

The C-Suite Secret to Success: Creative Leadership



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Think left and think right and think low and think high.
Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!
— Dr. Seuss, *Oh, The Thinks You Can Think!*

In this beginner book by Dr. Seuss, young children are encouraged to think creatively and celebrate the power of imagination. But as we get older, that kind of thought freedom seems to get lost in both our business and personal lives until eventually creativity becomes a professional skill associated only with artists or those working in the narrowly defined ‘creative’ sector. Right?

Wrong. At least in today’s world. Creativity and leadership have quickly become a popular class couple in both for-profit and nonprofit schools of thought, singing original duets and dancing an imaginative pas de deux around the organizational ballroom.

Today’s innovation economy represents a future that values innovative thinking and inspired problem solving, as reinforced in a 2010 global IBM study¹ where CEOs revealed that the most valuable C-level skill was “creativity.” The general public agrees as evidenced by a 2011 Adobe survey² where 80 percent of people felt unlocking creativity is critical to economic growth. And no doubt many nonprofit leaders would readily agree as they struggle to balance double bottom lines (mission and financial), leverage limited resources, and achieve measurable impacts. Across the board, creative leadership is in high demand.

How does one define creative leadership?

While there is no standard definition, there are many creative qualities that nonprofit leaders share with forward-thinking entrepreneurs as well as seasoned business executives. They are visionaries who see a future of possibility and opportunity, demanding innovation. They can adapt often and swiftly, learning from failure and are comfortable with change. They are curious, questioning, and imaginative in their approaches, while also tenacious and resilient in their passionate pursuit of

¹ IBM 2010 Global CEO Study, IBM, May 2010, <https://www-03.ibm.com/press/us/en/pressrelease/31670.wss>.

² State of Create Study, Adobe, April 2012, http://www.adobe.com/aboutadobe/pressroom/pdfs/Adobe_State_of_Create_Global_Benchmark_Study.pdf.

success. At the same time, they are able to lead and inspire others to explore their own creative potential in jointly achieving organizational goals.

It is easy to think of many nonprofit CEOs and executive directors who embody these qualities, but other superstars are often overlooked. One example at nonprofit Citi Performing Arts Center is the popularity of its annual Oscars-inspired Employee Awards Celebration. Nominations are peer generated and reviewed in five areas recognizing outstanding creative leadership: team, fiscal, innovation, service, and general leadership. For example, last year's General Leadership winner from the Finance team won these accolades from peers throughout the organization: "...She explains things...and wants you to understand what you're doing...she is a great mentor and leader...who is dedicated to her job and wants others to move ahead as well... ." Now in its ninth year, this is a simple but powerful illustration of how nonprofits can find creative leadership being defined in different ways at all levels of the organization.

Is creative leadership important?

According to a 2014 study by the Fluent Group, college millennials believe that being creative is a key to a great career³ although historically, creativity has taken a back seat to efficiency, quality, and operational effectiveness. But today, creative leadership has never been more important in the nonprofit sector. Authors Trilling and Fadel write "As we journey deeper into the 21st century, creativity and innovation will become the brightest stars in the constellation of 21st century skills. New ideas, innovative products, novel services, and fresh solutions to local and global problems will increasingly power our emerging Innovation Age."⁴ And according to *The Creative Dividend*, a thought leadership paper commissioned by Adobe in 2014, companies that cultivated the creativity experience achieved greater revenue growth and a commanding market share, while also enjoying a high performance work environment.

In 2014, the Nonprofit Finance Fund reported that according to its *State of the Sector* survey that 80 percent of respondents reported an increase in demand for services, the sixth straight year of increased demand, and that 56 percent were unable to meet demand in 2013—the highest reported in the survey's history.⁵ With such daunting challenges and compelling potential for impact, the need for more creative leadership in the nonprofit sector has become both vitally urgent and critically important.

³ Study commissioned by Fluent Group and Citi Performing Arts Center in 2014 revealed 81 percent of college millennials agree that creative people are more successful in the business world.

⁴ Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel, *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times*, Jossey-Bass, October 5, 2009, p. 104.

⁵ 2014 State of the Nonprofit Sector, Nonprofit Finance Fund, Executive Summary, <http://nonprofitfinancefund.org/state-of-the-sector-surveys>.

What does this mean for the future of the sector?

Recognized for their resourcefulness, nonprofits have a unique opportunity to take the lead in cultivating the creative leaders of tomorrow. The Center for 21st Century Skills defines the foundational skills for 21st century success as the following: creativity and innovation; information literacy; collaboration; problem solving; communication; and responsible citizenship. At Citi Performing Arts Center's, the "City Spotlights Leadership Program" illustrates how creative leadership skills can be developed. Working with inner-city teens using the arts to develop creative confidence as part of a seven-week summer jobs program, they learn to deliver community workshops, flash mob performances, and even present at the State House—ultimately reaching over 15,000 people each summer. The program has had transformational results: 71 percent strongly agree that they see themselves as a leader (versus 42 percent before the program), 90 percent are more confident in pursuing their future, and 90 percent can envision a future where they can achieve their potential. These teens have gone on to introduce the Governor, participate on a panel with the Dalai Lama, and championed social change in their local communities, illustrating the impact that this next generation of creative thinkers, doers, and leaders is already having.

Resources for Inspiration:

- [Forbes 15 Books for Creative Leaders to Read in Spring 2015](#)
- [Creative Confidence: The book, toolkits, and more](#)
- [Harvard Business Review](#) blog, "How to Find and Amplify Creativity," by Bruce Nussbaum
- [Video: City Spotlights Leadership Program: In Their Own Words](#)

Want to cultivate creativity from within? This example comes from a recent *Boston Globe* article "Promoting creativity can increase results,"⁶ which describes a team contest across four Deloitte LLP offices in India to develop solutions to a wide range of challenging, real-life problems. The program was so successful in nurturing a creative culture that valued team work, it has now expanded to several university campuses in India. There are many more examples of both individuals and groups learning how to develop their creativity; take a moment to explore Tom and David Kelley's best-selling book *Creative Confidence: Unleashing the Creative Confidence in Us All* for even more inspiration.

Oh the Thinks You Can Think Of ...

If you are part of a mission-driven organization that is striving to achieve breakthrough results, creative leadership is essential to success. The good news is that every person has untapped creative potential and that creativity can and should be nurtured, coached, and cultivated in school, business, and life. The world, and especially nonprofits, desperately needs creative thinkers, doers, and leaders to explore the possibilities. A future without them is simply unimaginable.

⁶ MIT Sloan Management Review, "Encouraging employee creativity boosts innovation, results," *Boston Globe*, Sunday MBA, March 1, 2015, <http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2015/03/01/encouraging-employee-creativity-boosts-innovation-results/>.

Need to Sharpen Your Creative Edge?

People who see themselves as creative leaders have developed a creative confidence that allows them to act as ‘disruptors’ while developing new business, programs, services, and solutions to local and global problems that no one has done before. Not sure you are leveraging your creative leadership potential at work? Here are a few areas that can help you imagine a more inspiring future:

- **Experimentation:** Do you challenge yourself inside and outside of the office by trying new things? Do you enjoy exploring the unknown and sometimes taking the road less traveled? Do you believe that to be creative, you need to act creative?
- **Learning:** Do you approach problem solving by drawing upon multiple perspectives and experiences? Do you network with a diverse set of people (from different backgrounds, sectors, experiences) to broaden your thinking?
- **Questioning:** How do you define a challenge, unmet need, or opportunity? Does every problem have only one solution? When opportunity knocks, is there only one way to open that door? Do you accept conventional wisdom or probe the assumptions it is based on?
- **Imagination:** Can you imagine alternative futures? Is thinking-outside-the-box and brainstorming fun and invigorating? Or do you use the reality of limited resources as a convenient excuse to not imagine the possibilities?

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