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THE TRANSFORMATIONAL DECISION TO BE A CREATIVE

Abstract

Historically, a person labeled as “creative” had artistic inclinations; however contemporary creative individuals (Creatives) are typically not tied to the arts and can be found in a wide variety of fields including STEM subject areas. Creativity has also been tied to economic success and interest in developing Creatives in various disciplines and understanding how one becomes a Creative has broad application. While humans typically have many different areas of interest, research has found Creatives often have specific, self-identifiable areas in which their creativity flows. Since creativity is not developed in every interest area, this selective application of creativity may indicate a transformational decision to be a Creative. Creatives act upon their thoughts in unique and original ways in spite of risk factors using intrinsic motivation, metacognition, and self-leadership. The grounded theory based on this model of intentional decision is the ME-Zone Theory. It is the researcher’s hope that promoting awareness of the ME-Zone can positively impact the intentional and self-directed development of Creatives. By using best practices of developing mentoring relationships and furthering self-leadership skills, nurturing creativity in individuals across all subject areas can be encouraged and fostered.

Introduction

Past studies have investigated Creatives from both inside the individual (e.g. their individual personality traits, intrinsic motivation) and factors outside the individual (e.g. organizational leadership, educational training). Generalized findings from these studies indicated that creativity is not a single facet of one’s personality nor has a methodology emerged to allow creativity to be instilled into individuals by others. Regardless of research findings we see evidence that individuals continue to become Creatives as they follow their own callings. Perhaps by better understanding what it is like to live as a Creative, their awareness of being creative, and their thoughts regarding their own creativity, we can gain insight into their experience of acting and thinking in creative ways thereby transforming themselves into Crea-

tives.

Creativity is not just artistic

A first step in studying creativity is to define the term. Society uses the term “creativity” to apply to a wide range of fields including IT, science, math, engineering, finance, and management. Evidence of this can be seen by searching listings for job openings using the term “creativity” and perusing the thousands of job listings that appear with very few being exclusively in the field of art. This activity of searching job listings also highlights the essential need which exists for Creatives in the workforce. As economists and business leaders have noted, Creatives have become a key element in many companies’ economic success (Florida 2012), are catalysts to organizational adaption (Reiter-Palmon 2011) and has been credited with being synonymous with economic productivity (Grierson 2011).

Factors for Individual Creativity

Creativity can be observed as a demonstration of behavior, but the impetus for creativity has been studied as a cognitive function. Research has identified several areas which must be addressed by Creatives: they must be willing to take risks to develop their creativity (Kaufmann & Sternberg 2007), they must trust in their own ideas (Wright 2010), and typically they demonstrate self-leadership, intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Deci & Ryan 1985), and can also use metacognition and reflective thinking. The quality of original ideas can be influenced by the Creative’s positive attitude (Grawitch, Munz, Elliott, & Mathis 2003) as well as the relationships (Grant & Berry 2011), leadership (Zhang & Bartol 2010), and culture (Wilpert 2005) provided to them in both work, home, and school. While this is not an exhaustive list, Factors for Individual Creativity (FIC) as referenced later in this paper include risk, self-trust, self-leadership, intrinsic motivation, metacognition, and positive attitude. Additionally, it has also been found that the emergence of creativity is often uniquely tied to specific domains and specific individuals. With notable exceptions such as Leonardo daVinci or Benjamin Franklin, a person who is a creative producer in one field is seldom a creative producer in an unrelated field (Snow 1986). This connection between domain identification and creative awareness had been personally experienced and also observed by the researcher; a connection that appeared to be a beginning point for individual creative awareness and self-leadership in creativity development.

Methodology

Seeking to gain more understanding into the transformation of individuals into

Creatives, this study investigated the process used by individuals to identify potential fields in which to be creative and personal self-realization of the emergence of unique creative activity. This type of personal insight is best captured by a qualitative study in which interviews and observations made by a researcher are collected and analyzed to better understand the individuals' decisions to be Creatives. A grounded theory design was used to organize the research process into an initial interview, analysis, and understanding followed by a two more cycles of interviews, analysis and understanding. This cascading design allowed for hand coding of data, and axial coding of data to reveal a theory. This theory was then tested with two final participants to allow generalization of the theory to a larger population.

Participants

Although the decision to be a Creative is not isolated to a particular age group, the participants for this study were between the ages of 18 and 20; an age group where reflective thought and self-realization is stressed due to college and career path choice decisions. Each of the ten participants had exhibited behavior that was noteworthy due to creativity; awards for judged work in the arts and commendations for novel science and research excellence. The participants were purposefully selected to represent Creatives in various fields of study (including art, music, science, information technology, business and engineering) to allow the researcher to generalize the findings to a wide range of subject areas. As a test for trustworthiness and credibility, a rough draft of the transcribed interviews and the researcher's insight gained from the interviews were provided to each participant. This member-checking arrangement allowed the researcher to be confident that the data correctly represented the participants' intent and meaning.

Although this paper uses the term "creativity" and "Creative" to identify these participants, a portion of those interviewed did not feel that these terms were appropriate descriptors. Several noted that their interests were not in the arts and they felt that "creativity" was arts-biased and therefore did not describe them as well as "innovative" or "original". For these participants, the researcher opted to substitute the term "original thinking" for "creativity" during their interviews. As previously discussed, contemporary use of the term "creativity" seems to extend past the arts into all fields, but as a comfort for these participants, the option of a substitute label for "creative" was incorporated in the interviews.

Recognition of Areas of Creativity

By evaluating the participants' individual journeys to becoming Creatives, the researcher found prominent similarities regarding their awareness of their own crea-

tive inclinations in specific interest areas. When asked about their use of creative, innovative, or original thinking, the participants directed the conversations toward their unique interests and included their thoughts and accomplishments where they had creative successes. Without the researcher knowingly prompting or directing the dialogue, the participants had self-identified Areas of Creativity (AOC) and continued with stories of finding mentors, organizing resources, and finding their own ways to thrive. Conversely when asked about other subject areas, participants expressed frustration when they recalled being required to put effort into areas in which they did not feel creatively gifted. In these Areas of Non-Creativity (NonAOC), the participants recalled their under-performance or even avoidance of the subject areas. In terms of school classwork, participants described their experiences in AOC courses with positive overtones showing evidence of engagement, ownership, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, and active learning while in their NonAOC classes they conversely demonstrated disinterest and few successes.

The Decision

It was observed that these participants knowingly sought out opportunities to be creative in specific fields or areas. Looking back on the FIC listed previously, each of the participants took actions to become a Creative. Although no one stated that they made a conscious decision to become a risk-taker (as is required of a Creative), their subsequent actions demonstrated that they were willing to take risks in their pursuit of growing in their AOC. In secondary school environments, they asked teachers for alternative assignments, challenged their peers to question their thinking, or left traditional school settings to attend magnet-type schools in their AOC. Outside of school settings they ventured on their own to find competitions or experiences in which they could explore their AOC in self-determined capacities. They showed evidence that they were willing to trust in their own creative powers, build support systems, and seek out opportunities to grow in their AOC. The researcher observed that the transformational decision to be a Creative was often a cognitive decision to follow a self-devised path which may not have been voiced as a declaration to others.

Evidence of the Decision

If the decision was not voiced, what evidence supports the observations that they made a decision? Participants stated that they found value in using creative thought and were aware that they made conscious decisions to place themselves in environments where they could be creative. They realized their drive to be engaged in particular fields or subject areas was different than others around them and the need to satisfy their internal drive seemed to become a dominant influence in their

lives. Interestingly, since these participants were all in an age group where peer-influence is thought to be influential, these participants saw themselves as different and did not consider themselves as having the same needs as their peers.

In school, Creatives who were engaged in AOC classes recalled that grades were not a strong motivator for them, but found that the satisfaction or “good feelings” they found in using their own creativity was a better reward. Unfortunately for education, most of the participants recalled that they created many of their opportunities on their own time, outside of the classroom, because school environments were not typically supportive environments for their creativity.

Expressed emotions also were indicators of the connections which developed between participants and their identified AOC. Frustration was often mentioned when participants were faced with required a right-or-wrong decisions in their AOC since they frequently saw multiple workable solutions for a particular situation. They were less concerned with decisions in NonAOC; which gave further evidence to their perceived differentiation between areas of interest and other less important areas. Participants expressed their desire for control over their time and effort in their AOC but were less engaged in NonAOC events. Participants expressed increased feelings of self-worth once they had been acknowledged as achieving some level of success by using their creativity in their AOC, but not all accolades were equally valued. Several participants stated that they only valued feedback from others who they felt were knowledgeable in their AOC.

AOCs also were noted as catalysts for relationships between Creatives and others who they perceived as being interested in their success. Family members were often seen as allies and Creatives valued them as supporters. Outside of family connections, Creatives often conducted intentional searches for mentors who could support their growth in their AOC through coaching, training, and modeling behavior. Occasionally Creatives found that they outgrew mentors and reached out to find other relationships which could help them grow in their AOC. Creatives also sought out peers who they felt were sincerely interested in the AOC and would create a mutually beneficial team.

Analyzing their Awareness

The participants appeared to be aware of their specific areas of creativity and that they acted in ways which allowed them to pursue their own unique calling, but they differed in their understanding of the earlier identified IFC. While their actions and comments inferred their use of intrinsic motivation (IM), few referred specifically to IM and others denied that they personally had much IM even though their experiences had demonstrated it. It was observed that many of these Creatives had adopted tactics to allow themselves to use their creativity, but were unaware of their cognitive practices. Their desire to be engaged in their AOC did not

necessarily include the use of metacognition, or thinking about their thinking. In a few instances during the interviews, the participants grew in understanding of their own thinking and experienced “ah-ha” moments regarding their actions and their own motivation. When these moments of awakening happened, the researcher noted the heightened engagement and excitement that the participants exhibited as they seemingly took ownership of the ideas.

While research has identified aspects of nurturing and encouraging creativity, these participants who were living as Creatives were often unaware of the existing knowledge about creativity. As evidenced by the brief interactions where new information energized the participants and gave them new insight and ideas, it appeared that Creatives and potential Creatives may benefit from awareness of the IFC and other empowering information. For Creatives in the workplace, it seems likely that they could benefit from understanding their fit within their organization; a fit that researchers have equated to a small business entrepreneur (Sarri, Bakouros, & Petridou 2010). When Creatives adopt entrepreneurial strategies such as focusing on company goals, finding /using resources, and developing their own support systems, they have been found to be more effective and satisfied. Although this is published research, it does not appear to be widely known by individuals who might be more effective at using their creativity.

Discussion of the ME-Zone Theory

The process for making a transformation into a Creative as revealed by analyzing the stories of the study’s participants includes identifying areas of interest followed by seeking out opportunities and resources to use creativity. The decision to be a Creative seems to occur within the individual and then requires the Creative to begin a navigational path through inherent risks that accompany the decision. Each Creative has a unique journey which research cannot accurately predict, but as evidenced by the discussions between the participants and the researcher, the findings from research can help Creatives devise strategies to be more effective actors and thinkers. The ME-Zone Theory which resulted from the grounded theory methodology from this study helps to explain the relationship of the Creative with awareness of information and a call to action that can positively affect their growth as a Creative. By presenting Creatives with the concepts of self-leadership, entrepreneurial skills, metacognition and the other known creativity factors, they can be more effective and efficient in developing their creativity.

Another aspect of the ME-Zone Theory that was revealed in the study was the responsibility and ownership that rests with the Creative. The individual is central to the development of creativity; although incubator environments can be created for encouraging creativity the effort and work must originate within the individual. Beginning with an internal decision and self-recognition of the AOC, fulfillment of

creative growth is the outcome of the Creative's engagement with the creativity factors. The decision to become a Creative is transformational and the transformation is affected by the empowering information that the individual internalizes.

The ME-Zone Theory can promote awareness and understanding for all who hope to create interest in creativity. Introducing the concepts of individual decisions and self-nurturing behavior may entice previously non-Creatives to use their creativity with a potential outcome of increasing the number of Creatives available to the workforce. For mentors and educators, the Me-Zone Theory can graphically illustrate the ownership required of the Creative and explain their role as external influences as opposed to the driving force. As a vehicle for awakening, educating, and empowering, the Me-Zone Theory can be a tool for both Creatives and those who work with Creatives and potential Creatives.

Conclusions

Creativity has a heightened awareness in our society and developing Creatives has become an economic focal point. This study analyzed the stories of creative individuals and found that the development of creativity is a unique and personal experience that begins with a transformational decision to be a Creative and then requires a self-directed path to nurture their own creativity. The findings from this study have been accumulated into The ME-Zone Theory which presents a model for Creatives to better understand their self-leadership roles and provide understanding and empowerment to the individual as the center of the creative process. By better understanding the process of becoming a Creative, it is hoped that more individuals are encouraged to investigate their creative callings.

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Author's brief bio

Dr. Valery Keibler is both a Creative and a mentor to Creatives. Building on her graphic design and marketing background, she currently is an instructor in the humanities department at the Community College of Allegheny County and conducts ongoing research in encouraging and supporting individual creativity and original thinking. She holds a PhD in Instructional Management and Leadership from Robert Morris University and a master's degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Capella University. She can be reached through her website, www.valerykeibler.com.

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