



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusres

Stimulating organisational creativity with theatrical improvisation

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Creativity
Collective creativity
Organisational creativity
Improvisation
Theatrical improvisation
Arts-based methods

ABSTRACT

Although organisational creativity has become an increasingly important performance driver, little is known about how it can be built and stimulated. The existing literature has mostly focused on techniques for improving idea generation in specific and occasional problem-solving situations. However, there is scarce research about how to improve creativity as a quality that pervades everyday operations throughout an organisation. This study explores how theatrical improvisation could foster organisational creativity. Qualitative action research shows theatrical improvisation as a promising method to stimulate both individual and collective creativity in an organisation. The study links theatrical improvisation to organisational creativity, understanding the former as a potential method for organisational development. This research extends the understanding about enhancing organisational creativity as a multilevel phenomenon, as well as the possibilities for applying arts-based methods to organisational development.

1. Introduction

In today's fast-moving, digitalised economy, organisational success increasingly depends on organisational creativity (OC) — an organisation's capacity to empower its human resources towards creative action, leading to novel solutions and thereby to a sustainable competitive advantage (Styhre & Sundgren, 2005; Zhou & Hoever, 2014). The demand for creativity is expanding from occasional, clearly delineated problem-solving situations to an essential necessity of everyday work life and an organisation's overall capacity to stimulate its employees' potentials, enabling novel and flexible ways to achieve organisational goals.

High-performing, forward-thinking companies acknowledge that the complexity and the dynamism of current economic conditions demand the active involvement of employees' perspectives in organisational activities. Pixar is famous for nurturing collective creativity (CC) as it enables all its employees to contribute to the creative process while producing breakthrough movies. Google invests heavily in fostering a workplace culture of creativity through versatile means, from technological platforms and frequent social events to physical spaces that are intentionally built to stimulate creativity. Virgin is renowned for its culture of innovation, as employees are involved in creative activities and encouraged to produce ideas that can lead to continuous organisational development.

Also defined as an organisation's capacity to introduce novelty into what it does and how it does it in order to achieve its goals, OC is based on the individual and collective behaviours of organisational members. As a collective process (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Harvey, 2014;

Harvey & Kou, 2013), OC is a multilevel phenomenon, as it simultaneously encompasses individual, interpersonal (group) and organisational levels (Amabile, 1988; Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjan, 1999; Nisula, 2013; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). To stimulate OC, all these levels must be covered.

How then organisations can foster and support OC? Most of the relevant literature has focused on techniques to improve creativity in specific and occasional creative events or problem-solving situations (Harvey, 2014). While useful in temporarily increasing creative productivity, the occasional application of techniques such as brainstorming (Osborn, 1953) or lateral thinking (De Bono, 1992) may not have much impact on employee creativity in day-to-day work. Furthermore, the main emphasis of past studies has been on improving idea generation (De Bono, 1992; Harvey & Kou, 2013; Osborn, 1953; Paulus & Brown, 2003). This perspective ignores the emergent nature of collective engagement in joint creation, in which idea generation, implementation and problem definition all intertwine in a complex and iterative manner. There is little knowledge about how to improve creativity as a quality that pervades everyday operations throughout an organisation.

If OC is understood not just as the production of novel ideas to respond to clearly defined specific problems, but also as a holistic flexibility that allows to approach issues from new perspectives, and an agile capability to grasp new opportunities, then its stimulation will benefit from techniques that help organisational actors to be in a state of continuous awareness, sensitivity and responsiveness. This differs from other OC approaches, which merely offer techniques for producing novel ideas to be utilised in special, clearly delineated occasions.

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The necessity for a creativity-supporting culture of high performance is well recognised in innovation literature (Anderson & West, 1998; West, 1990), and OC research has recently grown (Bissola & Imperatori, 2011). Nonetheless, there is a need for studies to examine *how OC and the collective creative potential of organisational members can be built and stimulated*.

This paper examines an arts-based approach as one potential to bridge the current knowledge gap in OC development. Arts-based approaches aim to utilise art processes and products (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009) to support change and managerial development in organisations (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Schiuma, 2011). Specifically, we study how theatrical improvisation methods can be used to stimulate OC, which is a suitable strategy because improvisation is all about communication and interaction among participants (Pina, Cunha, & Vieira Da Cunha, 2003; Kanter, 2002; Vera & Crossan, 2005). As a creative performance built through the interaction between people's speech, gestures and movements, theatrical improvisation fosters both individual creativity (IC) and CC, which are essentially intertwined. Empirically, we conducted action research (AR) involving three collective improvisation workshops with two groups of participants over a five-month period.

This study contributes to the OC literature and its development. First, it expands the understanding of OC as a phenomenon in which individual and collective creativity are essentially intertwined. Second, the study extends the OC literature by perceiving IC as consisting of both intrinsic and other-focused dimensions. Third, it adds to the literature on OC development by providing empirical evidence of the possibilities for theatrical improvisation to stimulate OC as a multilevel phenomenon. Fourth, the study enhances the emerging literature on arts-based methods and practices (Barry & Meisiek, 2010; Schiuma, 2011; Taylor & Carboni, 2008) by providing empirical evidence about using collective improvisation, drawn from improvisational theatre, to foster both IC and CC and thereby OC. The study's managerial contribution broadens the knowledge of practical methods for developing OC and embedding creativity into organisational members' daily work by showing the potential of arts-based methods for organisational development.

2. Organisational creativity (OC)

Researchers have adopted various perspectives on OC. The outcome view emphasises novel and useful products, processes, services and strategies (Amabile, 1996). The process view focuses on how creative outcomes are produced (Drazin et al., 1999; Fisher & Amabile, 2009). Some scholars perceive OC as a creative organisational climate (Moultrie & Young, 2009). In this study, we understand OC as an organisation's capacity to introduce novelty into what it does and how it does it in order to achieve organisational goals (including developing novel products, processes, services and paradigm shifts as well as developing new ways to grasp opportunities, solve problems and face internal and external changes). In OC, both individual and collective (group and organisational) creativity are intertwined because there is no collective without individual contributions and interplaying individuals.

Individual creativity (IC), defined as the introduction of novelty into a person's knowledgeable actions (Nisula, 2013) or the introduction of the "unthought" into action (Hjorth, 2005), refers to an individual performing work in professional, creative and original ways. It is enabled by an individual seeing differently, exploring opportunities, drawing distinctions, making initiatives and converting knowledge and insights into action on behalf of individual, group or organisational goals (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Yuan & Woodman, 2010).

Within IC, two aspects can be further isolated — intrinsic and other-focused. *Intrinsic creativity* refers to the individual's desire for imagination, passion, openness and creativity in one's personal thinking and behaviour. Someone with high intrinsic creativity is able to imagine and produce novel, useful outcomes based on one's personal ideas and intuitions (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) and is intrinsically motivated to utilise one's expertise and creative thinking skills to generate new ideas

(Amabile, 1988). This dimension of creativity is quite sufficient to understand people's creativity when they are working entirely by themselves, but it does not account for an individual's role in collective and joint creative processes.

The second aspect of IC, *other-focused creativity*, denotes an individual's ability to work with and on the stimuli in a social setting. In any shared endeavour, a person's sensitivity to others and pro-social orientation are important dimensions of creativity in the individual domain. This aspect is crucial because creative activities in organisations tend to be more social than isolated ways of idea generation (Choi, Sung, & Cho, 2014; Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011). In fact, someone's pro-social creative contributions, such as expressing ideas, supporting others' initiatives and stimulating their creative energy (Choi et al., 2014), build joint creative processes. Thus, this vital aspect of IC involves other-focused orientation (Grant, 2008; Grant & Berry, 2011; Neff & Harter, 2003), which refers to someone's interest in interpersonal relationships, in others' needs (Neff & Harter, 2003) and in benefiting them (Grant, 2008).

Collective creativity (CC) is a process of joint creation comprised of the interdependent contributions of individuals, groups or entire organisations. Such creative synthesis emerges via interaction as a complex composition of participants' social and intellectual abilities. People's knowledge, imagination, ideas, creation of collective meaning, environmental influences, timing, luck and mistakes are all brought together into common creative achievements. Thus, CC highly relies on the interpersonal dynamics in situ. The participating individuals' contributions (Choi et al., 2014; Harvey, 2014; Harvey & Kou, 2013), behaviours and interactions (John-Steiner, 2000) in this context also influence what is actualised (Woodman et al., 1993). Consequently, joint creation can occur only if individuals contribute their attention and energy (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006) to creative acts and fully engage in these creative acts (Drazin et al., 1999; Harvey & Kou, 2013) while being willing to integrate others' contributions into the collective creation. Requiring specific circumstances, CC is likely to occur when the participating members work in an interdependent and egalitarian relationship as well as when the task is challenging and its solution is open-ended, which demands a high level of creativity (Harvey, 2014; John-Steiner, 2000; Sawyer & DeZutter, 2009).

3. Theatrical improvisation and OC

Improvisation is defined as a spontaneous and intuition-guided action as well as an unplanned and creative process to achieve a goal (Vera & Crossan, 2004). It is linked to organisational change (Pina et al., 2003; Orlikowski, 1996), learning (Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001) and innovation (Moorman & Miner, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Improvisation and creativity are also perceived as parallel constructs (Miner et al., 2001). Frost and Yarrow (1989, p. 2), for example, argue, "that improvisation may be close to pure 'creativity'— or perhaps more accurately to creative organisation, the way in which we respond to and give shape to our world". Fisher and Amabile (2009) connect improvisation with creativity through the idea of improvisational creativity, in which problem identification, idea generation and idea implementation happen simultaneously. In such creative behaviour, planning and action converge in the moment (Moorman & Miner, 1998). Deviating from familiar practices and knowledge, improvisation radically builds space for new ones (Moorman & Miner, 1998). Thereby creativity and improvisation are intertwined essentially.

Improvisational theatre is a collective activity in which a group of actors perform together — with no script or director — in a spirit of shared leadership, responsibility, mutual support and care. Planning and acting occur simultaneously in the moment (Johnstone, 1979; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Weick, 1993; Yanow, 2001), and the events enacted determine the world of the performance, whereas the future is unknown (Weick, 1993). The actors draw from all possible sources for their contributions to the performance by applying their knowledge,

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