



Mather LifeWays Orange Papers are provided as a resource on topics related to the growing fields of aging, wellness, and workforce development. Their content reflects the expertise of

Mather LifeWays researchers, educators, and other professionals who are leaders in creating Ways to Age Well.<sup>SM</sup>

# Oh, Think of the Possibilities!

## *Creative Thinking at Work and at Play*

*By Reed Engel, MA, FAWHP, Director of Wellness Strategies*

*& Elisabeth W. Grover, M.A., Wellness Intern*

*Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging*

## Oh, Think of the Possibilities

Imagine the last time you observed art—for example, an oil painting in an art museum. Let's say it was a Claude Monet piece. Did you find yourself thinking something along the lines of, "This man was a creative genius. I could never do that."?

While you may not be able to make a cultural contribution of such lasting historical significance as a Monet painting, you can certainly be as creative. Creativity is about far more than the vague idea of genius that humans so admire; it is an innate human ability that every individual possesses. Yes, that means you.

You just need to learn how to tap into your natural wellspring of creative prowess. Read on to learn how.

### WHAT IS CREATIVITY, ANYWAY?

Creative thinking seems important. People keep saying that it is a useful skill and it keeps appearing on job postings and in company mission statements as a desired ability. But what is it, exactly? And how can you add it to your résumé?

Creativity is generally considered to be a form of "optimal functioning" among human beings (Simonton, 2000). It is both a tool to lead a more productive life and a blessing to lead a more relaxed and happy life.

As a complex skill, creativity has been defined and understood in many different ways. Most simply, creativity is the ability to create something original that is useful and solves some kind of problem (Simonton, 2000). In more complex terms, creativity can be understood as the "interaction of a system composed of three elements," which includes a societal *culture* of learned rules, an *individual* who contributes a new interpretation of a cultural rule, and a field of *experts* who "recognize and validate the innovation" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Despite the mystical reverence most people hold towards creativity, it is simply a mental process that can be practiced and strengthened by nearly anyone, as with any other skill. As one researcher in the field so aptly put it, "creativity entails ordinary cognitive processes and hence creative thought is accessible to almost anyone" (Simonton, 2000). Although there seems to be a certain "threshold level of intelligence" that is necessary for creative thought, once that threshold is reached then additional intelligence does not increase creative ability (Simonton, 2000).

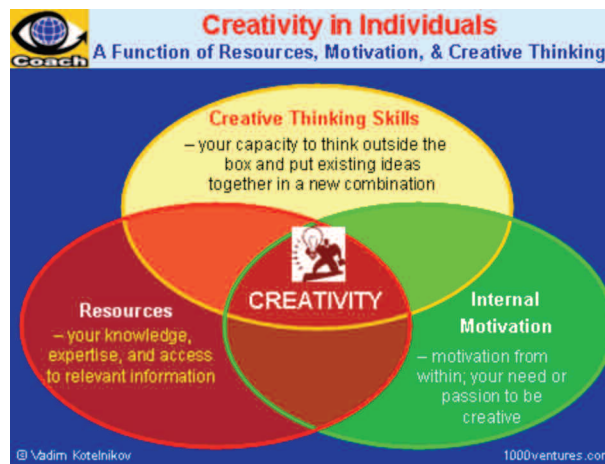
Those who appear to have been naturally blessed with a talent were most likely shaped by the interaction of their environment, personality, and experiences. Creative potential seems to be most encouraged by a developmental environment that includes multicultural experiences that expose individuals to possibilities outside of the culture to which they have been socialized, and difficult experiences that strengthen the ability to persevere (Simonton, 2000).

The power to be creative is an innate ability, something that each of us is born with, and it does not decline with age (Cohen, 2000). While there are environ-

## Oh, Think of the Possibilities

mental factors that influence whether or not individuals are “naturally” creatively gifted, most creative talent is developed through practice and dedication, rather than being magically bestowed upon a few lucky people.

As you can see from the diagram below, creativity lives in the intersection between your current creative thinking skills, your current knowledge of the problem, and your motivation to solve it. Note that each of these factors is under your control—therefore, you have control over your creative thinking ability and what you do with it.



Adapted from [http://www.1000ventures.com/business\\_guide/crosscuttings/creativity\\_main.html](http://www.1000ventures.com/business_guide/crosscuttings/creativity_main.html)

Consider this quote from Nolan Bushnell, founder of Atari and Chuck E. Cheese (a creative person, you might say): “Everyone who’s ever taken a shower has had an idea. It’s the person who gets out of the shower, dries off, and does something about it who makes a difference.”

What great idea did you have this morning?

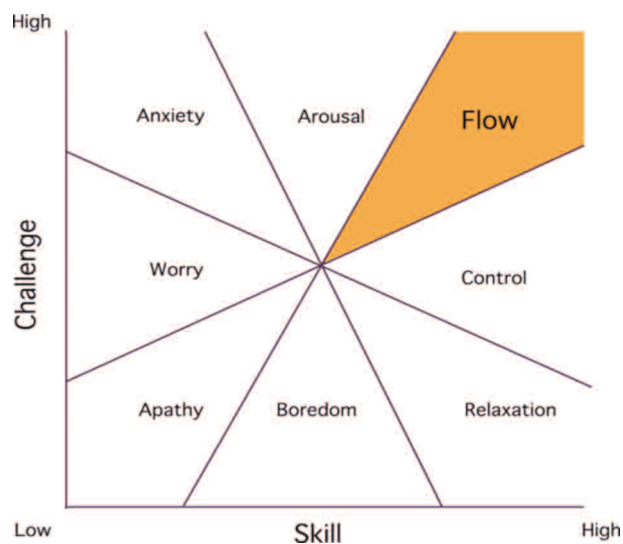
### CREATIVITY AT HOME

What do you like to do outside of work? What activities do you participate in simply because you enjoy them? Make note of what they are, because they are the key to your health and happiness. Having activities in your life that you are intrinsically motivated to participate in can be deeply fulfilling. Just look at so-called “starving artists,” for example: they are compelled to spend their time in creative endeavors to the point of not being able to pay bills. They love it that much.

Activities you want to participate in are an important form of self expression and a way of creating identity. No one forces you to paint watercolor landscape paintings on the weekend or write songs at night—you do it because you feel compelled to do so, and these activities bring you joy. Since creativity appears more often when someone is intrinsically motivated, you are more likely to be creative in these types of situations (Simonton, 2000).

## Oh, Think of the Possibilities

Becoming engrossed in an enjoyable activity can lead you to experience *flow*, a euphoric experience where you are so engaged in an activity that you become entirely engrossed in it. This state is characterized by being highly focused and unaware of your surroundings, feeling peaceful and ecstatic, while time seems to stand still (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Think of it as being “in the zone.” A *flow* state can only be achieved when the activity poses a greater challenge than most tasks and accordingly requires higher skills than usual (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Note that *arousal* and *control* are complementary states from which it is easier to move into *flow*. You can observe this relationship in the chart below. The center of the graph, where the sectors meet, represents the average levels of challenge and skill presented by most activities.



Adapted from <http://creativespark.wordpress.com/2009/04/11/life-dreaming-is-it-better-to-be-aphetic-or-anxious/>

You can increase the likelihood of experiencing *flow* by engaging in an activity you genuinely enjoy, setting goals that are slightly above your skill level, continually raising the challenge level as your performance improves, screening out distraction, seeking feedback, and concentrating on the sensory elements of the experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

The psychologist who coined the term *flow* hits on why the creative experience is so important: “the process of discovery involved in creating something new appears to be one of the most enjoyable activities any human can be involved in” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Losing yourself in an activity you love is a subliminal experience.

Creative expression and flow bring joy, which is a satisfying emotion that enhances your mental health and contributes to your overall sense of well-being. Creative activities and the satisfaction they bring can reduce stress and anxiety, sharpen the brain and stem the onset of dementia, boost self-confidence, and

improve overall health and well-being (Rodriguez & Craig, 2010). Positive experiences can make you emotionally, mentally, and physically healthier.

So, the next time you feel guilty about indulging in an activity you're not obligated to do, remind yourself that pleasurable activities improve your health and make you happier and more well-balanced. We are bombarded each day by obligations: to work, family, friends, and to-do lists. It can be difficult to make *you* time a priority. But even small activities that you may consider "frivolous," such as drinking wine or playing card games, can contribute to your health—if you enjoy them, they will make you happier and healthier!

### CREATIVITY AT WORK

Remember in high school when your guidance counselor encouraged you to take personality and interest assessments so (s)he could help you figure out what job you might want? Well, (s)he was onto something. Being aware of your personal interests, traits, and strengths can lead you to a more fulfilling career and enable you to be more successful in your chosen profession. And if you are in a career that is a good fit, you are more likely to be engaged and creative.

If you are interested in taking self-assessments to learn more about your interests and strengths, here are several sources of inspiration:

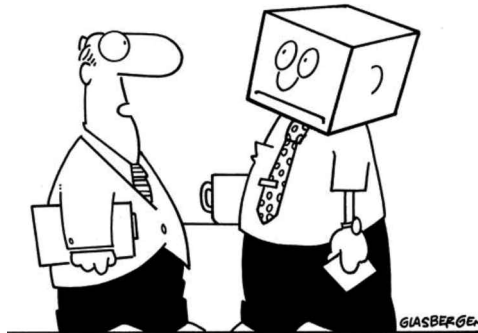
- Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) personality test  
<http://www.myersbriggs.org>
- Computerized Interest Profiler <http://www.onetcenter.org/CIP.html>
- DISC personality assessment <http://www.discmastery.com/online-disc-tests.htm>
- Authentic Happiness Test Center  
<http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/testcenter.aspx>
- VIA Institute on Character survey of character strengths  
<http://www.viacharacter.org/Surveys/SurveyCenter.aspx>
- Guide to Creative Careers <http://www.creativecareers.com>

Understanding your strengths and how to utilize them to enhance your creativity will make you more valuable to your current employer and more marketable to future ones. You may have noticed that "innovation" is becoming today's buzz word in the business world, and if you have searched for a job recently then you may have noticed that the ability to "think outside the box" is sought by nearly every recruiter.

As many jobs are moving abroad and the U.S. economy forces consumers to select their purchases carefully, many organizations are looking for ways to stand out against the sea of competitors. Many of them are hoping to become more innovative by creating unique offerings; to do so, they need fresh ideas, so they turn to the creative thinkers (Williams & Yang, 1999). The creative thinker can (and should) be you.

## Oh, Think of the Possibilities

Copyright 2005 by Randy Glasbergen. www.glasbergen.com



**“Thinking outside of the box is difficult for some people. Keep trying.”**

One author argues that this dynamic is due to three interacting factors, which he terms *abundance*, *Asia*, and *automation* (Pink, 2006). In this era of *abundance*, where consumers have an overwhelming variety of choices, companies must make their products stand out through exceptional functionality, appealing design, and a clever angle. As many jobs are outsourced to *Asia*, where they can be done more cost effectively, the work that remains focuses on building relationships and synthesizing the big picture. As much of the mechanical and computer work becomes *automated* by machines, the work that is in demand now is that which cannot be done by computers—i.e. creative thought (Pink, 2006).

To ensure that your skills remain relevant in the new occupational landscape described by this author, he suggests that you ask yourself:

- Can someone overseas do it cheaper?
- Can a computer do it faster?
- Is what I’m offering in demand in an age of abundance? (Pink, 2006)

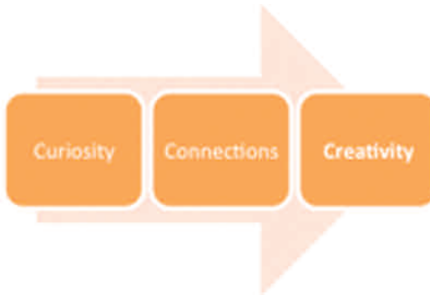
If you doubt your own ability to solve problems and be creative, then preconceived myths and misperceptions about creative thinking that you have been socialized to believe may be at work. Consider a few:

- *“Every problem has only one solution (or one right answer).”* If your solution solves the problem, then it is a good solution. It doesn’t matter if it is different from someone else’s solution (which may also work).
- *“The best answer/solution/method has already been found.”* New solutions and improvements are constantly being developed—take the gradual refinement of computers, for example.
- *“Creative answers are technologically complex.”* While some solutions can be complicated, most of the best ideas are surprisingly simple.
- *“Ideas either come or they don’t; nothing will help.”* You should realize by now that this idea is incorrect; there are many techniques for thinking about problems in different ways (Harris, 1998).

If you feel that your creative skill set could use some enhancement, fear not. There are many ways you can practice and improve your creative thinking ability.

## Oh, Think of the Possibilities

For starters, try to simply be curious about the world around you; much problem solving begins with problem finding, and problem finding starts with curiosity. By investigating why certain things are the way they are, you may begin to make connections that will lead you to new ideas and new solutions to old problems. You could also think about a problem that has been bothering you for a while; how would you fix it? Also pay attention to any ideas that you have not shared—yet.



Most creative thinking at work occurs in pursuit of a solution to a problem (Nickerson, 1999). Five common methods of addressing problems that typically lead to creative thought are *evolution*, *synthesis*, *revolution*, *reapplication*, and *changing direction* (Edgar et al, 2008).

- *Evolution* is the process of incremental improvement where small changes over time lead to significant improvements; good examples are cars and computers.
- *Synthesis* is the combination of *Idea 1* and *Idea 2* to create a new *Idea 3*; examples include audio books and dinner theater.
- *Revolution* is developing an entirely different way of doing something; for example, the invention of cars, airplanes, computers, or the Internet.
- *Reapplication* is creating an idea or product in a way that was not originally intended by the designer; for example, a bowling ball lamp.
- *Changing direction* is the process of shifting your focus from one aspect of a problem to another angle. A great example of this process is the story of a local government trying to prevent teenagers from skateboarding in a drainage ditch that just so happened to create the perfect half-pipe shape. Officials put up stronger and taller fences and more strongly worded warnings, all of which were ignored. Finally, they paused to think: *Why* do the teenagers want to skate here in the first place? The problem was then immediately solved by pouring a small amount of concrete in the bottom of the ditch, which eliminated the half-pipe shape and thus the desire to skate in it (Harris, 1998).

A popular specific technique for solving problems is *brainstorming*, typified by the wall of Post-its covered in ideas. The idea is to quickly generate as many ideas as you can in relation to a specific problem; do not judge or evaluate the ideas as they come to you, simply record them. Even an idea that seems insane and that you know will not work may spark a new idea that *will* work (Nickerson, 1999). Focus on quantity, not quality. Once you have generated as many idea Post-its (or napkins or items on a white board) as you can, then you can begin to arrange them into relationships and patterns.

## Oh, Think of the Possibilities

As a fun side note, Post-its are a real example of *synthesis* that led to a new idea. A chemist at 3M invented a glue that was not very sticky but could be reused; it was originally considered a failure because it wasn't sticky enough to bind. Five years later, a 3M colleague used it to create a bookmark that would stay put in his church hymnal (Post-It brand, 2010). You can see why William McKnight, the President of 3M, was quoted as saying, "Listen to anyone with an original idea, no matter how absurd it may sound at first. If you put fences around people, you get sheep."

Another useful form of solution finding is *mind mapping*, which is the same idea as brainstorming except that the thoughts fill a page with images rather than a wall with Post-its. The idea is that you begin with a phrase or image that represents the problem you are trying to solve, then fill the page with key words that relate to the problem and spontaneous associations that emerge from the key words. Once the brainstorming is complete, you identify relationships and themes and connect related thoughts with colors, symbols, and pictures. Mind maps are effective because they mimic the way our brain actually makes connections—haphazardly, non-linearly, and visually (Buzan, 1996). See an example below.

For more ideas and creative thinking techniques, here are only a few of the many resources available:



- Comprehensive Directory of Techniques [http://www.mycoted.com/Category:Creativity\\_Techniques](http://www.mycoted.com/Category:Creativity_Techniques)
- Educational Website, Virtual Salt <http://virtualsalt.com>
- Mind Mapping computer software [http://www.thinkbuzan.com/us/products/imindmap?utm\\_nooverride=1&gclid=CKHmiYnX8aUCFTRa7Aodog7dmw](http://www.thinkbuzan.com/us/products/imindmap?utm_nooverride=1&gclid=CKHmiYnX8aUCFTRa7Aodog7dmw)
- Creative Center of the Universe <http://www.gocreate.com>
- American Creativity Association <http://www.amcreativityassoc.org>
- National Center for Creative Aging <http://www.creativeaging.org>

## Oh, Think of the Possibilities

- Creativity at Work <http://www.creativityatwork.com>
- Michalko, M. (2001). *Cracking Creativity: The Secrets of Creative Genius*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.

With any of these creative problem-solving methods, remember: the goal is more important than the path. The best method is the one that works for you.

### WHY CREATIVE THOUGHT MATTERS

Creativity, in all its forms, adds meaning and richness to your life and the lives of those you impact. Take it from actress Sophia Loren: “There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age.”

The ability to think creatively can help you solve daily problems at home and at work. It is a skill that is becoming increasingly sought after by organizations, so being able to claim it as a skill you possess will make your job search that much easier. It can also enhance the work you do; there are many techniques to help you solve problems in new ways, so practice them and find what works best for you. Who knows, with practice you may just come up with a brilliant solution that finally fixes that problem you’ve been having at work.

It is important to set aside personal time for yourself each day. Pleasant activities provide an outlet for identity creation and personal expression, and when we are fully engaged in an activity we truly enjoy, we have the potential of experiencing the euphoria of *flow*. When we participate in meaningful activities that we enjoy, we are happier, healthier, and have a more positive sense of well-being. So go ahead and eat that piece of chocolate—after all, it’s health food.

### **Reed Engel, MA, FAWHP, Director of Wellness Strategies**

Mr. Engel is responsible for development, training, and evaluation of Mather LifeWays' wellness initiatives for older adults, professionals that serve older adults, employees, and the public. Mr. Engel's prior experience included work in the United State Peace Corps as a health volunteer in the Republic of Kiribati where he was responsible for writing national food safety legislation, building the country's first youth wellness center, and assisting the Red Cross with strategic planning and fund-raising. Prior to that, he was the Director of Corporate Fitness Management for the National Institute for Fitness and Sport. In this position, he was responsible for corporate consulting, design and implementation, staffing, and evaluation of worksite health promotion facilities and programs. He also worked as Program Manager for Saint Francis Hospital overseeing the corporate and community-based fitness center and programs.

### **Cate O'Brien, MPH, MA, Director of Workforce Research**

Ms. O'Brien has worked in a research capacity for Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging since 2005. Since then, she has been responsible for designing and overseeing large-scale multi-year evaluations for grant-funded projects relating to the field of aging. As a project director on grant funded research projects, she has been responsible for forging collaborations with aging services organizations nationwide, and for recruiting older adults into various studies. Ms. O'Brien's academic training is in the areas of Epidemiology and Public Health/Community Health Sciences.

### **About Mather LifeWays**

Based in Evanston, Illinois, Mather LifeWays enhances the lives of older adults by creating Ways to Age Well<sup>SM</sup>. Founded in 1941 by entrepreneur and humanitarian Alonzo Mather, Mather LifeWays is a unique non-denominational, not-for-profit organization dedicated to providing a continuum of living and care; making neighborhoods better places for older adults to live, work, learn, contribute, and play; and identifying, implementing, and sharing best practices for wellness, workforce issues, memory care support, and empowering caregivers. To learn more about our senior residences, Community Initiatives, and Mather LifeWays Institute on Aging, call (847) 492.7500 or find your way to [www.matherlifeways.com](http://www.matherlifeways.com)

## Sources

Buzan, T. (1996). *The Mind Map Book: How to Use Radiant Thinking to Maximize Your Brain's Untapped Potential*. New York: Penguin Books.

Cohen, G.D. (2000). *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*. New York: Avon Books.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: Harper Perennial.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). Excerpt from *Finding Flow*. New York: Basic Books. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199707/finding-flow>.

Edgar, D.W., Faulkner, P., Franklin, E., Knobloch, N.A. & Morgan, A.C. (2008). Creative Thinking: Opening Up a World of Thought. *Techniques*, 46-49. Retrieved from [www.acteonline.org](http://www.acteonline.org).

Harris, R. (1998). Introduction to Creative Thinking. Virtual Salt.com. Retrieved from <http://www.virtualsalt.com/crebook1.htm>.

Nickerson, R.S. (1999). Enhancing Creativity. In Sternberg, R.J. (Ed.). *Handbook of Creativity* (392-430). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pink, D.H. (2006). *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Post-It Brand (2010). Retrieved from [http://www.post-it.com/wps/portal/3M/en\\_US/Post\\_It/Global/Home/About/About](http://www.post-it.com/wps/portal/3M/en_US/Post_It/Global/Home/About/About).

Rodriguez, D. & Craig, C.W. (2010). Creativity Can Keep You Healthy. EverydayHealth.com. Retrieved from <http://www.everydayhealth.com/emotional-health/understanding/creativity-productivity-and-leisure.aspx>.

Simonton, D.K. (2000). Creativity: Cognitive, Personal, Developmental, and Social Aspects. *American Psychologist*, 55 (1), 151-158.

Williams, W.M. & Yang, L.T. (1999). Organizational Creativity. In Sternberg, R.J. (Ed.). *Handbook of Creativity* (373-391). New York: Cambridge University Press.