

Advances in Project Management Series ¹

From adversity to innovation: Forging a creative discovery journey ²

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The most recent contribution in the series (Dalcher, 2021) focused on the need to lead transformations, with a particular emphasis on navigating disorder in times of crises. The contribution makes it clear that disorder plays an important part in enabling significant change and transformation. This month we continue to explore the imperative to change and the creative and human sides of transformations.

The Covid-19 pandemic has shaken the world to its core, forcing urgent adjustments and fundamental changes to society, and our way of life. But pandemics and crises are not new. Indeed, the history of the human race is littered with a myriad of crises that have challenged the normal order of things, often inducing abrupt resets. Crisis events can therefore force a rethink and offer the inevitable spark needed to engender transformation.

“Mitroff (2018) observes that beyond the immediate harm wreaked by a crisis, there is a more insidious impact with an existential component where all the important assumptions, the notions of what might be safe and the deeply held models, become invalid all at once. The pandemic has thus questioned the wisdom, perceived capability and desired inclination to control nature through technology, bringing the physical and natural environment, our wider ecosystem and our complex connections with it into sharp focus.” (Dalcher, 2020: p. 4)

Following the financial crisis of 2007-8, it was noted in the Journal of the American Bankers Association that innovation presents an enormous challenge for most banks, and especially for those with long histories of conservative management (Sullivan, 2009: 30); yet, innovation is recognised as the all-important engine that empowers recovery. The normal controls and procedures that are cherished for their ability to introduce efficiency and inhibit variation and irregularities in normal times, also root out creativity and innovation, suppressing the potential for change and recovery in the aftermath of a crisis. A crisis is an important reminder that ‘what got us here’, will no longer suffice to get us out of trouble...

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Routledge *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ. See Darren's background and qualifications at the end of this article.

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Crises compel us to re-evaluate, rethink and reposition in response to disruption, turbulence and uncertainty. When the safety of the known, the familiar, and the habitual is challenged, there is an urgent need for an injection of attention and effort to develop alternative modes of coping, coasting and prospering under the newly altered conditions. Indeed, there seems to be nothing as powerful as a crisis to ignite innovation, as the discovery and creativity needed for forging a new direction, are often borne out of urgent necessity, pressing adversity and sheer pragmatism and perseverance.

Creativity to see afresh

Most individuals seem to have a good notion of what creativity is about, yet, researchers and practitioners have struggled to define and explain it. So, what is this thing called creativity, and why has it proved so elusive?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines creativity as '*the use of imagination or original ideas to create something*'. The Cambridge English Dictionary positions it as '*the ability to produce or use original and unusual ideas*'. The Collins Dictionary offers additional insight by focusing on '*the ability to transcend original ideas, rules, patterns, relationships or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, interpretations, etc.*'.

Key concepts that stand out from the definitions are the notion of 'creating' something, and the transcendence beyond the original boundaries of what already exists, as we seek meaningful new forms and ideas. The typical synonyms used for creativity include inventiveness, ingenuity and originality, hinting at other aspects of creativity.

Kauffman (2016; p. 5) similarly affirms that creativity must firstly, represent something different, novel, new or innovative; whilst, adding a further constraint, that, secondly, it must also be appropriate to the task at hand. In other words, it is not enough to just be different, a creative response needs to be both useful and relevant. Appropriateness can also be said to encompass the properties of being useful, valuable, correct, expressive, meaningful or somehow fitting to the purpose that the individual creator intends (Amabile, 2018).

The properties of newness and appropriateness need to be present in any response that can be considered to be creative. Simonton (2012) summarises creativity as a simple formula, where: Creativity = Originality X Appropriateness. When either of the two components equals 0, creativity will simply not be found, implying an all or nothing multiplicative property. Other authors suggest that the output of a creative activity needs to be of value to an individual or a group (see for example, Hennessey & Amabile, 2010), and be surprising, astonishing or unexpected (Boden, 2004; Boden 2012; Simonton, 2012).

Creativity is said to be an important and unique feature. Csikszentmihalyi (2013) maintains that creativity provides the central source of meaning in human lives, not least because participating in creative activities offers great feelings and excitement. Moreover, he contends that most of the things that are interesting, important and human are actually the results of creativity. Creativity therefore could mean different things in different domains. Csikszentmihalyi locates creativity as a systemic phenomenon occurring in the interaction

between people's thoughts and a sociocultural context (p. 23); implying that novelty and usefulness are subjectively determined by, and interpreted through, the specific perspective of field, disciplinary and contextual settings (Csikszentmihalyi, 2015; Plucker, et al., 2004; Puryear & Lamb, 2020).

Creative navigation in times of crisis

Whilst creativity has often been regarded as intentional and planned, crises galvanise action, encouraging and engendering new waves of innovative activities. Foeken & Konings (2006) observe that in times of economic and political crisis, urban dwellers in Sub-Saharan Africa display a large degree of creativity in the survival strategies they employ by developing social networks and constructing imaginative and original practices and ideas. For others, such disasters reinvolve meaning, purpose and community, beyond the initial grief and destruction, thereby enabling novel forms of innovation and creativity (Cameron et al., 2018; Cohen & Cromwell, 2020; Leontidou, 2020). Playing a part in shaping the new environment in the face of turbulence, loss and uncertainty can yield significant benefits. Solnit (2010) repositions crises as emerging opportunities to summon and rediscover powerful engagement and the joy of genuine altruism, civic life, grassroots community and meaningful work.

Finding new direction in times of turbulence requires structural orientation and many difficult decisions. According to Beghetto (2021) creative leaps are possible in times of crisis precisely because the typical forms of reasoning and action, may no longer be applicable. The sudden doubt and the deeper form of uncertainty force the consideration of alternative options and the development of new approaches and perspectives. This chimes with the view of Pragmatists, such as John Dewey and Charles Sanders Peirce, who had long maintained that a state of doubt is a necessary pre-condition for thinking and acting in new ways. The urgency derived from a crisis thus delivers the impetus needed to explore new options and novel directions. The effort to navigate deeper uncertainty whilst remaining lost in the fog, characterised by deeper uncertainty, can lead to creative actions and responses, as well as to significant outcomes that could be considered to be both new and meaningful (ibid.).

Many of the outcomes experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, have been significant, unexpected, surprising and novel, showcasing the potential creativity of many individuals, groups, communities and agencies that suddenly found themselves grappling with the urgent and unexpected. Very limited guidance is available in this area, and therefore this month's contribution by Andrew Day, focused on creativity, imagination and transformation is particularly timely and welcome. The article draws upon one of the chapters from his recent book *Disruption, change and transformation in organisations: A human relations perspective* published by Routledge.

Day's perspective is focused on exploring the psychological and social dynamics of continuous, disruptive and discontinuous change, with a particular focus on the emotional and disruptive elements of change, the nature of transformations and the ability of organisations to adapt and thrive in turbulent environments. The long-term survival of organisations increasingly depends on their adaptive capacity and the capabilities needed in order to respond

to perturbations and transform. Yet, individuals and organisations continue to struggle with the need for urgent and immediate transformation.

Day endeavours to synthesise and integrate insights from a variety of diverse disciplines and domains in order to derive a clearer understanding of the dynamics of urgent change and transformation. Disruption has the potential to impact any organisation and an enhanced and informed perspective for dealing with significant, impactful change in turbulent environments is essential and well overdue. The approach deals with the concerns and experiences of individuals and the wider impacts on the wider organisation and its ability to continue to operate throughout and beyond any disruptions. Day reminds us that resolving a crisis requires the creation of a transitional space that supports dialogue, experimentation and sensemaking, before we can harvest a new focused creative energy.

Accepting the loss of the old and familiar is only the beginning of the process for dealing with emergent change and urgent crises. There are no easy recipes for change. Innovating and identifying new responses require leaders to transcend beyond rigid adherence to what used to work previously. Kaiser (2020) argues for new models of leadership are required to address the paradoxes and dilemmas created by the growing complexity and accelerating pace of change. Such needs become more acute in the aftermath of a global disaster, with far reaching implications. Yet, dealing with the new world and establishing a new normal necessitate creativity, innovation and determination and the belief in pursuing a worthwhile adventure or journey to a new normal. Crucially, the work by Day offers many important insights and signals that can be applied on route.

Leaders are called upon to operate in unfamiliar and unfriendly landscapes. Leading in such hyper competitive, dynamic and turbulent environments calls for new understanding and skills to oversee change and overcome turbulence. Long-term survival in such settings will ultimately depend on the ability of organisations, and their leaders, to navigate the increasingly complex, uncertain, ambiguous, and non-linear terrain, whilst guiding communities and individuals on their own discovery journeys. The success of any urgent transformation will depend on the ability of the group, the collective, to construct a new common meaning, develop a new belief system and establish a buy-in for a better future. Above all it would require creativity on the part the leaders, and their followers, in devising, designing and pursuing creative and productive new approaches to surviving, thriving and excelling in their new normal setting.

In real times of crisis, people often search for meaning, and find solace in purpose, hope and community. Crises make us reach out and extend beyond the immediately accessible and well-rehearsed routine, forcing a deeper, more meaningful and thoughtful engagement. Navigating a crisis therefore relies on breaking out of established patterns and finding the creative spark needed to highlight the new possibilities and novel perspectives. Building the bridge while we walk on it, during a perilous adventure, is a significant challenge that should involve the creative insights and attention of our entire constituencies. While the new leadership stance may need to become more versatile, adaptable and pragmatic in order to better perform in such settings, leaders can start to bring people and communities on board by displaying and developing their own humility, authenticity and above all, their humanity.

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