The Future of Imagination in Organisations –

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Abstract

Imagination is one of the key drivers to evolution in individuals and organisational success in businesses, yet is underrepresented in today's business models. Imagination is the process through which individual's picture objects and events that do not yet exist from the combination or alteration of established concepts. In this essay I suggest that there are four areas that organisations will benefit from better understanding the potential of imagination: 1. Aggregate images of the future, the combination of multiple individual mental maps to produce a broad and diverse outlook on a future or problem. 2. Problem solving and using imagination to create solutions that diverge from current thinking 3. Communities of practice, groups of passionate people that can imagine and discuss solutions and futures, and 4. employee engagement through alignment of imagination in all employees.

"Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire, you will what you imagine and at last you create what you will." George Bernard Shaw 1856-1950

Imagination is one of the critical functions of human development and an important part of human beings, yet this power is not fully appreciated in today's rational numbers based environment. In this essay I will suggest that by developing and incorporating imagination to decide what "could be" will both improve individual and organisational innovation and development. I will propose that imagination is the way of the future; and that managers will need to step outside their preconceived mental models to keep pace with an ever changing reality. By engaging imagination, it will lead to better employee engagement and should be a major contributor to both strategy and decision making processes.

Imagination is a central driver of evolution in humans (Szulanski & Amin, 2001), likewise it is also a key driver in organisations, where there is a constant need to adapt to the rapidly changing and complex external environment. Imagination can be defined as "the process through which individuals envision and/or create objects and events that do not yet exist from the combination and recombination or transformation of established concepts" (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2005, p. 317). Imagination is effective at calling upon a broad use of participant knowledge, and is fundamental in gaining access to intuition, creativity and a more complete assessment of the business and its environment (Anthony, Bennett, Maddox, & Wheatley, 1993). Imagination therefore is the key to innovative businesses, yet little is yet known about the processes and underlying mechanisms that best engage it (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2005).

To maximise the potential of imagination managers must be able to overcome the limitations of their own mental models to develop a new understanding that will ensure the development of innovative, but feasible strategies to deal with an unfolding reality. (De Wit & Meyer, 2004). Human beings deal with ongoing bombardment of information through the use of these mental models, which provides an internal representation in the mind of how the external world works (McShane & Travaglione, 2007). Mental models are developed overtime through education, experience and interaction with others, and once these models are created they become fixed and reinforced in the mind, becoming difficult to change. These models are important to humans as they form the basis of intuition and judgement, and quickly help to capture the "big picture" through assessment of a situation by blending

in all types of qualitative information. However to be innovative we must constantly challenge and rebuild our mental models, and imagining new ways to understand the world that do not logically follow from past beliefs (De Wit & Meyer, 2004).

Many people, when describing a creative breakthrough, tell of a process in which they stopped thinking of the problem, and whilst engaged in a completely different activity, they experienced the imaginative breakthrough that allowed for tremendous progress in their work (FitzPatrick, 2002). Therefore if imagination is not a self-activating force, but a potential that is engaged by outside stimuli, organisations can take action to try to facilitate this process (FitzPatrick, 2002). Whist what the imagination produces is never identical to the intentions that activate it, creativity skills can be increased by the learning and practice of techniques to improve flexibility and intellectual independence (Amabile, 1997).

Literature shows positive support the use of imagination in organisations; however the key question is how to successfully incorporate it into a practical application. In this essay I am going to recommend four useful uses of imagination; creating an aggregated view of the future, problem solving, as a key component in developing communities of passion, and in achieving better buy-in and engagement from employees.

1. Aggregate image of the future

Mental imagery and creative thinking allows managers to create and actively direct vivid projections of an often confusing and uncertain outside environment (Anthony, Bennett, Maddox, & Wheatley, 1993). Concentrating on creative abilities of individuals however is not sufficient for creating successful innovations, as most innovations require a collaborative creative effort that often exceeds the borders of the individuals (Steiner, 2009). Under the right conditions, teams make better decisions, develop better products and services and create a more energised workforce compared with employees working alone (McShane & Travaglione, 2007). Teams with diverse membership and a collectivist orientation are likely to have a broader resource upon which to draw from when generating ideas, combining them and subjecting them to critical evaluation (Bassett-Jones, 2005), providing aggregate images of the future or solution to problems.

The challenges with using a combined mental model for looking to the future or solving complex problems is it is reliant on how accurate, realistic, and diverse the members of the team are as they envision and apply future scenarios (Anthony, Bennett, Maddox, & Wheatley, 1993). Mental models are inherently bias, and once formed are difficult to break (De Wit & Meyer, 2004). When an individual's mental model is supported by similar beliefs within a firm, industry or country, the ability to question key aspects of a mindset will usually be rather limited. Therefore by mixing teams with people that have diverse mental models, may allow the combination and questioning of status quo easier (De Wit & Meyer, 2004).

2. Problem solving

Imagination helps by focusing on solutions not on the problem (Mintzberg & Westley, 2001). Because visualisation enlighten and hones the dynamics of a projected scenario, mental imagery procedures enable decision maker's to envision other future environmental conditions (Anthony, Bennett, Maddox, & Wheatley, 1993). By using imaginative techniques across the organisation, decision makers can pull together information, find multiple problems, and generate diverse solutions (ogilvie, 1998).

The challenges of using imagination in problem solving is there is also a need for logical thinking, for which De Wit and Meyer (2004) suggest is a paradox situation, that is that they are incompatible, however both required. Mintzberg and Westley (2001) suggest that there are three approaches to problem solving, each individually important, but could be combined to advantage. These approaches include: the facts (planning), the ideas (visions) and the experiences (visceral). The "facts" are heavily used in today's organisations, however it is suggested that organizations should broaden their focus and place more emphasis on visions and imagination (Mintzberg & Westley, 2001).

3. Communities of passion

Creativity is most likely to occur when people's skills overlap with their strongest interests and deepest passions (Amabile, 1997). Managers need to nurture passion by creating a work environment that downplays the obstacles and fosters stimulants to creativity (Amabile, 1997). One way to nurture this passion is through the introduction of communities of

practice, where groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint venture. These communities encourage the sharing of experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that encourage new approaches to problems (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) and to challenge mental models, after all "nothing innovative happens without someone getting fired up about an idea and then getting others enthused about and supportive of the plan" (Cross, Linder, & Parker, 2006, p. 26).

The challenges of communities of passion are that there are difficulties in tangibility placing value on the investment of item that these take. Key problems are that the results are often delayed, and generally appear in work of teams and business units, not in the communities themselves (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Wenger and Snyder (2000) suggest that the best way to understand value is by listening to members' stories, which can clarify the complex relationships, knowledge and performance.

4. Employee engagement

A proactive approach to business engages and fully uses employee imagination (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2005). People are more creative when they are motivated primarily by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction and challenge of the work itself (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010). The development of different possibilities are likely to lead to longer lasting and more rewarding jobs for employees when exposed to such work environments (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2005). What is clear, however, is that the organisational environment and the resources available to employees can mobilize or inhibit imagination in the work setting. Fitzpatrick (2002) argues that firms need to take appropriate initiatives to facilitate this engagement and encourage employees.

Whilst the outcome of innovation projects rarely results in a successful commercial application, managers should not down play the importance of both the intellectual wealth generated by teams as well as the feeling of empowerment that employees experience when they are given the space to harbour their creativity in such innovative projects.

In summary I have suggested that imagination is a critical part of organisational development, and is essential in ensuring that the business keeps pace with the increasingly complex and competitive environment. Managers will need to ensure that imagination is promoted in all aspects of the organisation, ensuring that there is support to allow employees to think outside their preconceived mental models that have been forged overtime. By engaging imagination, it will lead to better employee engagement and should be a major contributor to both strategy and decision making process.

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