

# SUMMARY

## THE MYTHS OF CREATIVITY

DAVID BURKUS



# **Summary of “The Myths of Creativity” by David Burkus**

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Learn the Truth About How Innovative Companies  
and People Generate Great Ideas.

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# QuickRead

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# Introduction

What is a myth? Today, a myth is a story that has been passed down for generations as a way to explain certain mysterious events. Back before science, cultures developed stories as a way to explain the world around them and teach one another the rights and wrongs of behavior. The ancient Greeks, for example, used myths to understand everything from the forces of nature to what happened after death. They even used myths to describe the mysterious process of creativity. Creativity, they believed, came from the muses who received and answered the prayers of creativity seekers like ancient writers, musicians, and even engineers. Thinkers like Plato believed poets drew all of their creativity from one or more of the nine muses. From Callipe, the muse of poetry or Clio, the muse of history. In fact, Homer's epic poems *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* begin with a prayer to a muse, hoping to draw inspiration to tell an epic story. This belief isn't limited to just ancient Greeks. Similarly, theologians from many religions, including Christianity, have long believed that God is their source of inspiration. When people were asked where the idea for a song, poem, or invention came from, the answer was always the same: from God. However, many people today have adopted this same mentality. For instance, when was the last time you said you were going to do something you've always wanted to do, only to never do it because you were waiting for a sign from the universe or for a source of inspiration? People do this all the time. They fail to start their business because simply didn't have the right idea or they never start writing that book because they never found inspiration.

So while we may not necessarily believe that creativity comes from the muses, we still find ourselves relying on the belief that an outside force is needed to generate great ideas. But author David Burkus believes we have everything we need inside ourselves. You may be thinking, "I'm just simply not creative. How is it that others are much more creative than me?" Well, according to Teresa Amabile, a Harvard Business School professor, creativity is a starting point for innovation but it is not necessary. Instead, creativity is influenced by four components: domain-relevant skills,

creativity-relevant processes, task motivation, and the surrounding social environment. When these four components overlap, creative work happens. As you read, you'll learn about these four components as well as the myths of creativity that David Burkus debunks to prove that creativity comes from within, not from the divine. So if you're ready to get your creative juices flowing, let's begin.

# The Four Components of Creativity

If creativity isn't an innate trait, then where does it come from? As mentioned previously, Harvard Business School professor, Teresa Amabile, believes that innovation happens when the four components of creativity align. The first of the four components is *domain-relevant skills* (commonly called expertise) and is simply the knowledge, technical skills, or talent an individual possesses in a given domain. I mean, a composer wouldn't write a symphony without at least *some* knowledge on musical keys, scales, and harmony, right?

Many of us admire these composers and never imagine ourselves being as good or as creative; however, we fail to recognize and see the years of practice and hard work it took to gain such expertise. The second component is the *creativity-relevant processes* which are the methods people use to approach a problem and generate solutions. In other words, these are techniques that people use to examine a problem, combine previous knowledge, and attempt to provide a solution that goes against the grain. And while many people believe the people who can successfully do this are simply better creative problem solvers, the truth is, anyone can learn the skills necessary to generate ideas and provide out-of-the-box solutions.

The third component is *task motivation* which is simply the willingness to engage. It's the passion, or the desire, to solve a problem for the challenge it presents or the mere satisfaction of working on it. For instance, the architect with all the knowledge and skill to generate new perspectives might be the perfect person for the job; however, if she lacks the motivation for the challenge, then her expertise will simply go to waste. The final influencer in creativity is the only component that exists outside the individual: *social environment*.

You see, we all exist inside a larger environment, one that influences us on a larger scale than we believe. The environment can either positively or

negatively affect creative expression. Think about the environment in which you work, are new ideas welcomed or harshly criticized? How is collaboration utilized? Is there freedom in how problems are approached? These questions and more must be asked to assess whether or not the organization's social environment aims to foster or diminish the creativity of its members and employees.

In the end, these four factors, if designed with conscious intent, will eventually lead to the flow of creative ideas. For instance, domain skills can easily be improved. Think about the amateur photographer who can work hard and practice learning new techniques for light and her skills in editing and photoshop. Likewise, creativity-related processes can be learned too. People can learn how to brainstorm and how to utilize problem-solving methods or lateral thinking techniques. Once someone can generate more ideas, the quality of their work begins to increase. Both of these creative methodologies can be taught but they are irrelevant without the motivation to work. The hardest component to implement, however, is the social environment. It's simply up to the management team to decide how open they are to new ideas and whether or not they aim to foster creativity.

At the end of the day, creativity is less about divine inspiration and more about designing the right ecosystem and filling it with people who are open to new and diverse perspectives.



# The Realities of the Eureka Myth

Despite popular belief, creativity isn't something that simply "falls from the sky" and appears as a sudden flash of insight. Of course, we believe in this myth because of stories like Isaac Newton who was simply sitting under a tree when an apple fell on him. This event *sparked* his realization of gravity and suddenly, a new idea came to be! As great as this story sounds, it is largely untrue and simply feeds into the idea that creativity falls upon certain individuals out of thin air.

This is called the *Eureka Myth* and here's why it is wrong. You see, while Newton certainly *did* observe an apple fall out of the tree, he observed the event with someone else and the two then engaged in a scientific discussion. The discussion involved the concept of gravity and what they already understood about its forces. So instead of the revelation simply falling upon Newton by chance one day, the idea came to be after an interaction between two intelligent individuals. From that point on, Newton spent years intensely researching until he could finally create the mathematical formula on gravity.

According to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, innovation and insight only occur after a series of steps that many people move through before their idea comes to life. In other words, ideas can only emerge from a foundation of knowledge and preparation. For example, people that we consider to be highly creative, like da Vinci and Edison, were working on multiple projects at once. This process allowed them time to make connections and develop ideas while they worked on other ideas as well.

At the end of the day, the *Eureka Myth* is false and ideas, like gravity, are the result of hard work on a problem or project. "The answers are there, but they often need time to incubate into our subconscious as we connect ideas. Sometimes the connection comes from elements of older ideas."

# The Myth that Creativity is a Gift

Oftentimes, you compare your creativity with others and believe that someone else is just naturally more creative. We think the skill is innate or that the gift of creativity has luckily been bestowed upon that person. Creativity was inherited or it's in their genes. We view creativity as a limited resource accessible only to a rare breed of individual. This is the *Breed Myth*, which is the belief that creativity is in one's personality or genes. In reality, scientific research has proven that creativity is not something we are born with.

Many organizations even make a clear distinction between “creative” types” and “suits.” While the “suits” are the traditional business people that work in departments like accounting, finance, operations, and management, “creatives” are typically found in departments like marketing, advertising, or design. In many cases, the creatives are easier to spot: they don't wear suits. Oftentimes, they are even kept separate from the suits people and sometimes rules apply differently to each group. For instance, the current U.S. tax code allows companies to utilize certain exemptions from the federal minimum wage and overtime regulations if the individual's work meets the definition of “creative.” The definition includes those whose profession involves, “invention, diligence, imagination, originality, or talent.” This distinction is perhaps the reason why the Breed Myth is widely accepted.

For example, after Albert Einstein's death, scientists removed and preserved his brain so psychologists and medical doctors could examine it in hopes of some kind of biological evidence for his cerebral creativity and genius. Unfortunately, none of the studies revealed anything significant, other than the fact that his brain happened to be quite *smaller* than the average male brain. However, if you want to prove the relevance of the Breed Myth, you must start with families. Even more importantly, you should start with twins.

In 1973, psychologist Marvin Reznikoff aimed to prove whether or not creativity came from nature or nurture. To do this, he needed a large pool of both fraternal and identical twins. Fraternal twins are those who only share half their genes while identical twins share the exact same genetic code. Using the Connecticut Twin Registry, Reznikoff put together a group of 117 twins and divided them by gender and zygosity (fraternal or identical). The participants in the study were then given eleven tests that were designed to measure their creative ability. If creativity were something that is embedded in our genetic code, then identical twins would have a higher similarity in creativity, right? Popular belief would think so; however, the study proved that this was not the case. Instead, the study found that the creative difference between fraternal and identical twins stayed the same.

While science proves that creativity isn't simply a result of the genetic lottery, we still see organizations segregate between creative and noncreative roles. At W.L. Gore & Associates, however, such distinctions do not exist. At The Gore Company, they understand that everyone can contribute his or her own creativity. All employees, for example, start in the same position as an associate. And instead of a ladder to climb, they pair the associate with a "sponsor" who helps guide them through the first few weeks as they rotate around different project teams. For months, new associates are constantly meeting new people and learning about projects. Essentially, they are "auditioning" to see which team they can contribute to and fit in best. As a result, the company sees a range of over a thousand successful products.

# Creativity is Not Like a Fingerprint

So where does creativity come from? As a whole, we largely assume that ideas are generated from the mind of one individual. We believe the idea has been brewing in the mind of the individual his or her whole life and eventually brought the invention to life through hard work and dedication. Furthermore, we believe that each new idea is unique to the creator's brain like a fingerprint or a genetic code. This belief, however, is a myth known as the *Originality Myth*.

New ideas aren't as simple as people like to believe; instead, they are quite complicated and often involve more than one person. However, we tend to give credit to sole geniuses for inventions. For instance, take the well-known invention of the telephone. Who invented it? Alexander Graham Bell, of course. But did you know that Elisha Gray also invented the telephone? The same day that Bell submitted a patent for his device, Gray filed a patent caveat for a similar device. With a history of working with telegraph technology, Gray invented the self-adjusting relay switch and the telegraph printer - both of which led to drastic strides in the telegraph industry.

After both patents were registered, Bell began working making telephones for a company that would later be known as AT&T. Meanwhile, Gray went into business with Thomas Edison and made telephones for Western Union. Between the two companies, people largely believed that Gray had developed a better telephone, but Bell took action and sued Gray. Gray settled the lawsuit and simply abandoned his claim, allowing Bell to establish himself as the sole inventor of the telephone and remove Gray from history.

You see, we want to believe those unique inventions are the product of a sole creator when, in reality, the greatest inventions come from the influence of more than one person. For instance, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs both influenced one another with the invention of the personal computer.

In 1985, Apple began developing the Macintosh and allowed several people from Microsoft, including Bill Gates, to come and view the project. Steve Jobs, Apple's founder, was firmly convinced that Windows copied Mac, but Gates responded to Jobs' accusations with, "I think it's more like we both had this rich neighbor... and I broke into his house to steal the TV set and found out that you had already stolen it."

It turns out that both Steve Jobs and Bill Gates influenced one another with the PARC company's *Alto* computer. When Jobs toured PARC and saw the Alto, he immediately went back to Apple and began working on a prototype. In the end, teams of both Macintosh and Windows made improvements on the ideas found in the Alto. For instance, the Alto's mouse had three buttons, Window's mouse has two buttons, and the Apple mouse only has one. Later, Jobs admitted in an interview that "Creativity is just connecting things. When you ask creative people how they did something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just *saw* something. It seemed obvious to them after a while. That's because they were able to connect experiences they've had and synthesize new things." In other words, great ideas are built from combinations of older ideas.

# Creativity Can Be Learned and Practiced

As we've said before, ideas simply are a combination of existing materials and this doesn't just apply to inventions. In fact, it can be seen in a variety of genres. For instance, Shakespeare's *Henry VI* contains a strong influence from Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. And Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* borrows its plot from popular history books of the time combined with tales that Marlowe heard from Persia and Turkey. We even see the borrowing of ideas in advertising as well. Dan Wieden of Wieden+Kennedy created the Nike slogan "Just Do It" after hearing about the execution of Gary Gilmore whose final words were "Let's do this."

The theory that new creations are combinations of existing ideas isn't entirely new. Psychologist Sarnoff Mednick believed that creative thinking was "the forming of associative elements into new combinations which either meet specific requirements or are in some way useful." In other words, the more connections you could make, the more creative you were. To prove this theory, Mednick created the *remote associates test* (RAT) as a measurement of creativity.

The RAT presents individuals with a series of unrelated words and asks them to think of the one word that could be added to each to make a compound word. For example, say you were given the words "arm," "coal," and "peach" the word you would need to think of is "pit." According to Mednick, the quicker an individual could solve a RAT question, the more creative potential the individual had. Today, recent research that looks inside the physical brain seems to support this idea. You see, the brain is essentially made up of two types of tissue: gray matter and white matter. Gray matter is the area of the brain where we house all our knowledge like the facts we memorized in grade school or our most prized memories. White matter, however, is the connective tissue that transfers electrical signals across the brain.

Creative individuals happen to have significantly more white matter than less creative people. In other words, their brains are better wired to connect ideas to potentially produce more creativity. However, it's not a trait that people were born with. A follow-up study revealed that with training, individuals can grow white matter connections in their brains. This means that inventors, marketers, and artists are all utilizing the raw materials of existing ideas to create something new. White matter is constantly connecting and reconnecting ideas, searching for new combinations that will be worth something. The good news is that if you want to increase your chances of coming up with new ideas, you can train your brain to expand its white matter by just working on creative endeavors more often!

# The Myth of Brainstorming and Constraint

When organizations need to quickly unleash creativity, many of them follow the same formula: assemble a team of people, put them in a room with whiteboards and markers, and instruct them to come up with as many ideas as they can. This practice is called brainstorming, and it's the belief that all you need to produce innovation is to generate as many ideas as possible. Eventually, you'll generate an idea that will become the next big thing! This is called the *Brainstorming Myth*. Unfortunately, the problem with this practice is that after the brainstorming session, the organization has their new idea. After that, they're done and the brainstorming becomes the beginning and the end of their creative process.

The biggest problem with this myth is that it isn't entirely wrong. When done correctly, brainstorming teams can generate great ideas, but it is rarely done correctly. Instead, R. Keith Sawyer, one of the most prominent researchers on creativity and collaboration, concluded that individuals and teams who produce creative work move through eight distinct stages: 1) Find and define the problem. 2) Gather relevant knowledge. 3) Gather potentially related information. 4) Take time off for incubation. 5) Generate a large variety of ideas. 6) Combine ideas in unexpected ways. 7) Select the best ideas. 8) Finally, externalize the idea.

While Sawyer's eight-stage creative process doesn't replace brainstorming, it recognizes that brainstorming is a larger process of bringing creative ideas to the world. Additionally, another way to generate ideas quickly is simply by restricting the process. You may think this sounds confusing. Doesn't creativity need total freedom to grow and develop? Well, that belief is considered the *Constraints Myth* - a myth that creative potential is dampened by constraints. In fact, many artists subscribe to this belief that creativity knows no bounds. However, research supports the opposite; instead, creativity thrives on constraints.



Artists need structure. Think about some of the most creative poems which come in fixed forms like the Japanese haiku or the English sonnet. The advantage is that the fixed form is a challenging framework that requires the artist to push themselves to meet their creative potential. Matthew May once explained this phenomenon through sculpture, stating, “Michaelangelo’s statue of David would not be considered the masterpiece it is had he chosen to mold it from clay rather than marble.” You see, marble is a much harder, less forgiving material that forced Michelangelo to work harder to mold and live up to his creative potential. At the end of the day, constraints work to shape creative pursuits. So rather than begin with a blank slate, provide some structure and watch the creativity flow.

## Final Summary

As it turns out, creativity is nothing like we believed. What we once thought was something genetic, or reserved for a few individuals, is actually something everyone can access within themselves. In other words, saying “I’m just not that creative” is no longer an excuse. In fact, the key components for creativity come from making connections, having motivation, and surrounding yourself with people who can help collaborate and provide ideas. It’s important to understand that the best ideas never come from a Eureka! moment; instead, they come from a combination of prior knowledge and collaboration. Some of the greatest inventions that are largely believed to come from a single spark of inspiration took years of hard work before coming to fruition. Luckily, creativity can be something that we can practice and become better at over time. As you practice, you’ll make connections and begin innovating in ways you never thought possible.



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