



## Understanding creativity: The manager as artist

“Think outside the box” is the slogan of countless creativity experts who rightly connect creative thinking to corporate innovation. **Jörg Reckhenrich**, **Martin Kupp** and **Jamie Anderson** advocate, instead, that you think outside the canvas. A review of the thinking of the German artist, Joseph Beuys, shows how managers can unleash bold new ideas.

*I have always tried to show why art has to do with life. Only from art can a new concept of economics be formed, in terms of human need, not in the sense of use and consumption, politics and property, but above all in terms of the production of spiritual goods.*

– Joseph Beuys

**C**reativity is a widely used term in the context of strategy, innovation, organizational development and leadership. When managers realize that strategic questions, leadership issues and complex organizational situations are not manageable in a routine manner, the quest for creative solutions begins. The more unusual a situation, meaning that managers cannot draw upon experience or established routines, the more it calls for a creative solution. In that sense, creativity is seen almost as a prerequisite to manage change and renewal. Creativity is, therefore, a key skill for leaders and organizations, not only in order to adapt to change, but also to proactively shape industries and markets.

But the term “creativity” in business is mostly applied to the use of creativity techniques. *Harvard Business Manager* ([www.harvardbusinessmanager.de](http://www.harvardbusinessmanager.de), June 2008) recently dedicated a full issue to that very topic, presenting an elaborate brainstorming technique and the personal story of

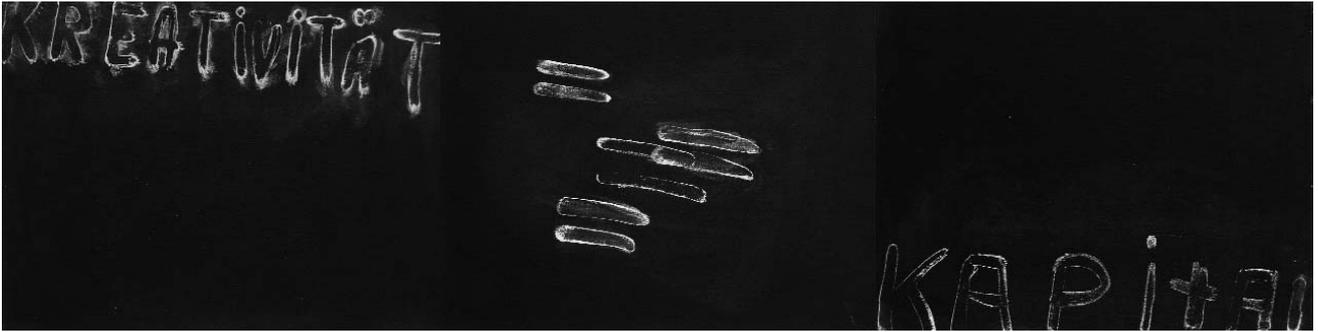
an artist. But, while creativity techniques are helpful to open managers to new ideas and while personal stories of artists have an inspiring impact, both approaches are limited in helping us to appreciate the inherent creative potential of people.

If creativity is to add value to the organization, managers first have to understand the principles of creativity as well as develop the mindset, attitude and knowledge of where, when and how creativity will emerge in order to find new solutions.

Joseph Beuys (1921–1986) was an artist who dedicated his work to understanding the basic parameters of art, the creative process and how people might unfold their own creative potential. Beuys became one of the most controversial artists of his time through his radical approach to the philosophy and processes of creativity. Beuys’s approach to creativity can offer practical insights on boosting creativity for individuals and organizations.

### The starting point

Joseph Beuys was the son of a German trader. He saw pictures of the work of German sculptor Wilhelm Lehmbruck and became aware of the principles of sculpture, art and creativity that he immediately proposed as general principles of life. He enrolled at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1947 and began to read widely, evolving ideas around science, art, literature, philosophy and →



Kreativität = Kapital

→ spirituality. Beuys' approach to art can be described as research into creativity, what he called the "true capital of human beings".

Beuys' fundamental ideas about creativity are found in his most quoted statement: "Every human being is an artist." When he made this statement in the early 1960s, it shocked the exclusive art world. The statement was a challenge to the established view of art; could everyone produce art and could everyone define art, if everything is art?

"Every human being is an artist" is not about taking up visual arts or writing (though this may be part of it). Rather, it's about mobilizing everyone's latent creative abilities – engaging one's creative thoughts, words and actions and expressing this creativity in meaningful ways wherever it is needed. Beuys said that, if you ask yourself who you are and what your ability is, each person can be creative in his own field or profession.

Beuys offered, through his performance, sculptures and teachings, concepts people could actively work with in order to have access to their own creative potential. He described three core concepts for the path to creativity. This path starts from the inside, personal creativity, to the outside, being creative in a social context:

- The active form of thinking, personal creativity
- The sculptural theory, process creativity
- The social sculpture, collective creativity

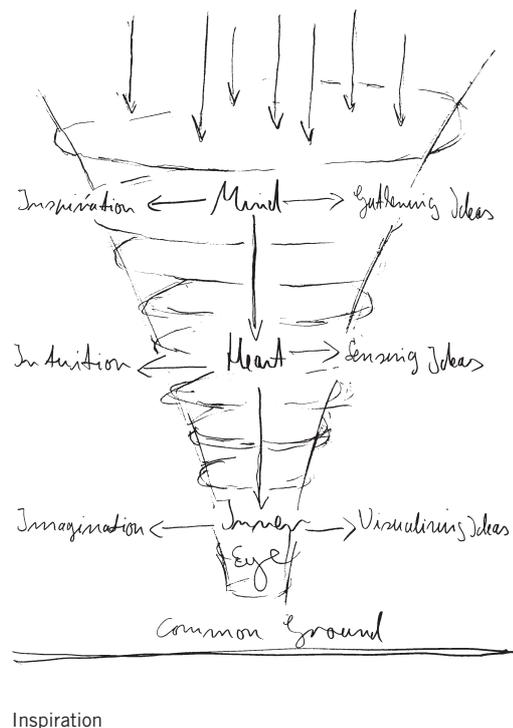
### Personal creativity

Most of the thinking we do every day, Beuys says, is routine. We repeat patterns and come up with the same solutions. But what do we do if we want to generate new ideas in order to invent processes and products? In order to do that, we have to let go of well-known patterns of thinking and old solutions. We have to enter what Beuys describes as the active form of thinking. He defined three levels of active thinking: inspiration, intuition and imagination.

*Inspiration* is the moment that we spot something new or get the first spark of an idea. Sometimes people speak about the refreshing "click" when a

moment like this happens. The idea is not yet clear, but one starts to sense what it could become. Most people experience *intuition* in the process of creativity. They sense and feel the quality of the upcoming idea. They trust their gut feeling. If we ask highly successful people the secret of their success, they often say that they sensed more than they thought about the topic. Intuition is the emotional side of the personal creativity process. *Imagination* is the final step in active thinking. What came to us as a spark and became more real by sensing is now generating an image. In the process of creativity, we start to let the image grow and make it as concrete and powerful as possible in order to communicate the idea. Imagination is the ability to think about the end and make this end visible.

Although inspiration, intuition and imagination are connected and are fundamentally a concept of personal mastery, companies can work with this concept in order to spark creativity within their workforce.



**Inspiration** has two seemingly contradictory requirements. It needs a framework (a rough idea where to go) and an open attitude (no clear objective). The framework creates the tension to go forward; the open attitude creates the space in which ideas can find their place.

Think about Pixar Animation Studios. Pixar produced the first fully computer-animated feature film, “Toy Story”, in 1995, followed by other films such as “Monsters, Inc.” and “Finding Nemo”. The success of their films is not only due to their improvement of the animation technique. Pixar understood that, in nearly every scene of a film, they needed an unusual idea to surprise the viewer again and again. While the plots of Pixar films may not be complicated, the single scenes are unique in the way in which they are created. They are full of little details such as the design of characters, colours, lighting and so on. It may only be the eye blink of a fish that excites the customer and makes a difference.

In the production teams of Pixar, thousands of ideas are created. While the framework is provided (using animation techniques to create a movie),

Think about an important decision, such as a question of strategy. You invite your management team to a meeting to find out the right direction by presenting them with different concepts. Instead of rationally analysing the concepts, you ask them first to use their intuition to talk about the concepts. Let them reflect individually for a moment and then ask them to contribute and to share. People might say: It feels good, because it has to do with.... Or I don't like it, as last time when we tried this we ran into a lot of trouble. Allow people to contribute and share what they sense. This will add additional layers to the concepts. You will hear about opportunities and challenges from a different, non-analytical side. This will reassure and adjust your own intuition and might help you to sharpen your imagination in order to make a decision.

**Imagination** is the last step on the path to improved creativity, the ability to visualize a desired future state that is so powerful it helps people to overcome potential obstacles. Think again of Pixar. In order to strengthen the imagination capabilities within Pixar,

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Pixar gives its production teams the freedom to explore new ideas within this broad framework. Most of the ideas at Pixar would not emerge if managers did not allow for uncertainty and openness.

Building inspiration in an organization is about providing the combination of a guiding framework, which very often is embedded in the corporate or departmental culture, and the freedom to let things happen rather than to control them.

**Intuition** is the emotional side of the active form of thinking. In many organizations it is uncommon to base decisions on intuition, as this is seen as irrational and is not the “appropriate way” to deal with business challenges. Family organizations often have a culture more open to intuition.

Wendelin von Boch, CEO of the ceramic producer Villeroy & Boch, stated in an interview that consumer decisions are taken 85 per cent on intuition. He also said the ability to make intuitive decisions is an essential factor of the success of Villeroy & Boch in placing new product lines in the market. He says the unique value proposition of the company is design, which cannot be judged by rational criteria.

Companies can support intuition actively in the sense that they create a trustful and respectful atmosphere in which employees are not forced to rationalize decisions in the majority-approved way.

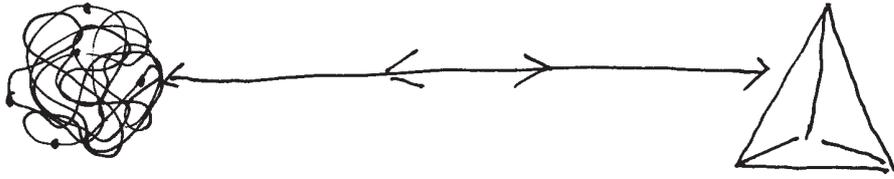
the company changed the mission of their development teams. Instead of coming up with new ideas for movies, as is the role at most studios, their job was to assemble small incubation teams to help directors refine their own ideas into powerful visions/pictures of potential films that would then be presented to the management board. Pixar does not judge teams during this incubation stage by the material they produce, but by their imagination and the teams' social dynamics created through this common vision of the future that helps the team to solve problems and make progress.

### Process creativity

In his sculptural theory, Beuys stated that every material that we use to produce an art product ranges between two poles, the pole of structure and the pole of movement.

He relates the left side of the diagram to activity, warmth, energy, movement and intuitive thinking, but also to disorder and chaos; the right side to form, coldness, organization, rational thinking and structure. This also applies to materials. Beuys used this concept systematically in his artworks. If he believed more warmth was needed for a special situation, he would choose the appropriate material.

Beuys claimed that this principle was not only →



### The Two Poles of Creativity

→ relevant to art production. He said it had validity for all processes, including processes of communication. In his understanding of the expanded world of art, material could also be what people said or contributed to a process.

Process creativity, according to Beuys, is the active shaping of a situation (by adding more structure or chaos), instead of controlling it. In this sense the process itself becomes creative. To manage process creativity, you have to closely observe the situation and judge its tendency towards structure or chaos.

Think about a typical situation in an innovation process in a company in which a manager has to deal with complex situations and people's different ideas. Sometimes during the project there may be a tendency to lose focus; the situation becomes too chaotic and unstructured. According to Beuys, one must now add more structure without ending the process.

Think of Ideo, the California-based design company, and its now widely known project to redesign the supermarket shopping cart. During the process, the design team members came up with hundreds of new ideas. At a certain moment, the team leader realized that the team would need more structure. But, instead of telling them what to do, he narrowed down the potential options by deciding on four key needs areas for the shopping cart: shopping, safety, security and finding what one is looking for. While this structured the process, it did not kill creativity, because from this point the team members were invited to build on the existing ideas and focus on the identified need areas. If a project team gets stuck, you need to open the situation and to bring in more "warm energy", for example, by adding a new perspective, changing the environment or bringing in external experts.

### Collective creativity

When Beuys was asked to name the most important piece of artwork that he ever produced, he always answered that it was the concept of the "social sculpture". Claiming a concept to be a piece of art might be an unusual answer. What he really did was bring together two things, social behaviour and the principles of building a sculpture.

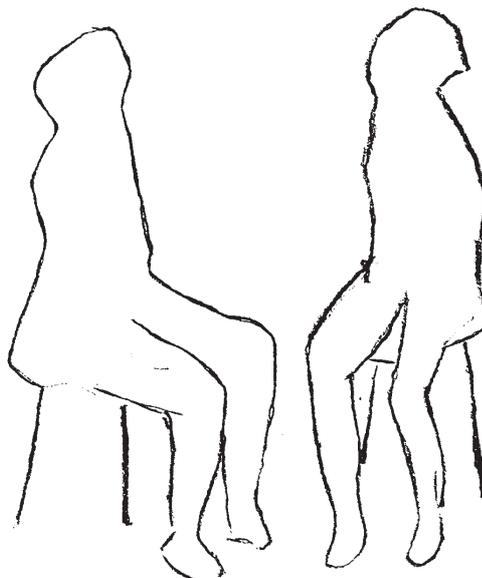
The heart of Beuys' concept of social sculpture is what he called "sculptural thinking". Beuys saw the interaction of humans as a sculptural space that

could be shaped, on a metaphorical level, in the same way as a real sculpture.

While we can observe a whole painting at once, the perception of a sculpture is different. Obviously, we are not able to see the whole sculpture at once. We start our observation by moving around the object, beginning with one particular view, and come back to the starting point. Again we see the same thing as when we started, but not the other side. But now we have a memory of what we saw. Based on the memories of different perspectives and information, we "construct" the image and form an opinion about the observed object. Beuys labels this process of assembling the different perspectives "sculptural thinking".

Beuys claims that these principles are valid for the social context as well and that we do the same thing, shaping space, whether we work with people or build a real sculpture. Certainly the material of the social context is different, but Beuys speaks about thoughts, ideas and emotions as material as well. While in the context of sculpture the object in itself provides the opportunity to be looked at from different angles (perspectives), in the social context the different perspectives are provided by the different members of a team that work together to shape an idea and to start, for example, an innovation process.

While the different perspectives (diversity) are



Dialog

Jörg Reckhenrich

key, Beuys also stressed the idea that the quality of the dialogue itself is essential to the outcome of the social sculpture. The result, he said, is mainly influenced by the creative tension of the process, which is supported by a broad framework as well as an open attitude. Here the open attitude mainly refers to the fact that each member of the team is seen as equal, team members respect each other regardless of their background, and everybody shares the vision that diversity adds value.

Think again of Ideo. When starting an innovation process, the composition of the team is key. In the case of the shopping cart project, the team included a Stanford engineer, a Harvard MBA, a linguist, a marketing expert, a psychologist and a biology major. That enabled the multiple perspectives that are needed and described by Beuys. But even more important than pure diversity is the respect among team members, their being seen as equal and their working towards a shared vision.

In modern business schools we typically find two kinds of faculty, those who excel in teaching and those who focus on research. Only if these two types are treated equally and respect each other can they create an inspiring and unique atmosphere that fosters innovation. In the business world, when this does not happen, we often observe problems in the innovation process within companies.

Think of a typical engineering-driven machine tool company. Here we can often observe that the best engineers are working in R&D, while those with lower educational qualifications work in production. Sales is often staffed by engineers who did not make it into either R&D or production. In some companies these hierarchical divisions are so engrained that when building a team with participants from R&D, production and sales, there is diversity; but respect between the members is very hard to establish. In situations like this, managers have to

break the rules of hierarchy. Without respect for individual skills and expertise, as well as a compelling shared objective, team performance can be far from ideal and conflict can readily emerge. To foster creativity, it is therefore essential to refresh the organization's behavioural patterns.

By looking at Beuys and understanding his approach to creativity, managers can become aware of ways to foster the creative process and how to enable people to unfold their very own creative potential. Beuys' ideas provide valuable insights about how managers can foster individual creativity within their organizations and also develop processes, structures and an environmental context conducive to innovation. Managers need to acknowledge that – despite the emergence of analytical, metrics-driven approaches to problem solving – imagination, inspiration and intuition still have an important part to play in the modern business. Rather being constrained by the boundaries of established management culture and legacy organizational practices, managers need to recognize the potential to sculpt their organization's innovation practices and social interactions, just as Beuys created new forms of artwork through his understanding of the process of creativity. The interaction of humans within an organization can be seen as a sculptural space that can be shaped, on a metaphorical level, in the same way as a real sculpture to boost innovation and creativity. Perhaps the term “creativity sculpturing” should become a core part of the management lexicon for the 21st century. ■

## Resources

Joseph Beuys: A brief biography,  
<http://www.walkerart.org/archive/4/9C43FDAD069C47F36167.htm>

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