HRD Forum

Learning to Boost Creativity in Teams

**Rob Sheffield, author of ‘Innovation Catalysts’,
in interview with Rick Holden (Editor, IJHRDPP&R)**

Introduction

Dr Rob Sheffield is a leadership development consultant and innovation coach with Bluegreen Learning. He is a Visiting Fellow at the University of the West of England. After four years in the writing, his book “How Leaders Learn to Boost Creativity: Innovation Catalysts” has recently been published. I wanted to find out a bit more about the book and in particular to explore some of the HRD issues and implications that the book embraces and encapsulates. To begin our discussion, I ask Rob why he wrote this book.

I wrote my book for several reasons. First, I wanted to draw attention to the converging of the need for and means of learning and applying creativity and innovation skills. Societies, cities, organizations, and individuals want them. A couple of illustrations add weight to this view. The World Economic Forum 2016 report forecast that by 2020 complex problem-solving skills will be the most needed workplace skills, and creativity will be the third. And in 2018 a survey by Deloitte of 10,455 millennials asked them to identify their priorities for business. In third place, behind “Generating jobs/provide employment” and “Improve society” came “Innovate/develop new products and services, generate ideas”. Second, while trust and confidence in organizational leadership is generally low across the globe, the experience of myself and my colleagues is that we often work with leaders who learn and apply these skills. They do so in under-the-radar ways without seeking much attention, while improving others’ lives by bringing clear value through changes they introduce. Third, I wanted to make clear that creativity and innovation skills are learnable. While few know it, we have around 50 years of research and teaching to draw upon and help us.

Picking up on this last point I often come across people who say they have never been very imaginative or creative. And some relatively recent research (noted in Cox, 2013) has suggested that we might be underestimating the extent to which creativity is heritable. Why do you believe strongly that creativity and innovation skills are learnable?

I’m not denying that there are differences between people that are relevant and relatively fixed. For example, the adaption-innovation dimension (Kirton, 2003) in the book is a style measure and the research suggests our preferences don’t change though our lives. What I’m convinced about is that, through following useful tools and disciplines, people can learn quickly to generate more ideas, more types of ideas, and, to some extent, originality of ideas, although I

acknowledge this is a bit trickier. They can do this individually, but especially in groups. At the heart of this is encouraging and nurturing an ability to engage in divergent thinking. And all the evidence suggests this is both underestimated and underdeveloped. In many ways it's more about self-awareness and self-identity than any innate ability. Some research by Adobe (2012), for example, indicated that only 1 in 4 people feel that they are living up to their creative potential and this is in a work context where the pressure for increasing productivity at work is growing strongly. And certainly my experience is often that people working in small groups go through a bit of an awakening as to what they can do and what they can do better.

I'm interested in hearing a bit more about how you position your thinking on creativity and innovations skills in the context of leaders and leadership in today's organizations.

I wanted to share stories of individual leaders who get very little air time. The collective noun of leadership gets plenty of press, usually bad, for abuses of power, from expense fiddling to corruption and more. It's easy to throw a blanket over the whole of leadership and damn everyone. But that's not my experience. Also, importantly, the underpinning paradigm of leadership, has altered away from the taken for granted focus on the leader as a heroic individual to one of leadership as a more distributed and relational process. I talk about the concept of interdependent leadership — people who think carefully about using the power they have to help others feel stronger, in the service of a worthwhile goal. These people are doing good work, introducing change that their stakeholders want, and working in ways that sustain their team, rather than depleting them. It is a book that gives 'voice' to everyday leaders, working under difficult constraints, who find ways to develop and implement novel approaches that benefit people. In a context where fear, uncertainty and doubt can be contagious emotions, I wanted to redress the balance by bringing some optimism and hope.

A Model for Learning Creativity and Innovations Skills

With its emphasis on learning creativity and innovation skills would you say this is principally a 'how to book'?

I'd say it's more of a why-to book, and even more, a you-can-do-it! book. I wanted to make the point that creativity and innovation skills are very topical and growing in demand and supply. I've already mentioned some of the indicators of this ... and we have a rich heritage of know-how in developing these skills. I wanted to show that the research has very practical implications.

The book is aimed at two main groups of readers. Firstly, organizational leaders whose teams have to turn ideas into value. And, of course the senior HRD professional is one such leader. They are critical players in any organizational change process. Acting as internal consultants they need to understand how their organizational strategy generates a need for innovation, before they start building the skills and ensuring that leaders understand how they impact on team climate, so that skills-building can be applied in a supportive context. Secondly, students of topics like leadership, creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Most programmes within business schools today include such topics and I hope the approach adopted in the book will have real appeal to this readership. The how-to comes in at the level of a set of principles, captured in the ABCD model (see Figure 1). We've adapted a 58-year-old model, which gives a systematic way of raising the odds of organizations becoming more innovative. There are some clear implications for anyone interested in human resource development and good people

management practice more generally? “Innovation” has been topical for some years, and at risk of being perceived as just another hype that will soon disappear. The risk is that we mistake the noise for no substance. Part of the judgement for professionals is in discerning the potentially profound implications for people management.

Figure 1: ABCD Model (Sheffield, 2019)

Can we look at aspects of the model in a little more detail? In the context of element 2 “Build creative problem-solving skills” what would you highlight as critical here?

It’s important for me to note that I see the model as an integrated structure for introducing creativity into organizations. Each of its sections are complementary and each part has a role. But yes, this is the part of the model that enabled me to introduce the tools for the different stages of the process of building and nurturing creativity and innovation. What would I highlight as critical? Well, probably that agreeing and defining a need is a key starting point. For example, in the book, Liam manages an experienced team of people who treat drug and alcohol addicts. Because they are already recognized as being successful, they are given an opportunity to extend their services across a wider region. Because of the scale of the challenge, they had to develop a new way of working. They’d already had some training with us, and had learnt a set of creative problem-solving tools. What was interesting about this team was that they were highly committed, experienced, respected each other, and were led by a facilitative leader. The CPS tools are useful but the quality of conversation underpins them. This team brought in partners from within and outside their organization to co-design the process with them. They trusted these people, and each brought something different. There’s a mindset of entering into a new territory together — underpinned by trust, respect and a willingness to accept not-knowing — that supports these tools. Without the mindset and healthy relationships, the tools are limited.

The fourth element of the ABCD model is 'leveraging diversity'. Have you an example of how this can be realized in practice. What would you say is a key implication for the HRD professional here?

I should clarify that what I'm talking about here is principally cognitive diversity ... a style of thinking I suppose. I think that interdependent-minded leaders tend to think things like: I have skills you don't have; you have skills I don't. They understand that teams really need a mix over time and they don't set themselves above others. They think about mutuality — what we can do together. It drives their openness to working with others. In the book, Ted is a consultant in an accident and emergency department. He manages Jo. Ted also knows that Jo is more likely to come up with more radical solutions. (Ted is more pragmatic, more incremental in his approach.) And Ted encourages Jo to pursue her radical method when it's appropriate. Ted gives political air-cover and legitimizes Jo's work through support in meetings and 'managing upwards'. For HRD professionals, a key implication is to help leaders first understand their own preferences and the implications for working with others on creative challenges. For example, how they, as leaders, might not have the best ideas!

Thinking about the work climate element ... it seems to me that this book speaks most powerfully to those work contexts are peopled by high performing, highly committed individuals ... workplaces that are being transformed with new technologies, new forms of organization, and new generations of management stressing flexibility, quality, teamwork etc. But what about those organizations that deploy a very different business model; one that operates on the basis of reducing costs, unskilled and routinized work, (digital Taylorism?) increasing work intensity, insecurity, and minimal training? Can creativity and innovation and your claims for the organizational value of learning such skills speak to such workplaces and organizations operating in this way?

I'm not sure it's so polarized. In the book, I describe nine cases of leaders learning to enable creativity in their teams, across healthcare, legal and corporate services, technology, and education. Some of these are very traditional settings, where there has been relative stability over time. They're all under pressure to sustain their existences by introducing new market offerings (products, services, markets, etc.) and cut costs, become more efficient, improve internal processes, etc.

I agree that, for plenty of people, the challenges may be more at the incremental-end of the change continuum. But, also, this demand for creative skills is a real phenomenon. You could argue that the workplaces you describe are more likely to become more automated and process-driven. The harder to automate roles might be those which require skills of empathy, critical and creative thinking, leadership, and influence. I think there is a strong point here about an unintended consequence of the push for greater efficiencies, cost reductions, and work intensification. As the remaining people become more productive — up to a point — more stressed, and probably less loyal, these conditions will negatively affect creativity. Idea generation and implementation don't thrive under these conditions. People withdraw their discretionary efforts. So, yes, I think the book does speak to the sort of organizations you highlight but I acknowledge that there is a tougher challenger here. Such organizations are likely to lack a 'creative' and 'innovative' internal champion of change. Perhaps the biggest challenge — including for the HRD professional — is finding the 'entry' points to enable questions about prevailing assumptions to be raised and alternatives considered.

The ‘Transfer’ Challenge

Finally, in the world of HRD, transfer of learning remains a real challenge. Suggestions are that as much as 75% of learning can be lost in context of transfer scenarios. To what extent do you feel this is any less or more problematic with something like creativity and innovation skills?

My background is in learning and development, and so I do recognize this. I think there are some important differences with skills such as creativity and innovation. Firstly, people can apply these skills at personal, group, and cross-organizational levels. The skills are scale-able. Also, organizations want these skills applied, so there should be opportunities present in everyday work. Another difference between this and some other skills areas is that people often get pleasure from applying their imagination; it can generate real engagement. They enjoy the process of working with others, the surprises and the laughs. It’s interesting how often people laugh when they work this way. That gives an experience they want to repeat. And, thirdly, for some people, they see these skills as helping to safeguard their future employability. They want this because, in an uncertain employment market, with automation and robotization on the rise, they anticipate that these skills are harder to automate. Learning them will help safeguard their own futures. People are motivated to develop them, and are likely to persist in applying the skills, to build a track record. I noted the Deloitte research earlier about the perceived priorities for business held by Millennials and this seems to offer support for a strong relationship, between creativity and innovations skills and employability.

So, in summary I’d say that our clear experience is that leaders and their teams learn quickly how to be more creative. The learning ‘sticks’ when they complement skills training with a supportive work climate, using the thinking diversity they possess, and do all this with innovation aims clearly aligned to strategy.

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