

Chapter XX

Creativity

Do you consider yourself a creative person? What do you even define as creative? When was the last time you felt like you were creative? What in the world does creativity have to do with leadership, anyway?

Creativity is one of those words that people tend to associate with a very clear mental image of what a “creative” person looks like and does. Looking at the below images, which (if any) of the graphics do you feel show someone being creative?



Did you choose the artist? Most likely, that was an easy choice, but were there others? How about the coach (lower left), instructor (lower right), or business person (second row,

middle)? Really, all these graphics can easily represent creativity and people engaged in creative thought! Creativity isn't just art; it's the ability to think and perform in new or novel ways. In a world of uncertainty, creativity can be the key to successful leadership: creativity is the best way to solve ill-defined problems, act on opportunities, and ultimately help an organization (or individual) maintain a competitive edge. (Guo & Dilley, 2006)

Like leaders, creative people are often familiar with the idea of continual development. Creativity, like leadership, is a skill and one that can be learned. If you imagine someone in your life right now that you feel is creative, likely one of the reasons you see them as creative is because they are continually pushing their boundaries and practicing being creative. Michelangelo, a famous artist, sculptor, architect, and one of the most influential figures of the Renaissance, was 87 when he said,

“Ancora imparo”

“I'm still learning”

Developing as a leader is a journey with no end, just as developing a sense of creativity is a journey with no end. Creative people *decide* to be creative, just as you are *deciding* to hone and develop your own leadership skills with this journal.

The concepts of leadership and creativity are both uniquely complex in their own ways, and it is difficult to commit to a single definition of 'creative leadership'. Some research has even forgone the attempt to create a single definition of creative leadership and instead view it as a union of skills and dispositions (Guo & Dilley, 2006).

This section will explore some topics and activities specifically targeted at unlocking your creative potential. Each activity was chosen and designed specifically for its ability to tap into a different creative area of your brain and is backed up by research. However, like any challenge, what you get out of these exercises reflects what you put in. They may not all resonate with you, and that is okay. Hopefully at least one of the activities or reflections will give you unexpected insight, either now or later. As a final thought before we jump in, don't be afraid to stretch yourself beyond your comfort zone. No one is judging you and there are no rules and no prizes. What you create in these pages and beyond can be used to gain insight, change perspectives, challenge and grow. There are no right or wrong answers. Feel free to complete the prompts digitally or on paper. Use a pen or a pencil, or use paints, markers, magazine cuttings, or anything else you like. Instead of drawing a sketch, write out words. Be as detailed or basic as you like. This isn't an art book and there won't be a test at the end to judge your use of perspective and complementary colors. This is about allowing yourself to be creative, maybe even a little vulnerable, and expand the way you not only think about leadership and yourself, but how you think and respond to challenges, unusual situations and changing environments.

Creative Leaders:

Definition cre-a-tiv-i-ty /,krē'tivədē/ noun. The use of the imagination or original ideas.

(Oxford Languages, 2023)

Creativity isn't just about art; it's about thinking beyond the usual patterns and expectations. It's not a talent you are born with, any more than "leadership" is a talent you are

born with. It is a skill, something that can be learned and practiced. To quote Thierry Henry, a French professional football coach: “Amateurs call it genius, masters call it practice.”

So why creativity for leadership? For a leader, creativity is the skill to “create” something in a never-before-seen method or a novel way. Out-of-the-box thinking **is** creative thinking! While not an artist, it is easy to see why Steve Jobs would qualify as a creative person and leader: it took creativity to not only envision a future with smartphones but inspire a company full of people to share that dream and make it a reality. And then, even more creative thinking in order to sell that to the public and make them believe it was a valuable product and not a silly sci-fi gadget! But creative leaders aren’t limited to business leadership: you can find creative leaders in any field, from science to sports. Charles Darwin was a creative mind and leader during his time; it took creativity to observe the natural world and challenge the prevailing scientific thoughts of the day with new theories and ideas. Walt Disney was a creative artist, there is no doubt, but also an influential leader as well. Ben Franklin is another creative and influential leader whose works continue to be referenced and built upon today.

Creative leaders exist all over the world and at any level of leadership. While there is no single definition of what defines a “creative leader”, a common element seems to be that they think, act or create in a different way than the normal pattern. Steve Jobs didn’t just create the iPhone as a next logical step in the advancement of cell phone technology: it was a jump in technology to a whole new place, well outside the predictable pattern of how that technology had been advancing to that point.

Reflection

Think about who you might define as a creative leader. Write their names down here.



As an extra challenge, try to name at least one creative leader from each of these fields:

- Universal Geniuses
- Great Scientific Minds
- Painters and Artists
- Writers
- Musical Geniuses
- Spiritual & Political leaders
- Film Directors
- Sports Figures
- Someone in your life

Take a look at your list of names and ask yourself some questions. How do you feel about it? Are you concentrating on one area of “creativity,” or did you pull examples from multiple fields? If you are reviewing your list and realize you have only written down names of artists and the art-adjacent, try to expand your perspective and identify creative leaders in business or politics.

This last question is the big one: Do you think everyone on your list qualifies as a leader? Ask yourself why – or why not. For example, you may have written down “Mark Zuckerberg,” founder and current CEO of Meta (formerly Facebook). Is he a creative leader for his development of Facebook and, more recently, the Meta-verse? He has shown repeatedly a willingness to embrace new ideas and challenge the status quo. He has a clear vision, one that he has inspired others to get on board with and support. All signs of a good leader.

Or is his controversial past a sign that he may be successful but is not an authentic leader? With controversies ranging from unethical data management and collection to potential theft of ideas, his ethics are, at best, unclear. He has also shown a disinclination towards clear communication when questioned on uncomfortable topics, such as during congressional hearings or interviews, and even more, he doesn’t seem to want to acknowledge the massive power and role that Facebook plays in modern society – along with the ethical ramifications of that position. The list of controversies involving Facebook is extensive and grows each year, but it begs the question: Is this a reflection of leadership or of society adapting to technology?

With this example in mind, look back at your list. Are there any people who you now question whether they should be considered creative leaders? Are there any additions you can make? Reflect on what this tells you about your own view of leadership, and what it means to be a “good” leader.

Self Portrait: Mind Mapping

Once you have spent sometime thinking about who is and is not a creative leader, you likely have started to developed some criteria for what a good leader looks like. With that in

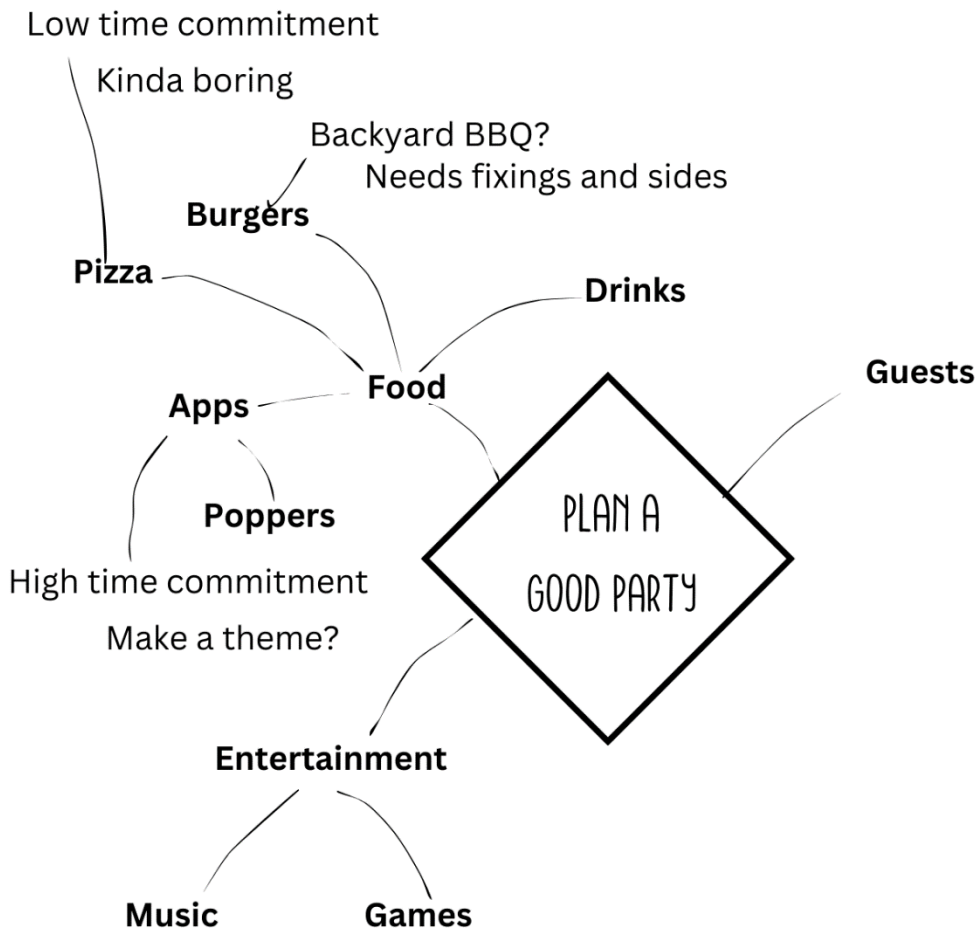
mind, try the next exercise: a leadership self-portrait. In this self-portrait, you will create a mind map, also called a brainstorming chart or visual organizer.

How a mind map works:

1. In the center, enter the main topic or subject. In the activity, the center is already filled out with “good leader”. For the example mind map, I will use “plan a good party”
2. Start brainstorming topics. These are big, general ideas. Don’t worry about the order, just get them on there. In the example, you will see the general topics of food, guests, and entertainment.
3. Next, create sub-topics under each main topic. Entertainment is broken down into music and games. Food is broken down into Apps, burgers, drinks, etc.
4. Expand as needed from here. You are just capturing thoughts at this point, as many or as few as you like. Under “Apps” you see the listing for poppers, but also some general thoughts: High time commitment and make it a theme? These are just anchor points for me to come back to and consider as I continue brainstorming. Only build out what makes sense to build out.
5. When you reach a place you feel “done”, look over what you have written out. You should start to be able to pick out themes, or maybe some big ideas that interest you. Go back and circle or highlight key insights or thoughts you find on your mind map that identify traits you want to develop. This is the starting point for really developing your vision and philosophy as a leader.

Example

In this example mind map, the center topic is “Plan a Good Party” - the main ideas for what makes a good party are closest (Food, Entertainment, Guests). Food is then broken down into smaller ideas (Pizza, Burgers, Apps), and those are listed with additional questions or details. Additional topics can be added or built on, with the intention of having a visualization of your thoughts of the topic at the end.



Note: As an alternative to completing this activity on paper, you can also use software to create a mind map. There are many free and paid options available online or through your preferred visual creation software.

Activity

Self Portrait: Mind Map

For this Self-portrait, you will draw a mind map of leadership. Starting with the center box of “good leader”, draw or write the elements that you feel relate to this idea. Then, build off those elements. Try to go 2 or 3 (or more!) levels deep!



Reflection

How did this activity make you feel, or what kinds of insights did you gain from it?