.

After probing deeper into the data they came to realise the results had nothing to do with the browsers themselves. The four groups, on average, had similar typing speed and technical knowledge of a computer. What mattered was how they came to use their preferred browser.

Internet Explorer<sup>28</sup> and Safari are the built-in browsers for their operating systems. If you used Firefox or Chrome you had to look beyond the default option you were given. You had to use your initiative to find an alternative browser, then make the effort to download and install it in your own time.

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<sup>28</sup> For the progressives out there, Internet Explorer is now called Microsoft Edge. Whatever that means.

**This tiny difference in behaviour pointed to a powerful difference in character. And a significant difference in performance.**

The employees who changed their browser rarely stuck to the script. They put more personality into each call and responded with more curiosity and creativity to any and all challenges within the role.

Those who accepted the default browsers, however, rarely strayed from the standard operating procedure. They saw their job as fixed, had a hard time adapting to unforeseen situations and inevitably became burnt out by the rigid and repetitive nature of the work.

Now, I'm not saying that if you change your browser you'll become an instant creative genius. But if you're someone who has a healthy distaste for the default, you're far more likely to find opportunities to express your creativity at work. And, judging by the research, you're far more likely to perform better too.

**The first step in finding the courage to seek is to develop a healthy distaste for the default.**

## **Surrender the script**

In 2009, I worked as a call centre operator for a social research firm. The place was full of musicians and actors trying to subsidise their artistic endeavours. We had a quota of completed interviews to hit every day. And it was imperative we followed the script.

I never followed the script. And for good reason: it was terrible. Whenever I did I'd get hung up on or receive a tirade of abuse. So I did it my way, and, as boring and repetitive as that job was, I loved it.

I never knew who would pick up, where they were in the country, or how the call would unfold. My imagination would run wild with the

sound of their voice or the noise in the background. And the challenge of building rapport in seconds to influence a complete stranger to do a 45-minute interview was fricken radical.

Much to the dismay of my superiors, who would reprimand me every few days or threaten to fire me if I didn't do it like I was told, I kicked arse. I consistently outperformed my peers, was moved on to more challenging projects and then hilariously won 'interviewer of the year' at the Christmas party (which was judged by numbers, not by the nature of the interview). And all because I found a way to be curious with the work.

**Curiosity isn't just the gateway to more creativity, it's the source of your competitive advantage.**

## **Making work work for you**

Think about your current work. In fact, let's go one step further. Think about the shittiest parts of your job. The most repetitive, pointless or bureaucratic. Something you just can't deal with, and even the thought of it makes you sigh.

Got it? Now answer me this. How can you infuse more of your personality into that specific task? How can you step over what's expected, look beyond your boss or best practice and do it in a way that works for you? However novel, impractical or unconventional?

I'm sure you have plenty of reasons for why that particular thing can't be done any other way. But I challenge you to consider how it can. This is precisely why and where you want to flex your curiosity and put the game back on your terms. Use it to make your experience at work better.

I promise you there are an infinite number of alternatives hidden in plain sight. The barriers to more creativity in your work are less about coming up with new ideas and more about finding the courage to act on them.

I've give you an example. Hands up if you love email! Anyone...

Anyone...

Well, I do. It's one of my favourite things. Here's why.

## **I centre-align my emails**

Seriously.

I've been doing it for years.

And it's been a revelation.

I used to hate email.

The layout was uninspiring.

Its vibe so beige and impersonal.

Until one uneventful day,  
while procrastinating over an email,

I got curious about the platform.

Started moving my mouse,

clicking on a few things,

until I discovered

the centre-align button.

It reminded me of all the years

I spent writing poetry and songs.

In those days I'd always centre-align  
because I liked the way it looked.

Enjoyed the way it felt.

And loved the way it

changed the way I wrote.

I'd phrase things differently

because I was conscious of

the shape of the text.

I'd lean heavy into rhyme

and alliteration for effect.

Writing emails became a joyful activity



to express my wildest creativity.  
And the impact stretched well beyond  
my personal satisfaction.  
It became a canary in a coal mine.  
A way to curate my clients.  
When I get a reply from a senior exec  
who has taken the time  
to right-align their text,  
to use coloured headings  
and mismatched fonts,  
there's a very high probability  
we'd end up working together.  
And that work will be delightfully  
creative right from the outset.  
But even more than that,  
it now acts as a trigger for  
solidifying my identity.  
Every time I centre-align,  
I'm reminded of my choice to be creative.  
It reaffirms for me that I'm a risk-taker,  
rule-breaker and mischief-maker.  
Which, in turn, empowers me  
to stay curious, stay courageous  
and keep creating.  
All of this magic  
from just one click.

## **Born to seek**

Fortunately, we are all hardwired for wonder: biologically designed to reflect, ruminate and reimagine the world around us. And this innate capacity to ask questions serves more than merely an evolutionary purpose.

Neuroscientists have identified a part of the brain they call ‘the seeking system’: a neural network that runs between the prefrontal cortex and the ventral striatum. When our seeking system is activated, blood rushes to the brain, dopamine is released and we are filled with positive feelings of awe, wonder and the search for meaning.

This invigorated sense of anticipation results in what Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, calls ‘zest’—a greater appreciation and enthusiasm for life. When we feel a sense of zest we experience life and work as a wild, untamed adventure. A puzzle to be played with; a mystery to be unravelled. We approach new situations and unexpected changes with enthusiasm and excitement instead of apprehension and anxiety.

Isn't that how you'd love to feel at work? Excited and enthusiastic, vibrant and alive? Passionately engaged in the tasks that lie before you?

Seeking—curiosity—quite simply makes our lives better, more colourful, dynamic, mysterious and enchanting. It propels us toward deeper engagement, improves intelligence and boosts physical and mental wellbeing. And if we wield it with consistency and conviction, it makes our careers more robust, rewarding and reliable.

So if curiosity is so essential to our lives, so effortless for our minds, and so desired by our organisations, why aren't we using it more? Why aren't our organisations encouraging and enabling curiosity? And why do so many of us find it so difficult to be curious at work?

## **Resistance to rumination**

Generally speaking, the world has been at war with wonder for centuries. Our oldest stories about curiosity are warnings. Consider Adam and

Eve and the apple of knowledge, Icarus and the sun, Pandora's box. It was St Augustine who said 'God fashioned hell for the curious'. It was Buddha who told us 'to seek is to suffer'. And we all know what killed the cat.

As Ian Leslie, author of *Curious: The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It* explains, 'For most of Western history, curiosity has been regarded as at best a distraction, at worst a poison, corrosive to the soul and to society.'

This should come as no surprise. Curiosity poses a direct threat to the status quo. It is the genesis of change and the root of every revolution. Our impulse for inquiry is dangerous to those who want to keep things as they are. And let's be honest: most organisations are filled with people who want to keep things exactly as they are.

Despite the corporate rhetoric and impassioned executive pleas, most of my clients speak of their difficulty in bringing more curiosity to their company. This sentiment is echoed in research conducted by Harvard professor Francesca Gino, who found that only 24 per cent of us feel curious in our job, and around 70 per cent say we face significant barriers to asking more questions at work.

There seems to be a divide in our relationship with curiosity depending on where we sit in the hierarchy. In a study conducted by Survey Monkey in 2018, 83 per cent of C-suite execs said curiosity is encouraged 'a great deal' in their company, while only 52 per cent of their people agree. And a staggering 82 per cent of individuals are convinced that curiosity makes no difference to their compensation.

**If you don't believe you're being paid  
to be curious, why would you be?**

Take a moment now to reflect on your workplace:

- ≈ How comfortable are they, really, with curiosity?
- ≈ Are they open to any and all questions?

- ≈ Are they at ease when they don't have all the answers?
- ≈ Do they celebrate and encourage those who attempt to change things?
- ≈ Or do they punish those who ponder?
- ≈ Do they mock or make fun of those who put forward half-baked ideas?
- ≈ Do they suppress any attempts to try something new in favour of doing what we did last year?

If your workplace leaves something to be desired in the way of encouraging curiosity, you're not alone. Most organisations still see curiosity as a liability, not an asset. People who ask too many questions are seen as a disturbance or an inconvenience. Add to that the frenetic pace of the modern workplace and the increasing pressure to deliver, and it's all too easy to slip into predictable routines.

But there are deeper, more personal reasons for why we find it difficult to ask questions at work.

## Curiosity requires humility.

To be curious is to accept that you don't have all the answers. You have to surrender your status or expertise in the hope of learning something new, and this is difficult for a lot of us. Especially at work.

By acknowledging we don't know something, there's a risk we'll be cast as incompetent, indecisive or unintelligent. It's better to keep up the pretence of being all-knowing than reveal any gaps in our knowledge or expertise.

And this mindset is exacerbated higher up the chain: the more we know, the less we think we have to learn. Business leaders start believing they're expected to have all the answers instead of asking more questions. This kind of thinking can unintentionally cultivate a culture that prioritises getting things done over doing things differently—even if it means doing things that are ineffective or inconsequential.

## **But the biggest barrier to curiosity is that, deep down, we're afraid of what we'll find.**

By asking deeper questions about our people and processes, our company and career, we open ourselves up to uncomfortable truths.

What if our current job isn't just boring, it goes against our values? What if who we spend our time with at work is more about convenience than meaningful connection? What if our career path is less about producing work that matters and more about proving we matter to someone?

### **A SPARKLY COMPLAINT**

Two years ago, a friend of mine (we'll call her Laura) landed a role as organisation development manager for a large manufacturing company with an 85-year legacy in Australia.

She was hired to shake up the space. To breathe new life into the culture and bring the business into the twenty-first century.

Naturally, she wore modern attire as opposed to a grey corporate suit. She liked to move around the office and work from a laptop instead of barricading herself behind a three-walled cubicle. And she was passionate and imperfect rather than reserved, compliant or agreeable when discussing the many possibilities for improving the employee experience.

Then one day, within a month of starting, she was called into the GM's office.

**He told me there had been a formal complaint made about my shoes,<sup>29</sup> and to a degree my general presence. They were too loud for the office and some long-term employees.**

(continued)

<sup>29</sup> Laura has a borderline obsession with a particular style of shoe by Adidas called the 'shell toe'. And the kind she wore at work that gained her this formal complaint was covered with glitter and sparkles.

## **A SPARKLY COMPLAINT (cont'd)**

**Seriously. A formal complaint made about my shoes.**

And how did that make her feel?

**Not great. That can really crush your soul (pardon the pun) when people see you for what you wear instead of what you bring to a business. Especially when that business was so obviously stuck in the eighties.**

Fortunately, the MD was more progressive than his counterparts and pushed the complaint to one side. This was, however, the beginning of what felt like a targeted campaign titled, 'that's not how we do things around here'.

Over the next 12 months Laura's budgets were cut, her projects were put on hold and the possibilities she was promised were reduced or diluted at every turn.

Anyone would be forgiven for jumping ship at that point. But Laura stuck with it. She found the resources she needed in the most unlikely of places and went on to deliver a suite of successful capability-building programs that are having a radical impact on the business.

When I asked her how she managed to stay sane, focused and optimistic in spite of her detractors, she said,

**The whole 'sparkly shoes' incident showed me loud and clear that this business wasn't going to be my inspiration for change. I knew I'd have to look elsewhere.**

**I'm highly visual so I spent my weekends going to art galleries and finding beautiful graphic design**

**publications. I'd retreat to my fancy notebooks and expensive designer stationery, even for just a few minutes, to keep me motivated and inspired.**

**I'd even sneak a quick peek at my glittery white kicks during meetings to help me feel creative in an environment which clearly was not.**

When creativity went AWOL for Laura at work, she went looking for it elsewhere. And by keeping herself inspired outside of work she managed to stay inspired inside of work. Despite the roadblocks and setbacks, she never compromised on her intention to make the world (and her company) more beautiful and creative.

Over time, the business began to change and the right people started to take notice. Two years on, 'culture' is now a pillar of the organisation's strategy and Laura was just named Head of People and Performance.

When I asked her how it feels to be a 33-year-old executive of a household name business, she replied,

**I'm just excited about what this means for my work. Now I can start doing something really exciting. And the best part is, my shoes are even louder than before!**

## **The real danger**

The real danger of not asking the questions that matter is that we'll become nothing more than a passenger. Happy to wait in queues, follow the formula and accept the only options as the only options. This approach will never produce anything original, and the impact extends well beyond the workplace.

If you're not intentional about learning, brave enough to step outside your comfort zone and explore more of what is available to you, you risk

more than the quiet atrophy of your creativity. Your life will become a patchwork quilt of reactionary choices.

You'll end up with work you're not proud of and a career you're not inspired by. You'll wake up one day and realise the circumstances of your life have largely been decided by someone else. That you've unconsciously accepted and compromised on everything that matters to you.

I'm not saying you should be entitled or ungrateful, always demanding more. I'm suggesting we could all be more focused and intentional about who we are and what we want to be.

This is the true power of seeking: not just to have more and better ideas, not just to feel alive and energised at work. But to become deeply aware of who you are, what matters to you and why you're here. To ask bigger, broader and more beautiful questions about the difference you want to make and the legacy you want to leave.

## **How to be more curious**

Whoa. That just got kinda heavy. Let's bring it back to what you can do today. Here are a few ideas for returning to your curious roots...

### *Diversify your stimuli*

When Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the eminent psychologist of creativity, was asked to describe how creative people differ from others he remarked, 'Complexity. They show tendencies of thought and action that in most people are segregated. They contain contradictory extremes; instead of being an "individual," each of them is a "multitude."'

Here's the truth. You're not going to find the answers you need to win at work, at work. At least not in your current role and routine. You've got to expose yourself to a wider palette of influence. Place yourself in a variety of unfamiliar situations, and immerse yourself in a diverse array of unique experiences.



**If creativity is the art of  
connecting dots,  
then curiosity is the art of  
collecting them.**

What does this look like? Go to events outside of your industry. Sit in on meetings outside of your department. Read articles, listen to podcasts and watch films about topics you have no understanding of. Stuff your brain with a delightfully diverse diet of interesting ideas. To rekindle your sense of wonder, you need to live a richer, more varied life.

The more diverse the inputs, the more distinct the outputs. You must cultivate a daily habit of finding and following what fascinates you. The most creative people I know read more books, watch more interesting films, go to new places and meet new people.

And for supercharged results, go for the edges. Be the traveller we talked about at the beginning of this chapter. Read the classics, not just shallow click-bait articles online. Go see live music, don't just listen to algorithmic playlists through your laptop speakers. Talk to strangers, talk to your customers, talk to your competitors. Resist the urge to gravitate toward familiar faces, places and routines.

Get hungry for the new, the novel and the next and both your curiosity and creativity will compound like interest.

### *Make room for space*

Talk to any gym junkie about putting on muscle and they'll tell you rest days are just as important as the days you lift weights. That's when the muscle repairs, rebuilds and regenerates.

The same is true for your creativity. You can't just stuff your brain with new information and stay forever focused on the task at hand. You need to let your mind exhale. And not just for rest and rejuvenation.

Quick reminder ...

... to exhale

Taking breaks, letting ideas percolate or heading off on year-long sabbaticals are all well documented as crucial elements of the creative process. Heck, even taking a nap has been scientifically proven to help with creativity.<sup>30</sup> But taking a break is one of those things we tend to do hours, weeks or years after we should. It's often just a reaction to exhaustion or overwhelm. We do it once we've hit a wall or run out of ideas. And when we do, we prefer to just veg out, watch a little Netflix or nap. But that's missing the real potential of space.

Studies have shown that engaging in simple, low-cognitive tasks between times of focused attention leads to more creative ideas. Activities that are boring or routine enough to facilitate a wandering mind are vital for marinating and incubating our ideas. Daydreaming, despite being considered lazy and ineffective, is essential for innovation.

This is why we have so many great ideas in the shower. Or while walking, driving or cooking. There's enough going on to keep our conscious mind entertained, so our subconscious can get to work without being watched.

I quite like the way Jonah Lehrer put it in his essay 'The virtues of daydreaming' in *The New Yorker*: 'A daydream is just a means of eavesdropping on the novel thoughts generated by the unconscious.'

When you take a break before you need to and switch your attention to another activity that requires little cognitive processing, you give your subconscious the space and privacy it needs to reconfigure all the information you've collected in new, novel and unconventional ways.

Think about all those ping pong tables in common areas of newly renovated offices. I used to think they were a shallow attempt at 'building a creative culture'. It turns out, a little light ping pong in between brainstorming sessions might be a powerful recipe for creativity.

So what are some simple activities you could do at work to give your conscious mind a rest, while giving your subconscious the space it

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<sup>30</sup> Dr Sara C. Mednick, an associate professor of psychology, found that 90 minutes of REM sleep does wonders for creative thinking and problem solving.

needs to make magic? And if you really want to kick it into fifth gear, make it something physical. Use your hands and move your body.

## *Kill your routine*

Now, before you go scheduling every minute of your week with new experiences or naps, I'm going to suggest something that flies in the face of popular culture.

Kill your routine. At least occasionally. And always intentionally. Embrace Mark Twain's philosophy for life: 'Everything in moderation, including moderation.'

We have an unhealthy obsession with optimisation. So many of us are suffocating beneath the weight of morning routines, evening routines, creative routines, mindfulness routines. All in the name of better performance.

Routine, however, can be devastating to our curiosity. Because curiosity needs variety; it thrives on surprise and is delighted by disruption. As author Paulo Coelho said, 'If you think adventure is dangerous, try routine; it is lethal'.

There are endless lists of products, innovations, songs and stories that were the result of an unexpected accident, a serendipitous rendezvous, an unintended circumstance. These disruptions are gifts. They hold the secret to our creative salvation.

If you're not willing to seize those unexpected moments, to surrender control of your schedule and liberate yourself from the shackles of your routine, you'll miss the gift of providence.

I'm not saying you should sleep in, cancel your engagements and wander the streets until midnight. But give yourself permission to:

- ≈ lean in when life throws you a curly one
- ≈ stay in the magic when the magic arises
- ≈ squeeze every drop out of a serendipitous rendezvous that ignites your curiosity.

## **The gift of Vuja De**

When you commit to becoming curious about your work—when you choose to use your dissatisfaction as a catalyst for creativity—you can find a way to make magic with anything. Especially the work you don't like.

When you develop the courage to seek you'll give yourself the best opportunity to experience what comedian George Carlin called 'Vuja De'.<sup>31</sup>

Vuja De is the opposite of Deja Vu. It happens when you enter a situation you've been in a thousand times before, but with the sense of being there for the first time. It's when we encounter the familiar but see it with fresh eyes.

As French novelist Marcel Proust said, 'The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes'. And this is the work of an Everyday Creative. To relentlessly ask questions about why things are the way they are. And put forward new ideas about how they could be. To see everyday work as a playground of possibility.

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<sup>31</sup> This phrase was explored in depth by author Bob Sutton in his 2001 book *Weird Ideas That Work*.

# TIME TO PLAY

Choose one of these to action this week.

- 1. Treat yo'self to wonder.** Attend one event outside of your industry, one meeting outside of your department and one experience completely unrelated to your work that makes you come alive. Listen intently, take notes, be the first to volunteer. Bonus points for raising your hand before you've even thought of a question.
- 2. Schedule depression sessions.** Engineer all your meetings to include a 10-minute depression session at the end. Use that time to reflect and process what you just covered. Daydream by a window, take a stroll outside or engage in a low-cognitive task like juggling or doodling. Bonus points for inviting your fellow meeting attendees to join you or do the same.
- 3. Accept one invitation you shouldn't.** Seize one opportunity to follow your fascination longer than you intended (or are allowed). Turn a chance encounter into a meaningful conversation over coffee. Expand a moment of insight into an hour of fully forming a new idea. Bonus points if you blow off the entire afternoon and end up at the pub.
- 4. Establish a daily LIP.** Start and finish every workday with a 'Learning In Progress' meeting. By yourself or with your team ask, 'What is one topic or activity I am curious about today? What is one thing I often take for granted that I want to find out more about? What is one practice or process I would like to change and why?' Bonus points for breaking rules, threatening the status quo or barbecuing a sacred cow.

**5. Create a shrine of curiosities.** Find a corner in the office (or at your desk) and fill it with interesting ideas, artefacts and reflections. Put images up that inspire you and physical objects that evoke your imagination. It could be about a person or a process. It could be the result of a success or failure. Bonus points for commandeering an entire room for curiosity.