REWRITING THE MYTHS OF CREATIVITY

OF CREATIVITY

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THERE IS A MYTHOLOGY THAT SURROUNDS CREATIVITY.

Cultures develop myths when they can't rely on existing knowledge to explain the world around them. They are developed and passed down in an effort to explain why certain mysterious events occur, or to affirm how we should behave and think. Creativity is no different.

The Ancient Greeks created the muses, who received and answered the prayers of ancient writers, musicians, and even engineers. The muses were the bearers of creativity's divine spark. They were the source of inspiration. Over time, the Greek influence on the Western world ensured that the legend of the muses continued on. During the Enlightenment, many of the leading thinkers of the 18th century sought to re-establish a "cult of the muses" as a means to further their own intellectual pursuits. Voltaire, Danton, even Benjamin Franklin while in Paris attended meetings at a Masonic lodge named Les Neufs Soeurs, or "the nine sisters." Our modern culture still feels the effects of their efforts in words such as "museum," whose original meaning was "cult place of the muses," but has since come to refer to any place where public knowledge or creative works are displayed.

While the influence of the Greek mythology of creativity can still be seen in modern times, the modern scientific method has helped us move away from a belief in the muses. But few, it seems, have accepted that help. Despite the revelations of empirical research, a newer mythology has developed to attempt to explain away other mysterious elements of creativity and the entire process of innovation. As I began my research into how individuals and organizations approach the creative process, I found ten myths widespread in the modern world. These are myths in the traditional sense: they're based on observing something seemingly unexplainable, and then crafting a logically sound (but faulty) explanation. These myths were prevalent almost everywhere I looked—everywhere except in the most innovative companies and people.

If we want to be more creative, if we want our organizations to be more innovative, then we have to learn from these companies and individuals, use the wealth of empirical research at hand, and rewrite the myths of creativity.

> **" *If we want to be more creative, if we want our organizations to be more innovative, then we have to … rewrite the myths of creativity.* **

The Ten Myths of Creativity

1 The Eureka Myth

2 The Breed Myth

3 The Originality Myth

4 The Expert Myth

5 The Incentive Myth

6 The Lone Creator Myth

7 The Brainstorming Myth

8 The Cohesive Myth

9 The Constraints Myth

10 The Mousetrap Myth

❝ The truth is that all new ideas are built from combing older ideas. The novelty comes from the combination or application, not the idea itself.

The Eureka Myth | We tend to assume that creative insights happen in a flash, or that the idea was brought to us from something outside ourselves. That's why we use language like "it just came to me." The truth is that the creative process typically requires a time of incubation, where ideas and relevant knowledge linger in the subconscious. Sometimes the ideas connect suddenly, seemingly in a flash, but more often the right connection takes some work after incubation. The most creative individuals and companies regularly schedule incubation time, or shift from one project to another, to allow conscious minds some time off from think about the project.

The Breed Myth | When we look at outstandingly creative individuals, it's easy to assume that they are a certain type or breed. The truth is that there is no evidence supporting a creative gene or personality type. We're all cut from largely the same cloth, with the same ability to generate ideas. There is a wealth of evidence showing there creative potential is inside of everyone. Walk through a kindergarten class and observe the creativity in every student. While it's easy to separate out "creatives" from the presumably non-creative workers, many of the most innovative companies purposely do not draw that distinction. They make creativity a part of everyone's job.

The Originality Myth | When a creative idea is presented to us, it's easy to look at it as wholly original–a departure from the old way of thinking. The truth is that all new ideas are built from combing older ideas. The novelty comes from the combination or application, not the idea itself.

The printing press combined the technology of the wine press with moveable type. Star Wars is a mash-up of previous science fiction movies with samurai films set against a plotline borrowed from ancient myths. Our brains are a jumble of connections, and new connections are formed all the time. Research demonstrates that the most creative people are the ones whose brains form new connections the easiest. It's not about originality; it's about making original copies.

The Expert Myth | When we face a tough creative challenge, we always look to those with the most expertise. The truth is that some level of expertise matters, but the most creative solutions come from those on the fringes of the subject area, who know enough to understand but not enough to block their creative thinking. Research shows that, over the course of their careers, most individuals tend to reach their peak creativity productivity early on, and then begin a downward trend. Those who continue at high levels of productivity, like mathematician Paul Erdos, are the ones who cultivate outsider mindsets by constantly learning new fields and applying those new lessons to old problems.

The Incentive Myth | In organizations, if you want something done well you incentivize it. But that can get tricky when the "something" that needs to be done requires creativity. The truth is that extrinsic motivators like incentive pay have been shown to have a modest effect on creativity at best, and a negative one at worst. Creativity is driven by intrinsic motivation, and unless an incentive is aligned with our intrinsic desires, the incentive won't have an effect. That's the genius behind grants like the MacArthur Fellows program, which gives recognition and monetary support to creative people who are already hard at work, instead of trying to match a project with a creative person and offering a prize.

The Lone Creator Myth | We tend to think that great creative work happens in isolation. We envision a lonely artist slaving away in his studio. The truth is that most breakthrough ideas come from teams formed out of the right network of collaborators. Thomas Edison has a team of around 15 other inventors working alongside him on various projects. Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel with the help of 13 other artists. Research shows that the best teams have a blend of long-time colleagues and new collaborators. When we think alone or with the same old team, we rarely capture new ideas. Creativity is a team sport and the most creative companies get that way by building the best teams.

The Brainstorming Myth | When most of us have to "think outside the box," we
resort to one method: brainstorming. The method itself has been the subject of debate for quite some time. One thing that isn't up for debate is that brainstorming as a creative method is not sufficient by itself. The truth is that the creative process requires various stages. Almost all fixed creative methods (from creative problem solving to design thinking) involve a period of rapid idea generation, but then also allow for a time where ideas are combined and externalized. Brainstorming works to generate a list of ideas, but its what we do with that list afterward that makes the result truly creative.

The Cohesive Myth | If you look at the most innovative companies in the world, it's easy
to see signs of cohesion. From pools tables to free food to Casual "Everyday," it can be tempting to assume that the entire company lacks conflict. The truth is that the most innovative companies and teams build conflict into their creative process. Film studio Pixar schedules regular meetings where directors screen a film-in-progress and open it up for criticism. The result of "shredding" the film is always a better film. While steps need to be taken to make sure criticism stays task-focused (not people focused), research suggests that even brainstorming as a technique is more beneficial when teams debate ideas. Conflict is a sign that new ideas are being suggested; cohesion is often a sign that there are no new ideas.

The Constraints Myth | When we're stuck on a creative challenge, it can become

easy to place blame on our constraints. If we had more resources or less specific requirements, then our creativity could really soar. The truth is that creativity is highest in a constrained environment. Researchers found that individuals are more creative after engaging in tasks laden with obstacles and roadblocks. That's why many of the most creative companies build limitations into their projects. Constraints help us by giving structure to the challenge we are trying to overcome. Without that structure, there is no understanding. Without that understanding, there is no solution. Creativity doesn't just love constraints; it thrives under them.

The Mousetrap Myth | We've heard the saying, "If you build a better mousetrap, the

world will beat a path to your door." The truth is that if you build a better mousetrap, the world will either beat it down or ignore it. History is filled with innovative ideas being rejected when they were first presented. Kodak invented the digital camera and never marketed it. Xerox invented the personal computer and handed it off to Apple and Microsoft. Harry Warner, of the Warner Brothers, first saw the technology that would allow talking movies and rejected it saying, "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?" Psychological research suggests that we actually have a bias against creative ideas. The most innovative companies know they don't need to make their people more creative, they need to get better at recognizing the creative ideas their people have.

There is a gap between what we think we know about creativity and innovation and what research and history actually tells us. There is no shortage of books on how to be more creative or how your company can innovate more. All of these books seek to meet a need. Few would dispute that our society needs more creativity and our organizations need more innovation. So we turn to books that promise simple tips or proven methods to leveraging creativity.

But what it it's not about creative thinking methods? What if it's about how we think about creativity?

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All of us hold on to a system of beliefs. Many of these beliefs have developed into a mythology about creativity. This mythology started with good intentions and sincere attempts to explain where creative ideas originated and how best to implement them.

But many of these myths of creativity are plainly false. They aren't supported by research or historacy, and in some cases what we've found about creative efforts directly contradicts the myths we choose to believe. Any model or method for creativity based on the mythology will offer little help in making us more creative.

If we want to develop more creative individuals, and build more innovative companies, then we need to questions our models. **We need to rewrite the myths of creativity.** 🏳

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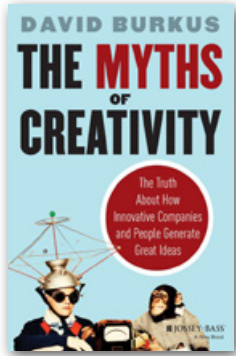
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