30
Days of
creativity

introduction

Thank you for downloading this eBook.

It wasn't originally an eBook.

In fact, I was trying to be creative at the start of 2022 by creating a pop-up newsletter on LinkedIn.

The content in this book was the daily content for the whole of January.

31 days, 31 ideas. (I since removed one idea as it was duplicate and added nothing to the book – so it's technical 30 ideas now)

Except I failed.

Like many creative attempts, failure is sometimes not far away. Failure is always a possibility. So too, is success.

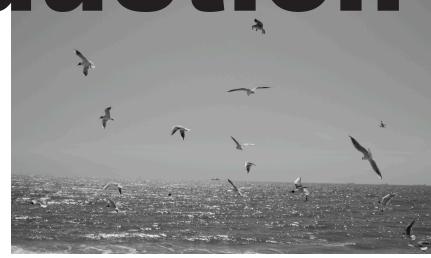**Why did my pop-up newsletter experiment fail?**

Well, the LinkedIn platform proved a monumentally bad choice to distribute the newsletter.

The platform simply refused to post somedays. Other days it would post but I couldn't share it to my subscribers.

It would lose drafts. Images wouldn't show properly. Some people couldn't turn the notifications off (yet some could!). It was a technical disaster.

An early failure to my creative endeavor.

So, it failed after just 6 days. Blocked. Unable to post. Fail.

But with all creative attempts there is a chance to learn. A chance to change direction. A chance to pivot. A chance to try something new.

Instead of a pop-up newsletter on LinkedIn, it's now this free eBook.

I hope you enjoy it.

Rob
Winchester. February 2022.

cultivatedmanagement.com

Move to think

One of the most powerful talks I've ever seen is Sir Ken Robinson's "Do schools kill creativity".

It's a blisteringly positive and funny talk but one part really stood out for me; the part about the little girl who needed to move to think.

Move to think.

Let's think about that for a minute.

The little girl was asked to sit still in school and do her work, but she couldn't. They thought something was wrong with her. They thought she needed medication. The reality was she needed to move to think.

I think I'm the same. In fact, I think a lot of people are like this, yet they try to bring forward good work, ideas and creativity by sitting still, by following conventions and norms of the workplace, by trying to force creativity.

Here are some ideas:

1.   I consider my brain to have a secret room where a small group of talented people are sat solving problems. All I must do is feed them a problem or seed an idea and leave them alone for a while.

Whilst I occupy the rest of my brain with a walk, some weight lifting, cooking tea, some movement – the clever team in the room will come up with the answer. And when they are ready, they let me know. I get that AHA moment. Usually in the shower.

2.   When I move I tend to solve more practical problems with creative solutions. This is good for solving work related problems, or problems that have a more logical solution. I don't tend to get pure creative ideas (like book chapters, art ideas etc) when I am moving. I get these best when I sit quietly with no agenda – meditation, wall staring, cloud watching etc.

3.   You need the experience to solve the problem you're pondering. I couldn't solve a mathematical rocket-launch problem, but I could come up with a way to solve a business problem.

4.   Not all creativity should be about solving problems, sometimes we create just for the sake

of creating. For me, this is the best form of creativity. But there is also a need to bring creative solutions to our work place.

Move. Think. Create. Ideate. Solve problems.

Movement is life. Movement is healthy. Movement is essential to creativity. But creativity also comes when we sit and empty our mind. It rarely arrives when we're back-to-back with meetings, on calls all day or so busy we can't even take a toilet break. We need to slow. And move. Or stare (carefully).

Simply having creative solutions or ideas is also not really creativity. As we will explore later – creativity is about bringing ideas to life.

An idea is worth little on its own. It must be brought to life – and this is true creativity. Creating something that didn't exist before.

With that, consider feeding your brain's creative team a problem then occupying your brain with something else, ideally movement. Consider sitting and watching clouds. Consider a pleasant stroll through nature. Ideas will come to you when you switch off and open your mind.

Now comes the hard work – creating what your brain gives you.

screen free

Very few of my best ideas happen when I'm looking at a screen. There's something constraining about a screen - and not in a good way.

Constraints are good for creativity, but the lack of tactile freedom could be why screens offer very little in the way of generating ideas (at least for me).

There are boundaries on a screen and very few software companies provide a way to break out and free write, free draw or free create.

Some tools are coming close (Mural is pretty good) but there are still constraints with inputs, delays in adding content, seeing the whole, feeling something, etc.

A simple Yellow Legal Pad or cheap notebook already allows that freedom, speed and accessibility for many.

Being in front of a screen also provides distractions. The quiet calling of the Internet. The temptation to waste more time on social media. That quote that you feel compelled to look up. The emails you know are sitting in your inbox. The research that you say is essential but is really a form of procrastination.
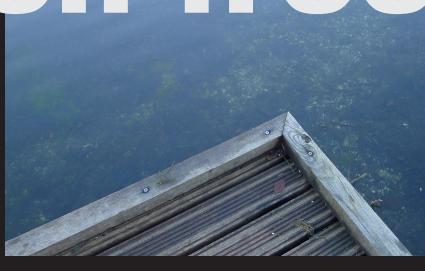
You can block all of this with technology (and that's great), but I believe simply closing your computer down and getting back to something more analogue is more fruitful in the long run.

Tech and screens are great when bringing something to life, but I find they hinder the thinking and creative ideation process. They hinder the exploration of an idea. They excel at storing outcomes, digitising ideas for reference and for bringing many of my creative projects to fruition (like this eBook).

But I can't think clearly with a screen.

Nature feeds creativity. If you want to have ideas and be inspired and to be calm in your mind and spirit - then seek out nature.

A walk in the woods. Sitting in the garden. A picnic in a field. Nature inspires and calms. And if you study nature and truly study what you see, you'll find ideas everywhere for your business, your life, your art and your creative pursuits.

Then capture these in a simple notebook.

I often say that if more business owners studied biology and the natural world they'd know how to look at their businesses in the right way. After all, organisations are organic - and the more we know about how the organic natural world works - the more we can learn how to nurture our businesses.

Another powerful reason I like to avoid screens and digital tools when creating something of value, is you often cannot see what you chose to cross out (or delete).

When I work through an idea on paper, I see the history. The scribbles, the lines, the things I crossed out. I can see the context and the flow and the arrangement and the reasoning. I can see the whole process - and when I can see that, I can understand more about the project and the work.

It's why, when I run creative thinking sessions with clients, I

get them to keep all their ideas - every single one. I want them

to see the history of their thinking, the ideas they said "no" to

- the logic behind their creative pursuits. It's powerful for them

to see the whole.

example

As many of you may know, I'm the co-host of the stationery freaks podcast with Helen Lisowski.

The podcast was a throw away idea a few years back. Something we pondered for a few years and said we'd do one day. Heck, we even recorded a test episode that was pretty bad, but it was a start.

It was a simple idea born out of a belief that good stationery can open our human potential. It was a project that sounded fun and playful – something to do just for the sake of doing it.

Eventually we played with the idea until it became something we could see brought to life, something we could sense needed to be created – at least for our own creative purposes.

It was a fun passion project. Nothing serious. Nothing professional. No obvious end goal. No targets. Just two people with an interest in a topic playing with the idea.

Then we recorded a proper episode, posted it online and it lit up.

Our enthusiasm and fun about the topic seemed to catch on. We started getting listeners - way more than we ever expected. It seems there are other people interested in this topic. It started to grow beyond a playful creative project.

There are expectations now!

The challenge we face is how to keep the play and turn pro at the same time. This is a challenge that often happens when we start creating things.

We need editorial calendars, but we don't want to stifle our ability to react to what interests us that week. We need schedules, but we don't want to stifle our flexible approach around our busy lives. We need artwork, social media posts, better web copy and maybe some way of monetising it (hosting costs aren't cheap) but without it becoming a burden.

Our recording process is fun and easy. Basic microphones, Zencastr for recording, Dropbox for synching files, Garage Band for editing and Transistor for hosting. The odd Facebook advert and we're solid.

We don't need much but should we go pro with any of these things? Many people tell us we should.

We aim for 20-minute episodes but often ramble chat for 30. We keep it playful.

Before we record, we check the stats and are amazed and overjoyed, but there are times when we wonder why an episode didn't do so well.

We keep the conversation loose and bounce off each other through the show - we've worked with each other long enough to not need a script. But then we get emails from companies telling us we need scripts and transcripts and this and that.

We need to go pro and take it seriously. Maybe we do.

The more listeners we get – the more people want a piece of it, the more we worry the playfulness will go.

Whilst our creative projects remain fun and playful, our creativity thrives.

When it becomes a chore, we need to lean back on other reasons to keep creating it. Creativity can be sucked out of a project quickly, so it's important to identify other reasons for doing something.

But play must remain for creativity to thrive.

And of course, we're grateful and happy that it's going somewhere!

And here in lies an all-too-common dichotomy with creativity.

Sometimes the things we create take on a life of their own and the creativity becomes harder to find. It becomes a chore, a job, a demand, a task, an item on the ToDo list – and the play is lost.

We're not going to let that happen to Stationery Freaks, but I've seen that happen with my other work.

The sheer playfulness has been lost to the comments, the unsolicited feedback, the haters, the people who want to sell to me, the demands for this or that, the opinions (we'll cover that in a later edition).

It can drain creativity if we're not careful.

It can take the play away and leave an empty chore. And when that happens, we're going to need some compelling "whys" to keep bringing forth our creativity to bring this thing to life....

2022, for me at least, is about rediscovering the play in my blogging, video making, writing, photography and more.

Why?

Here's John Cleese talking about why adults lose their creativity whilst kids don't.

"Most adults, by contrast, find it hard to be playful — no doubt because they have to take care

of all the responsibilities that come with an adult's life.

Creative adults, however, have not forgotten how to play."

Whether you are "creating" in work, or your personal life, remember that creativity is playful. It is fun. It is your curiosity brought to life. It is an experiment.

And the task, as far as I see it, is to keep the creativity and playfulness for as long as you possibly can.

There comes a natural time to hand over from creativity to simply getting the job done (certainly when we create not just for the sake of it), but I for one, in 2022, am trying to maintain (and rediscover) that playfulness in as many things as I can.

creativity is learning

Creativity is a learning process.

When we create something new we may fail, we may succeed, but we will always learn (if we want to).

We will learn about our own capabilities, the willingness of leaders and managers to support creativity and innovation at work – and whether what we create finds its place in the world.

Creativity is therefore a learning process.

There is always a risk, when we create, that we get it wrong, or it doesn't go well, or we don't create what we see in our minds, but in all of this are lessons that can make us better. Lessons that can make the business better. Lessons to use next time.

The size of the potential failure is important – especially so at work, where we may be "creating" with other people's time and money.

In business we must be careful.

Careful that the consequences of our creative and innovative endeavours aren't career ending or business ending. This requires studying and carefully thinking through the consequences. It means looking at what could go wrong and deciding how to mitigate potential negative outcomes.

It means caring about what you're trying to create. It means testing your ideas and validating what you create. However, this should be balanced with not letting this planning stop the creative process.

It's hard - and let's face it, some companies accept mistakes more willingly than others.

Too much fear of failure though and we'll potentially sanitise the ideas too far, move too slowly, worry too much about getting everyone's feedback and ultimately struggle to unleash creativity and innovation. It's a supremely hard balance when we're "being creative" in our work.
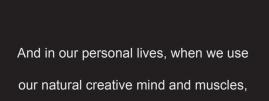
You see this often - companies demanding innovation and creativity - yet at the same time creating a culture of fear over mistakes.

Creativity often leads to mistakes. Mistakes are an opportunity to make ourselves and the business better. If we're scared of making a mistake, the chances are we'll never create anything of value.

In our personal lives it's likely easier.

Many of the decisions, outcomes and consequences can be more easily ascertained, understood and controlled.

But when we create - we learn. We learn about ourselves, we learn from the process, we learn from the outcomes, we learn from others, and we learn how to make ourselves, the creative process and the business better.

And in our personal lives, when we use

our natural creative mind and muscles,

we learn what it means to be alive.

Humans are designed to be creative; in art, in our day to day lives, in how we solve problems. We are humans. We are all creative. And we all need creativity when the world no longer seems rational.

Check out this great video by Ethan Hawke on why, when our

emotions overwhelm us, we seek comfort in poetry, dance,

film, theatre, books and other creative outlets.
At the heart of creativity though is learning.
Learning about who we are and what we're capable of.

So, as Ethan Hawke states "give yourself permission to be

creative". And if you're a manager or leader - give people the

space, time and permission to create - and accept that

creativity can lead to failure - so, go easy. If there is fear over

making mistakes, you'll likely create little of value.

brain food

To be creative, we need to feed our brain some good food.

There is no right or wrong here.

I hear people say that TV is a bad food for your brain. That's their preference. It all depends on what you watch and how open your mind is to new ideas and patterns. I often get more creative ideas about leadership from watching re-runs of Seinfeld, than I do reading one of the 2,000,000 books on leadership.

We're all different and we're all inspired differently and we're all probably creating something different too, and hence open to different inputs and ideas.

Books, podcasts, videos, magazines, blogs, everyday conversations - anything can be food for your brain, but the best food will be in-line with what you are trying to create. Read widely, watch widely and be critical in your consumption - and take what you need from it. Or choose a few good sources and truly digest them.

You need to open your mind to ideas. Kind of like a magnet - just pulling anything of interest towards you.

It's worth creating a commonplace book for all the observations, snippets, conversations, people, ideas, quotes and anything else that you feel is good for your brain. (link to a video I did on commonplace books).

Being able to come back to your commonplace book is essential to see connections between ideas.

Creativity is often about thinking broadly, spatially and widely to piece together seemingly disparate ideas. Being able to take in ideas from different food sources is a great way to be more creative. By bringing sporadic and wide ideas together you can often create something new from it, something that has never existed before.

If you get no inspiration from digesting some brain-food, you should ask – "did I enjoy it?" There's value in that too.

But if you're keen to create……..choose good brain-food sources, read widely or extremely deeply, consume what inspires you and be sure it's feeding you wisely.

I've found that the quality of my creative output is directly linked to the quality of the food I give my brain.

And here's a top-tip – I've found the best brain food to come from studying and observing the people around me.

You'd be surprised at reality when you study it deeply. You'd be surprised at the richness of ideas that are literally next to you. You'd be surprised at how truly bizarre reality can be. My best ideas come from simply observing people around me - they rarely fail to inspire and feed my brain.

"The difference between reality and

fiction? Fiction has to make sense."
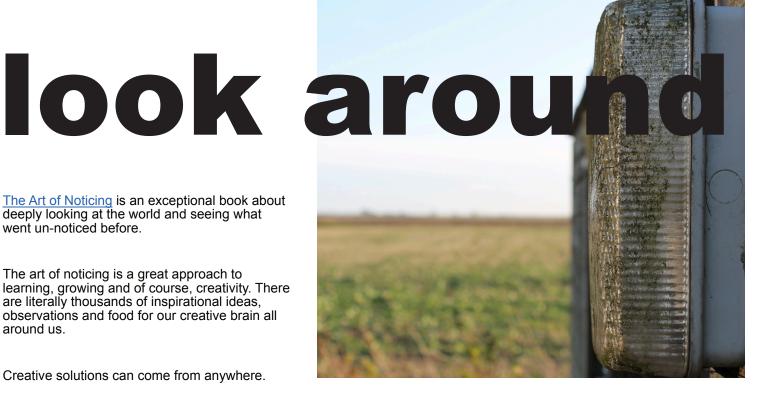
Possibly Mark Twain – possibly not.

look around

[The Art of Noticing](#) is an exceptional book about deeply looking at the world and seeing what went un-noticed before.

The art of noticing is a great approach to learning, growing and of course, creativity. There are literally thousands of inspirational ideas, observations and food for our creative brain all around us.

Creative solutions can come from anywhere.

Consider looking at:

1. How the world around you works. Where does work come from, where does it go? Who is involved? And how do they work? This is observable in our work, our shops, our businesses, our communities - everywhere.

2. Listen to and observe people (carefully – don't stare or freak people out). People can inspire, frustrate, annoy - they often make you feel something - and when we feel something, we move. I often do nothing but people watching. What are they doing? Who do I think they are? Why are they doing what they do? How do they behave? There is a lot of inspiration in watching the very people around us. Try to apply as little judgment as you can.

3. How are things designed and does that design make sense? Why are things where they are? What function do these things serve? Why do buttons, switches, doors, signs, windows, roads etc work the way they do? What is the purpose? And what can we learn for our own work and creative projects?

4. Sounds…..lots of sounds all around us. There is never silence. We often seek silence in nature, but it's not silent - not really. We hear birds, animals, the wind, trees - not silence. Stand in your city, park, countryside, office or mountains and listen. What do you hear? What is causing the noise? Is the noise essential? Why is the noise there? How does it make you feel?

5. When we think about being creative at work we could learn a lot from studying nature. Organisations are organic. So is nature. People follow the laws of nature (mostly) - so does

nature. When we are looking to bring creative and innovate solutions to our organisations, what is happening in nature and what can we learn?

I'd suggest you dig into books like [The Art of Noticing](#). The more we can truly observe, the more we can learn and feed our brain creative ideas.

And great leaders notice things - and bring creative solutions. [Check out a video I did on photography and leadership.](#)

Express yourself

It's impossible for your creativity not to be an expression of you, of yourself. When you create, you express yourself. Your opinions, views, ideas, thoughts, ways of living, layers of life experience in this world.

Therefore we can often be afraid to create.

We often apologise for ideas. We often struggle to share our work. It's because it's part of us. It's ourselves that we are putting out there. So, if people don't like what we create, it's kind of personal.

We should also be aware of this when we're trying to improve a business - we are often approaching improvements from a personal perspective - about how we want the world of work to be.

But that may not be what the business needs.

It may not need to change to meet our personal preferences - it pays to remember this when we feel like things aren't how they should be.

Creating something new is a reflection and expression of ourselves. It's why we care so much about what people think. It's why we often don't ship that blog post, or that painting, or that book.
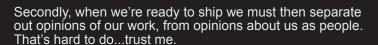
"What would people say?"

Shipping creative work and creating work are two different things. And not all creative work needs an audience - there is plenty of joy in creating for the sake of it.

But remember this the next time we criticise a book, or a post, or a video, or a painting. Sure, it may not meet our taste, world view or bar of creative greatness - but it was created by someone - and it was likely, in some way, an expression of themselves.

And if you're struggling to ship your work because you worry what people will think or whether you will be judged, then be aware, almost everyone who creates something has these same fears.

The trick then is to firstly separate out creating of things with the shipping of things.

Secondly, when we're ready to ship we must then separate out opinions of our work, from opinions about us as people. That's hard to do...trust me.

And you are not alone.

Creativity is an expression of ourselves - and we all like to feel like we can express ourselves freely without fear of critique. But the reality is, if we put something out there it will gain some criticism – and we must strive to not take this personally.

Create for the sake of it. Hide it from view. Or develop the habit of shipping. Up to you. Try not to take it personally, or let the fear stop you from expressing yourself.

commit

An idea that is not brought to life is not creativity.

There could be value in the thinking, and the flexing of the idea muscle. But until that idea is turned into reality there's little creative value.

Creativity, at a simple level, could be considered the creating of something that did not exist before. An idea is just a thought – so it needs creating.

Delivering the idea into reality is the hardest part about creativity. Having the ideas can be straight forward but turning the idea into reality can be hard.

Writing a book is hard, yet most people could come up with an idea for a book or story.

Creating a new product for customers is hard. Creating videos is hard.

The process of bringing something to life is creativity. And it's hard. There are highs and lows. There are things that don't go to plan. You may not feel like it one day. You may wish to give up. The messy middle can take it toil.

It is brutally tough to bring something to life - hence it's important to fall in love with the process. Even when it gets hard.

Routines, habits and discipline help.

It's why some writers follow the same routine (sometimes quirky) for writing books.

It's why at work, it's about systematising the process. Making it a smooth routine. And ultimately operationalising it - so we can bring an idea to life.

The discipline to follow the creative process is learning. We can learn from it - but we must follow it. If we don't, that book won't write itself. The videos won't be ready. The new product won't make it. The value derived from the creative idea won't come back to you.

If we don't follow the process, we won't know how to make it better – and whether it even works. Equally, if we wait for inspiration to strike, and don't have routines or processes, we may never deliver our creative thing to life.

And on a personal level, if shipping your art is important, it needs shipping. And only by shipping, time and again, will you get better at your craft, learn what works and ultimately start to build a body of work. The more you ship your creative work, the easier it becomes.

At work it's the same. The more you ship, the easier it gets and the better you get at it.

If you go back and look at early painting, photographs and writing of famous people you'll see that they often didn't start out great, but they shipped.

Ship it. Show the world. Don't tell. And learn from it.

Forget the potential

I do a lot of work in business change. When I'm working in a company there are no shortage of great ideas to make the business better.

There are lots of theories, ideas and options generated when people are looking to change a business process or culture or solve a problem. Generating ideas is not the problem.

Groups of people then swarm into action to plan, design, whiteboard, create hypothetical models and discuss how to get it right, how to bring this idea to life. This is still not creativity in the strictest sense – the idea has still not been brought to life – just the ideas, models and plans. We're close though.

People spend months planning. They wield theories and models. They have timelines, ways of working, working agreements, roadmaps and a host of amazing words and diagrams on how awesome this creative thing WILL be. They have been busy.

But they often miss the point. They haven't shipped the THING. They are letting the potential stop them from delivering it.

They are merely planning – and they get giddy with excitement about the potential this new creative thing will bring. Oh the potential. It will change the business. It is amazing. It is so creative.
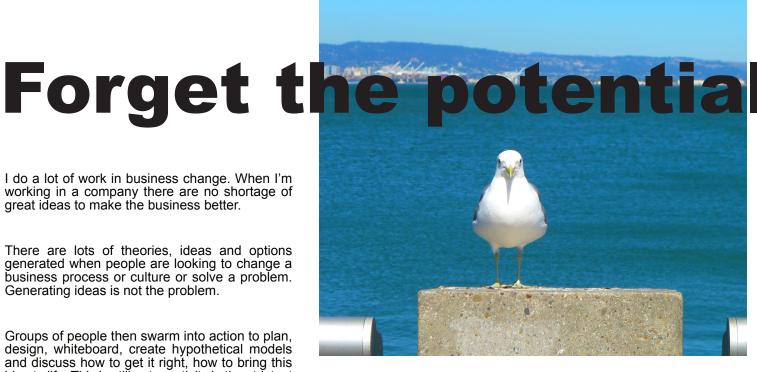
But they haven't shipped anything, built a small prototype or tested anything.

There could be potential – but they won't know until they try.

Instead, review after review, workshop after workshop, plan after plan. A veritable feast of busy planning, plotting and theorising. A plethora of opinions, dates and potential value.

But nothing gets shipped.

They are letting the potential of this new "thing" stand in the way of creating and releasing this new "thing".

In one company I would wander the floor looking at what people were doing. 90% of people were creating PowerPoints. All, no doubt, loaded with potential - but a PowerPoint is not a solution to a business problem. It is not a creative idea brought to life.

Hours are spent discussing the potential. Time is wasted defining what success looks like. Energy is burnt on fine tuning the idea.

But it's still an idea, even if you have a PowerPoint explaining it. An idea alone is not creativity – and it certainly isn't business change.

The potential of an idea is exciting.

I was excited about creating this mini book – but until I put words to paper (or MS Word), it is not creativity. There is no potential shipped. It's just an idea.

The potential is great but that potential needs realising – and that's hard work.

This giddy excitement of potential can often stop people creating the very thing in the first place.

That's not to say business ideas should be implemented with no thought, design or plan. But don't let that potential stand in the way. Test your ideas and seek council. Put a basic plan together. Then focus on shipping it – at least a prototype that can be tested.

In this company with 90% of the workforce working on potential PowerPoints, they were in trouble. They didn't need ideas and potential - they needed ideas and implementation. But fear stood in the way, just like it does with a personal creativity.

What if we get it wrong?

What if it's not right?

What if people don't like it?

What if we plan more?

You'll never find the answers to these things in the plan and the potential.

You'll find the answer by moving swiftly and trying, by shipping early and getting feedback, by being clear about what problem your creative solution is solving and testing this carefully. By bringing this potential to life.

Discussing the potential rather than shipping is procrastination. I should know, I still fall foul of this myself.

If the idea is business and life changing - take more time to think it through but keep asking yourself "am I avoiding shipping?".

And if yes, why?

Many businesses (and lives) would be better if people saw this "potential procrastination" for what it is. As a form of resistance. And as Steven Pressfield has articulated brilliantly in "[The War of Art](#)" - resistance is everywhere and it's hateful.

We must learn to overcome it - and one way to do this is spot discussions about the potential for what they are - a way to stop the potential ever being released.

therapy

I don't know about you, but I get frustrated with the world. Poor customer service, the lack of entertaining podcasts about the things I have an interest in, awful advice from consultants who have little experience. .yada yada.

I also, like you, have my inner demons, fears and annoyances to overcome. Am I really using my skills? Why are other people more successful than me? Why do I appear to see the world differently? Do people value what I do? Etc.

So, for me, creativity is therapy. It's a way to get things of my chest. It's a way to express my own thoughts, ideas and information. It's a way to make sense of the world. It's a way to understand my world. It's a way to learn more about who I am and what I want in this life.

Creativity is natural to humans, and I believe we all need it in our lives, no matter our physical, material or baseline living. We are geared to solve problems and express ourselves.

Back to Ethan Hawke – he said we often don't feel we need creativity until we feel immense emotions. We lose someone special to us, we feel guilty, we are in love – then poetry, the arts, films all become important to us. They help us to make sense of things that don't appear rational.

And for me, this is a form of therapy.

When I feel like life is getting too much it's usually because I am not creating. I am not flexing my creative muscle. I am not expressing myself.

Creativity is therapy. It helps me, and by doing so, what I create may have some tiny positive impact on other people's lives.

Tell stories

Each of us is unique. We see the world in our own special way and what we experience is only ours to own.

It's why two people can see a single event and interpret two different things from it. It's why some types of art appeal to one person, but not another.

It's why my conference talks are generally well received, but not without a few haters. It's why I look at an old, battered Mercedes and see joy, whilst others see a rusting old car.

As such, our creativity will always be unique unless we blindly copy someone else - then I'd argue that's not creativity.

We each go through our days experiencing life in our own unique way. Therefore, the logical conclusion would be that our ideas and creativity must also be unique too.

It's why I tell new conference speakers, who are worried about what people will think, to start with a story from their experience. Sure, people will still argue with it and say it's not right, but you will know it is. You will know it's what YOU experienced, understood or learned. Nobody can take that away from you.

We should also be aware that stories go where facts cannot and people resonate with stories. Stories make things emotional -and when we feel something we move.

So tell your story. Tell it as you saw it. Whether that be from the stage, in a book, in a video, through art or through the way you conduct yourself in the workplace.

Tell your story - the one from the past and the one you are writing in every single moment of your life right now.

Your story is no more or less valid than anyone else's, so hold it tight. Equally, other people have their stories to tell also - so try to listen.

Stories are how we make sense of the world. Tell yours. You may find its therapeutic.

Analogue | digital

The last few decades have seen the wrangle between digital and analogue rage.

With new apps promising to remove the need for pen and paper appearing all the time. The reality is we're hard wired to use a pen and paper. But digital tools are also helpful - and of course, in this whole debate, is your own personal preference.

I'm not going to preach which one is better and instead I will share my creative process, as in, how do I take an idea and make it reality.

The idea

It starts with the idea, or an observation, or a quote, or something that interests me.

If I have my Mark and Fold "everyday" notebook with me, then I will write down the idea. If I am traveling and have my Black and Red notebook to hand - I make notes in this. If I have just my phone I create an item in Apple Notes or ToDoist - my task manager of choice.

The key thing is I don't want to lose this nugget, seed or food. It gets captured in the quickest and easiest way for where I am.
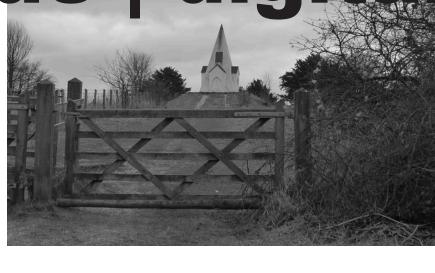
Capturing ideas as they come to mind is important. I don't want to lose this idea or inspiration. It might be the difference between a good book chapter and an awful one. It might be the seed for a new video. Who knows?

Capture it.

Curating

I capture a lot of ideas, thoughts etc. So, each week I need to curate these things. No point in capturing stuff and doing nothing with it.

Curating is revisiting the observation, quote, note or idea and reflecting on it. I typically do this weekly unless the idea is so obvious that it gets turned into something straight away.

All ideas, whether captured on paper or digital will end up in a folder in Apple Notes called ideas (assuming I don't want to discard the idea). Some will be worked on straight away, others will hang around a few days, some years. The key is having a giant list of ideas.

When something jumps out as needing to be explored, I jump out to paper. Apple Notes is good for storing, retaining, finding and sorting. But I can't explore and explode an item out in this app, it just doesn't work for me. I need the freedom of paper.

I use a yellow legal pad for exploring and exploding ideas.

There is something about the colour and the space available that helps my mind work. And frankly, Jerry Seinfeld made a career from his ideas written in a yellow legal pad. And Sam Walton built an empire using them. They also work for me.

I write. I expand. I scribble out. I doddle. I mindmap. I outline. I free write. I scribble some more. I cross out. I play with the idea.

And then it becomes something more tangible. It has depth. It has legs. Or it doesn't and I discard it.

Creativity – i.e. taking the idea and creating something from it.

If it's a new video idea, then I write it down in my monster list of videos in Trello. And any expansion of it gets stored in the Trello card.

If it's a book chapter I store it in Ulysses for that book.

The idea has gone from an idea captured on paper/digital, then stored in basic form in Apple Notes, to something that has been played with and expanded on paper – to where it belongs now The most appropriate place for that idea to get created fully. And this is usually digital.

Watch this video on how I build a [Personal Knowledge Management System](#).

Here's an example of how this very eBook went from idea to what you're reading now.

1.   I was frustrated with the sheer number of dreadful sounding newsletters I was being invited to on LinkedIn. I mean, some of them sounded SO boring. And there were thousands of them.

2.   I gave my brain a challenge. How can I do something less boring with the LinkedIn platform without it becoming a full-time commitment.

3.   A few days before this moment, unknowingly, I had given my brain some decent brain food. I have been a long-term subscriber to Craig Mod and re-read his excellent article on pop-up newsletters.

4.   So, I had an idea that a pop-up newsletter, on LinkedIn, (which wouldn't be so boring people would fall asleep), would be cool.

5.   This idea came to me on the walk to the train station from the London office. Notice – I gave the clever team in my brain an idea, I had already fed them some good food sources, then I did something that took my mind off the idea and involved moving (walking to the train station).

6.   On the train I rattled out the 31 ideas into my little Black and Red notebook. I had 37 but whittled some down during the creation of the eBook. I exploded the idea on paper.

7.   The following day I created a new project in Ulysses and created a new "sheet" for each of the chapters.

8.   Then, every lunchbreak, for two weeks during November, I wrote the content. This is the creative part – bringing these chapters to life.

9.   Then I exported the material from Ulysses into MS Word – and made use of the editor and formatting options in Word.

10.   Then I started to publish the newsletter on Jan 1st. Then it failed on Jan 6th. Then I had to rethink.

11.   I then turned it into an eBook, which took even longer due to COVID and other personal circumstances.

12.   Now you're reading it. It was published at the beginning of Feb.

13.   It took 4 months from idea to reality. It ended up being over 14k words – not far off a decent sized full book

For [videos](#), I break out the Yellow Legal Pad and expand the idea. I normally do an outline. Then I might use Ulysses to write the script.

For the [Stationery Freaks Podcast](#) we have a Trello board where we store the outlines and ideas. But the actual content I want to cover is written in my legal pad ready for me to present and talk about. I can add stuff as we chat. I can scribble any points I don't feel are relevant anymore. There is freedom on paper to explore.

But my writing of scripts and books is always done using Ulysses, and then exported to MS Word for the final draft.

The speed I can type on the computer is insane. But I only open my digital tools when I am ready to turn my outline, list or mindmap into something digital. Paper first to allow my brain to expand. Then digital to rapidly create it.

For conference talks I tend to outline in my legal pad first.

Then I write the script in Ulysses. I then edit it in MS Word.

I then print it and read it out aloud. I then change loads in the digital copy.

Then I create the slides. Slides should support the talk – not be it, which is why they follow the talk, not define it.

Then, when I've read it out aloud with the deck, and timed it, I jump back to paper.

I then write it out in longhand in a cheap A4 notebook. The whole talk. Every single word.

I do this at least three times. My goal is not to remember the talk, but instead, it's to not forget it. Writing with long hand lodges the talk in my brain.

Once it's lodged in my brain I can relax knowing I know the talk. I can recite the whole talk. I can then jump around it, play with the audience, deal with problems and I know that I know the talk. This also helps with nerves!

For each creative pursuit, I have a routine.

A routine that was built over many years of trial and error.

For me it typically starts on paper. I expand on paper. Then I bring this idea to life digitally.

That's the essence of it.

Don't listen to anyone who says you MUST work this way or that way; it's all a matter of what works for you - and that will require that you play around with your process.

But don't let that playing around stop you from shipping.

you need less

Thinking you need more than you have is a form of resistance, its procrastination.

I've been through it many times.

"When I have a better laptop, I will finally be able to write that book."

"When I have a better camera, I will launch my YouTube channel."

"When we have a proper area at work for breakouts, we will be more creative."

There are environmental hacks that can aid in your productivity, and some tools are better than others, but the reality is you have what you need right now.

Some of the most successful YouTubers started with a smart phone. Many authors still write their books in longhand on simple A4 pages, or on old laptops disconnected from the web. Many businesses innovate from a rubbish basement or badly lit office.

There are very few reasons why you cannot create with what you have.

Holding on for the right moment (or tools) is a way of delaying the hard and tedious work of bringing an idea to life.

I still fall for this.

I need more lights, or a better camera. I need this and that. And yes, once you get good at creating these things can make a difference. They can speed you up or allow you to deliver better quality, but they are not needed to get started.

I put off creating my YouTube channel for years because I thought I needed a good camera. Then I bought one and struggled to work out how to use it - so I reverted to my phone in the early days.

I thought I needed a better computer to write my first book, but then I had a quiet word with myself, and started with an old laptop. I found a quiet space in the office amongst the discarded chairs and desks and wrote every lunchtime for 8 months.

Ask yourself "do you need the right thing, or right moment to create?". Really ask this and be honest.

And the chances are you can start right now with what you have, who you are and who you have available to support you.

30 days of creativity

Cultivatedmanagement.com

mistakes

Some of the best creative endeavours are from mistakes I have made, or mistakes I see others make.

In fact, most successful businesses and products come from a failure by other companies. They fill a gap. It's why we shouldn't aim to beat the competition with a better product. We should aim to give the customer something the competition does not.

Some of my most successful books have been written from a place of failure. When I fail, I learn. And then I write about it so others may avoid the same pitfall. When I see failures in business and the workplace, they become stories to tell or opportunities to explain how things could be different.

When I fail with one of my videos I learn to fix the issue, or be clearer in my idea, or film them in different ways - creative solutions to solve problems and failures.

Mistakes are an opportunity to make yourself and the business better - and the solutions to these mistakes and problems often require high levels of creativity.

It's why I find it so frustrating when mistakes happen in workplaces and people simply move on. They let it go and don't try to understand why it failed or didn't work - and how to make themselves and the business better.

Is there a better way?

What could we do differently?

All opportunities to be creative.

Failures in my own life are rich stories and ideas for new content. They are a source of great inspiration and creativity. They are a chance to be better – and then share what I learn with others.

What failures have you made and how can you be creative from them?

How can you have an idea and bring it to life?

What new thing can you create because of a failure?

small audience

I think many people fear being creative in their own lives because they fear success.

They fear the large audience. I know I do. I don't do some projects because I worry what would happen if I succeeded! Weird. It's a form on letting the potential stop you shipping the potential!

Equally, many people give up on their creative personal pursuits because they want a bigger audience than they have.

The audience for your work is important, certainly if you seek financial returns or validation or to help people.

But creativity is not based on an audience. It is based on you having an idea, going through the process and creating something - that is worth it on its own.

If you get an audience for what you do - awesome.

But be careful, a large audience comes with its own problems. There is an expectation to deliver again and again. A bar that has been set. And this can stifle creativity greatly. It can add undue pressure and kill the creative process.

I experienced this with one of my earlier blogs. It started getting 70 – 80k views a month. It was good from a validation and audience perspective, but the audience started expecting more. The bar was high. I would get haters and un-solicited feedback from people who disagreed. I like people to disagree with me – I learn from it – but there's a way to give criticism and feedback and not everyone is adept at it. It can be hurtful, and I tended to take it personally.

Equally, a small audience is still an audience. There is still someone you are affecting by your work - and this is great. I often find that with a small audience I can still explore more - there are fewer expectations. I can learn more about what I am doing. I can experiment and be creative.

When we started the stationery freaks podcast we had less than 10 listeners. It was good - it showed at least 10 people were interested. It also gave us the space to explore, to learn, to develop our craft. Now we have thousands of listeners, and I can feel the pressure. It's still a passion project but there are listeners now.

We find ourselves influenced by the topics that do well, rather than creating for the sake of it. We must remember this and discount this - we're creating because we want to create and if it resonates with others - that is great, but the main audience is ourselves. It's hard to balance this. It's a constant tension but one that is worth it as we enjoy creating what we do.

If you are creating simply for an audience don't be surprised if your creativity diminishes and the joy from creating goes with it. Some people don't experience this, but many I speak to do. And remember what Kevin Kelly said - you only really need 1000 true fans to support a successful financial side of your endeavours.

If you pander to what does well in social media and what the algorithms of social media surface, you'll end up creating content to please the likes and views – and that may not be the content or creativity you really want to bring to the world.

Finances aside, creativity is very personal, and I'm always inspired by those who create simply for the sake of it. Sometimes they upset their audience as they create something different to what has gone before, but it is their creativity that matters - not the views, likes, reshares and opinions of their audience.

☐ Do you really need an audience to create what you want to create?

☐ Does it matter how big the audience is?

☐ What are the pros and cons of a large or small audience?

- ☐   What is it you want and why?
- ☐   What would your ideal audience size be?
- ☐   Why are you creating?

In thinking through these things we can understand what matters to us. And sometimes, creating just for the sake of it is all that matters.

at work

I am always bemused by leaders and managers who allocate time for creativity and innovation. Two weeks a year here, half a day a month here. They are forcing periods of time to be creative. They call it play, or down time, or innovation sprints, but they are time boxing it and squeezing creative exploration in between delivery.

That's not how creativity works.

Creativity and innovation are happening all the time, you just need to find it.

People are natural problem solvers and almost every problem requires some level of creativity to solve it. Problems require looking at something and coming up with an idea – a potential way to make things better.

So, the trick at work is not to instigate formalised "creativity" moments but to give people slack in the system to use their creativity to solve problems. Easier said than done. But the only way I've found for people to be messy, away from day-to-day delivery, is to not overload them with work.

This sounds counter intuitive, at least from a management perspective, but those creative breakthroughs are not only a productivity and efficiency win for the business (think new products with large revenue, improved ways of working), but they are also essential elements for the human soul.

And when people feel fulfilled in delivering work whilst also being creative, they will likely want to stay at your company. And retention of people is an important aspect of any organisation.

Creativity is everywhere. People are naturally creative, so the goal is to find people who are already being creative (usually they are operating under the radar of managers), help them, support them, build in slack and shine a light on how creativity at work is happening.

Scheduling two weeks a year for innovation or creativity is missing the point of creativity. It's also a sad situation when we expect people to be innovative and creative for such a short part of our working lives.

Important to you

I often find I'm more creative when I care deeply about something. Whether that be sharing my message, helping others in their careers or making work better. I find that creativity comes from care and attention.

When we care about something we tend to want to protect it, make it better, share it and look after it. When we don't care about something, we will often have little interest in making it better or looking after it.

So, when I hear Leaders and Managers in the workplace say that people aren't creative, I am looking for two things.

Firstly, they likely ARE being creative but it's under the radar, we've covered this in a previous chapter. Leaders must go and see for themselves.

Secondly, do people really care about what they do? Not in a care-less way (people generally want to do a good job), but do they care about the business, the mission, the goals? Do they deeply care about what they are doing? Do they care about the customers? The product? Making a difference?

Do they know how their work affects the business? Are they doing meaningful work?

If people care about their work, they will be creative in how to make it better through innovative and creativity. If they don't care, they will make do with how things are.

And in our personal lives, the more we care about something, the more energy and attention we will invest in it.

If I don't care about something, I'm unlikely to pay attention to it, take time to understand and be creative in my work with it. When I do care - well, that's when the ideas start flowing.

I tried to write a book once that people said I should write. They felt they wanted it. I had the experience, but I didn't care about the topic. I struggled through a few chapters then moved on. It was never going to get created. I had ideas, I

knew what I could create, but I had no energy and attention for the task at hand. I simply couldn't create it.

I care deeply about my brand parent brain - and helping parents remain relevant and employable. But I don't have the time to invest in it just yet - as such it eats away at me. It plagues me. It plays on my mind. And one day it will need to just be created. A podcast? Maybe. A book? Maybe. A conference? Maybe. But I care deeply - and it will happen. It kind of has to. Just not right now – I have other things I care about also.

I care deeply about the awful state of management in the workplace - hence my work in this space - and I have plenty of content, courses and consulting left to do.

I care deeply about my kids - hence I focus on them. I am creative in what we do together, and I do everything I can to support them in their education, life etc. Creativity is part of our family life, just as it is yours.

The more we care, the more we will find creativity coming naturally to us. The less we care, the less creativity we will be inclined to bring forth.

Noticing (photography)

As we've covered in previous chapters, creativity often comes from noticing the world around us, people, work, nature, processes, problems etc.

One way I've learned to notice is through photography - other art forms and hobbies are available.

I've done an in-depth video on this before but with photography you must decide what to capture.

There is always something to leave out of a photo. A good photo tells a story - and the composition of the photo is important in that storytelling.

As such, taking good photos requires noticing a wider part of the world and then deciding what to focus energy and attention on.

What, from everything around me, should I focus on? What should I take a photo of? What should I leave out? What should I pay closer attention to?

And in learning to take better photos I am learning to create stories by noticing more - and not just noticing, but then deciding what to focus on.

This is essentially a creative constraint.

I can't photograph everything. I can't include everything; I must limit what I capture. And this constraint breeds creativity. Within this constraint of the "photo frame" there is immense scope for creativity.

Landscapes, portrait, macro, street, car, conceptual….all different forms of photography and all types of creativity. The constraint of a photograph forces me to work out what I want to communicate. Constraints always drive creativity.

Constraints and learning to notice the world around us breed creativity.

views are wavering

We've covered many ideas about creativity and some reasons why we may be more creative. And we've talked about audiences.

And here's the thing. The opinions of others are always wavering. There are memes, themes, trends, genres, cultural shifts that are constantly moving.

What was interesting last year is not anymore. What people liked yesterday may not appeal today. People's opinions of our art, work and creativity are always shifting.

So, if we rely on other people for validation and feedback about what we create, we may forever be trying to pander to a moving opinion, rather than doing what we want or know to be right.

At work, we should gather evidence of the problems and come up with creative solutions. We should canvas opinion and seek inputs but sometimes our creative solutions need to be the right thing for the business, not playing to people's opinions.

As Deming said, use data, otherwise you're just another person with an opinion.

In our own creative lives we should be careful about pandering to an audience. If we create simply for a large audience we'll all end up doing dancing videos on TikTok. We must return to what we're trying to create. What are we trying to bring to the world and why? And focus on that.

Sometimes we create for the sake of it, just to bring something to life – with no target audience in mind. By doing so we are likely to create something meaningful, and over time, of quality.

And if you focus on this first, you will find the right audience. But even then, an audience's opinions are always wavering.

listen

We've already covered two important elements of creativity when it comes to problem solving.

1.   We need the skills to solve a problem

2.   We need to care about something to bring energy and attention to it

Hence, when we care and don't have the skills we become frustrated. I know I do.

And so we listen. We listen to other people who have the skills. We listen to other people who know what they are doing. We seek advice.

We listen to what is happening around us. Listening is a way to learn. It is also the greatest compliment you can give someone.

When we listen, we can learn how to solve the problem ourselves, or through other people.

Listening is learning. And when we learn and care deeply we should see our levels of creative solutions and thinking rising too. Well, at least I do :)

routines

Routines are the way to bring an idea to life. We've talked already that ideas are not creativity. Ideas are just that, ideas.

Creativity is bringing an idea to life. A new way of working, a book, a podcast, painting, stories or a new process at work.

Having the ideas is the easier part. Creating something from this idea is where it gets hard.

Routines help.

In fact, routines are the only way I've found to get stuff shipped. Almost every productive person has a routine or habit that is focused on getting through the hard work of creating something.

I wrote my first book during my lunch, every single day for 8 months. I record my videos at the same time and place (although I have lost that routine due to travel and Covid).

I write my weekly newsletter at the same time. I post it every Monday at 7:30 am UK time. I have a routine for writing, for creating, for recording, for reading and for working out. It sounds rigid, but its freedom - as Jocko Willink may say.

And the same is true at work.

Once people have had the space and time to think it's time to bring these ideas to life. And this is done through routines, habits and discipline. There is no right or wrong routine - just the one that works for you.

Read about other people's routines and try them - but don't follow it if it's not working. And try not to spend all your time reading about the routines of others at the expense of shipping your work.

The work of bringing something to life requires discipline. It requires you to say yes to your creative path and no other things. Only you will know what you are saying no to.

And routines are how you do small bits of work every day to bring something to life. The little actions add up.

Instead of waiting for inspiration to strike - let it strike at the same time every day and soon you will have created the very thing you visualised in your mind.

this is where I work

Something that has worked well for helping me creatively, is the association of a place with the act of creating. A place where I do "the work".

This helps in work and our own lives too.

A place where we do "this type" of work.

When I was working in a start-up we had a small room set up with whiteboards and pens. This room was where we held our weekly new product development meetings.

When we entered that room, on that day, with that group of people, we were innovating around new products. It became a ritual and the place helped. That room – that activity.

When I was writing my first book I would work on an old laptop on the top floor in our office building. It was an empty space where people would dump desks, chairs and old printers. It was messy and horrible, but it was "the place" where I would write.

I set up a desk and chair. When I sat down, I was writing. It became a ritual. This place, this laptop, this time, this activity.

I do the same at home now.

I use a MacBook Pro to write all my work. I sit at a certain part of my desk and when I open the Ulysses writing app (or WORD for finalising it), I am creating.

When I sit down here, with this desk setup and this machine, it is time to write.

This place, this time, this team. The place is important. Over time it becomes associated with an activity.

I've found it's easy to undo this association by doing some other activity at this place. For example, when I started checking social and doing my chores (tax returns etc) it ruined the ritual of my desk setup. I had to move to another place for everyday tasks so I could reclaim my time and space.

The environment helps - and sure, we'd all like a dedicated writing/creativity hut/tower/studio, but I've found that holding out for those things is merely procrastination.

Many of us aren't lucky enough to have a studio but that should not prevent us from idea thinking and the associated creative making. The trick is blocking out the world by having a ritual, routine and place (no matter how messy).

With that, go forth and create a time and place to work - see if it works for you.

Remember to say : This is where I do X. And over time it becomes a trigger, an environmental affordance to the activity itself.

And if you really want to step it up, there is science to suggest that when you wear a certain piece of clothing associated with a task, over time you perform better. (Find out more in the comms workshop).

So, find an outfit, a hat, a jacket, some slippers - whatever it takes to associate the clothing with the activity. A place, a routine, some clothing > create.

body of work

I have a diverse set of projects going on.

I run Cultivated Management and the associated YouTube channel. I co-host the Stationery Freaks podcast. I run Parent Brain. I have photo projects on-going.

I have other writing activities that are books or scripts not related to any of the main brands. I run a local car meetup. I'm involved in a lot.

For years I procrastinated because I couldn't see the thread that hung them all together. I felt I needed a brand / separation between them all.

I was looking for the thread but realised the thread between these projects can only be seen in retrospect - by looking back and seeing how they all piece together. This is a body of work.

I was trying to define what this body of work should be upfront, and it stopped me shipping my work. I realise now I will never know ahead of time what thread ties my body of work together. Only when I look back will I see the thread – and the associations in time and space.

In the art world, a body of work is a consistent set of work that could, for example, be shown in a gallery.

In my world I don't see it like this. I see my body of work as work that represents who I am and what I'm thinking when I create the work. I see a body of work as a collection of work I am proud of, whether there is an obvious thread or not. My own little mark on the world. Something for my kids to look back on and see what their dad created. Work I can look back on and be proud of.

Work that meant something to me, whether it is successful or not. A legacy of sorts. My own little contribution to the world, that, sadly, will crumble to nothing over time.

But the point is not longevity in that sense, it's to feel like I've created something valuable in my little time on the planet. And in doing so I have expressed myself, shared what I know, given my boys something to dive into now (or later) and used my creative drive to create something;

hopefully something that helps, inspires or entertains other people.

Then again, I'm a sentimental old fool.

Your body of work will probably only make sense in retrospect. And if you try too hard to create a body of work that feels tight and consistent, you may not be creating what your soul and mind feel compelled to work.

And certainly, in today's vacuous, algorithm driven world of social media, if you try to reach the audiences and have major success with what you create, you'll likely create something you're possibly not proud of.

You'll end up dancing on TikTok for the likes – now of course, this may be your goal .

Follow what you feel compelled to create and you will find an audience and you will build a body of work.

And when you look back, you'll be proud of what you've created (even the low-quality work that is created on your path of learning how to get better). It's all part of a journey through who you are and how you grow. And when you look back you'll find the thread that ties it all together.

quite word

So, you've had an idea and you're starting to bring it to life. This is creativity - creating something that didn't exist before, a new book, a new way of working, a new product, a new video yada yada yada.

As we've discussed - there is an immense amount of hard work involved in creating something.

It therefore pays to know why you are creating it - and to remind yourself of that every single day. I call this "having a quiet word with myself".

I have a painted picture of what I'd like my life to be like in 10 years time. It describes who I am trying to become, who I will be helping and what I will be offering the world.

There are some materialistic things in there, but mostly it's about how I spend my time.

I have 5-year goals that lead to this ten-year plan. A halfway check-in. I then plan 1-year goals leading to the 5-year goals. So, each year I write out some goals that, if I complete them, will be leading me to the 5-year plan, which in turn should be fulfilling my 10-year plan.

I have this written down in a Moleskine notebook. This is also my journal, where I reflect (almost daily) on how life is going.

Having a quiet word with myself is about reading through this plan every-day to remind myself why I must try to be disciplined and focused on my day. A way to stop the day running away with me, or my head dropping if things don't quite go to plan.

This is having a word with myself. I added the word "quiet" because I must remind myself not to be too hard on myself if I fall short.

Creativity is painful. The idea is the easy part. Bringing something to life from it can be brutal. It's hard work. It can be tedious. It can be frustrating. So, you need to remind yourself why you're doing it.

Its why people don't ship that book they're trying to ship. It gets hard – so they stop. Or that new way of working in the workplace – it's hard, so people give up when the enthusiasm has gone.

I try to read the life goals and plan every day - it helps me to remember why I do what I do. When it gets tough, this helps to ground me in the reasons behind the structure, routines, habits and hard work.

This quiet word with myself is important.

It helps to keep me focused on what's important when it gets hard.

For me, it's therapy. And it also helps me to stay focused. This is essential to creating anything that means something to me. It's far too easy to give up. To ship something sub-par because it was too hard for me to complete. It's all too easy to get distracted. The resistance can be strong.

Having a quiet word with yourself is an important part of getting good work done.

Just be kind to yourself too.

hard work

Bringing any idea to life takes energy, time and attention. Whether this be at work or in your own life. It is hard. Hard work.

You've likely experiences this. You start with enthusiasm, you have energy, you get some stuff done. Then it gets hard. Resistance sets in. Distractions become interesting. You find ways to avoid doing the hard work.

It's why, when the energy is high (in life and work), I try to frontload the project.

I try to get as much done in the first few weeks or months before it becomes hard, and the enthusiasm is waning. It's the same at work. People set goals and deadlines and tend to even-out the work between the start and finish. This often results in a mad rush at the end. Front load. Get most of the work done whilst you're fresh and enthusiastic.

But before you start any creative endeavour, whether at work or in your own life, be sure to understand whether it is worth it. How much do you want this?
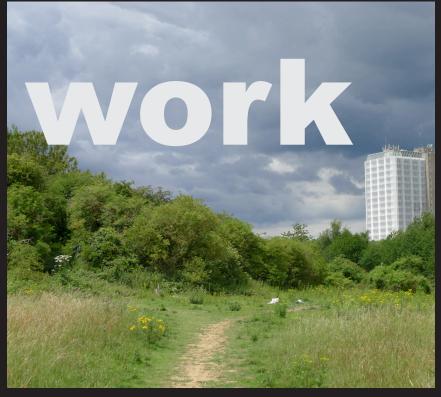
How much are you willing to give up?

What will it really take to bring this to life? Is everyone ready for the hard work? The bad work? The tiring work?

As a conference speaker, I remember a year where everyone seemed to be talking about avoiding bad work. "We refuse to do bad work". They weren't just talking about the immoral, illegal, dangerous work - we should all avoid this. They were talking about the boring, tedious, difficult, gnarly work that all businesses have.

What a cop out.

It's through this "bad" work that we grow, we learn, we create things of value. There is little in life and work that is worth achieving if it's easy. If it's easy it's likely not new, innovative, valuable. The hard work is a sign. The bad (gnarly and tricky work) is also a sign. Where it exists is where value is.

By breaking through this hard work, you will learn something. You will become better for it. And it's really the only way to be creative.

It starts with a good idea, it becomes an outline or plan, then the hard work begins - making it. The bad work. The boring, tedious, difficult work. But it's worth it if it means something to you.

Whilst writing this eBook I found loads of ways to procrastinate. But I've learned to overcome that urge. I've learned to ignore the easier things. I've learned to focus. But it's very hard. And like everything, it requires practice.

The world is likely full of great ideas and half implemented creative pursuits - and it's a shame. And it's likely because it became too hard, and someone gave up.

So, consider this before you begin, keep reminding yourself of why you're doing it and push through the hard work. Even if what you create doesn't solve a problem or garner attention, it doesn't matter. That's not always the point. Sometimes we just need to bring something to life. And in doing so, and in overcoming the hard work, we will grow because of it.

take time

Good ideas often take a while to bring to life. Sure, you hear about the overnight successes but behind that is years of thinking, gaining experience, pondering, planning and more.

Sure, you hear about these people who pump out 5 books a month on Amazon. But have you read any of them? There's a reason why mainstream published authors often don't have that level of output.

Good quality takes time.

How much time it takes depends on the idea and the value, but don't try to rush it.

It will flow and arrive if you sit down and do the work and push through the resistance. If you build good routines and habits, you will slowly get it done – little by little, day by day.

It will take what it takes. But don't let time fly by as you procrastinate or get distracted or avoid the hard work.

It's a fine balance which is why I'm a fan of routines and habits. A little bit each day, or however often you can find time.

At work the same thing is true. Many managers and leaders want this new idea yesterday, but it takes time to truly create something new and of value.

If you rush, you're likely to cut corners. Remember, we're always trying to look back at what we did and be proud of the body of work, whether in our personal creative pursuits or in work. And to be proud of something requires you create what you feel good about - and only you will know what that is.

I look back at some of my early work and cringe. It's not what I want to create now, but it was right for the moment, and I am proud of it as it was a stepping stone in my creative journey.

The creative output that I spent the right amount of time on is the work I am most proud of. The work I rushed through, less so.

Take time. Do it right first time.

create yourself

The art of creativity is not just about bringing something new to the world (that is the tangible outcome) but something more satisfying is the fact you are creating yourself in the process.

You are becoming who you want or need to be. You are learning about yourself and your own capabilities. You are expressing yourself and that's important.

We often only focus on the tangible outcomes but that is to miss the bigger reason for creativity; we are humans, and we need it. The very act of creating something that means something to you, is a gratifying process.

That new way of working in the business - well, that's going to make you better, or at least you'll learn from it.

That new book you want to write - you'll learn a lot about yourself, your abilities, and your thoughts.

We are always becoming ourselves when we create.

If we let the rest of the world depict what we think and do and create, then we're missing a chance to create a body of work and to express ourselves. We're missing a chance to become who we need to become. We're letting life pass us by.

And we're not alive for long in the grand scheme of things. Wouldn't it be a shame to not explore our creativity whilst we have the chance to do it.

innovation stack

We've talked a lot about the creative process, mostly in our personal lives, but what about at work. How can we bring ideas to life?

Well, I've been implementing a process of innovation long before I read about Steve Blank's model, called the Innovation Stack.

The innovation stack is about moving from problem, to idea, to operationalisation. This is creativity and innovation in action - and it's brilliant, but hard.

My version starts with a problem to solve or an idea to explore. There is the usual brainstorming, testing the problem and thinking through the possible solutions.

Once we're happy we have a potential solution, we move to a pilot stage where we try the idea in a controlled environment.

We bring it to life in the smallest yet most tangible way we can. We test this and seek feedback. Is it solving the problem we set out to solve? Does it make our lives better? Is it a good idea worth pursuing?

After this, and assuming the feedback is positive, we scale this pilot. Does it still work? Is it still good? Does it scale?

And once we've done this, we make it operational. We turn it into processes, routines and habits. We make it the very fabric of the business.

Think about a new way of working.

Many companies launch giant companywide initiatives to be more "agile" or something like this. The whole business goes for it, and it fails in many parts.

Wouldn't it be better to try it with one team, one department or one group of people? Test it, prove it, iron the idea out. Once it's working, scale it wider.

Then wider. Then wider still and turn it into the operating model of the business.

This is what I do with all my work as a consultant. I implement potential solutions I've seen work before (after all, experimenting with grand theories, on other people's budgets, is not a good way to work.) We go small, we prove it, we get results, we scale, we turn it into operational ways of working.

The innovation stack really is a good model for taking ideas, innovation and creativity and turning it into something.

Widen awareness

Its highly likely that I wouldn't be able to solve an engineering problem with a new building or come up with a creative new building material to make it easier for building houses. I have very little experience or knowledge in this area. And my math sucks.

Likewise - I wouldn't be able to come up with a cure for a disease. I have very little knowledge in this area.

But I could solve a problem in business, or improve a process, or help people communicate more, or tell better stories.

I can write, podcast, create videos and more. Why? Because I've been widening my awareness and experience in these areas - and it's allowed me to tackle many problems with a wide set of experiences and skills.

We're unlikely to be creative in fields that we know little about. But the wider we build our experience, knowledge, mistakes, knowledge and capabilities in the areas we do occupy, the more creative we will be when it comes to solving problems.

We need the skills and experience to solve the problems at work. We need experiences to tell an interesting story.

We need a broad experience to be an effective consultant. We need inputs and food for our brain. We need to learn by doing something – task acquisition.

I've found that the wider I learn and experience, the more creative I become.

Stocks and flows

I first read about this idea of stocks and flows a few years back and it changed my creative life.

Social media has us wrapped up in thinking we should always be sharing, always be involved, always part of the party. Businesses believe they must spend heavily on social media to get noticed. Individuals are playing to the algorithms all the time. But social media is a flow. And flows are ephemeral, at the mercy of the tech companies and can disappear overnight.

Stocks on the other hand are things you create that last the test of time. Books, blog posts, videos, businesses (if it's a successful one), art, podcasts and more.

When we spend time in the flow, we are likely not spending time on stocks. But stocks are our creative output. They are our body of work. They are the things we'll look back on with pride.

I've wasted too much time on LinkedIn and Twitter in the past. I've spent too much time in the flow rather than using that time to build stocks.

I for one, at the end of my life, will not look back on my LinkedIn feed and say how brilliant it was. I would rather look back at the stocks I created and see a body of work.

When I'm in the flow, I'm not creating stocks. Equally, we should also realise that stocks alone may not be the point. We may need to indulge in the flow to point people at the stocks.

Stocks are my life's work. Flows let people know I'm still alive.

The same is true in work. I've seen people spend more time on Yammer, in the community groups, in every community of practice going rather than doing the work they are paid to do. They're more concerned with letting people know how great they are, rather than being great and letting their stocks speak for themselves.

At the end of the day where do I want to focus my energy and attention? On a banal and somewhat tedious flow of updates? Or on creating stocks I can look back on and be proud of?

Would my kids rather scan through my Tweets when I'm no longer here? Or read books I wrote? Would they care about my LinkedIn posts? Or be more interested in seeing their dad on the many videos I create?

Only they can answer that question, but I know, that looking back on my life, I'd rather have created stocks than flows.

thank you

Thank you for reading this eBook – I hope it has been helpful for you.

Rob.

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