



# Unglued

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## Creativity vs. Productivity

Before the holidays last fall, I went into production mode with my painting. I wanted to produce enough small (4” x 6” or smaller) original paintings to sell at a holiday boutique and to give as hostess gifts for every holiday party I would attend. I picked six reference photos from my file and got to work. Those first six paintings, though small, took a chunk of time as I worked out problems and experimented with composition, value, and color. But I needed way more than six paintings, so I had to decide: Should I continue experimenting with different images? Or, should I paint the same images again (and perhaps again), hoping to pick up speed and increase productivity? **Time was limited. I had goals and a deadline. I chose productivity over creativity.**

**Companies face similar decisions as they develop business strategies.** I can see it in the meetings I facilitate. The goal of the quarterly, semi-annual, or annual planning meeting is to reach consensus on goals and action plans. Impatient to get the meeting over with, the team allots a half-day, or a full day at the most, to meet and accomplish this purpose. Developing goals and action plans is a tough task even for high performance teams. But for the average, somewhat dysfunctional team, a half-day or even a full day, is a recipe for disappointment. As a facilitator, I can help a team achieve goals and an action plan in a half-day or a day, but deep down inside, I know that they are likely to fail in the implementation phase.

**Why? Thinking deeply and creatively about the future takes time, individually and collaboratively.** When forced to make decisions without adequate creative thinking time, the decision may not be the best one; there’s little enthusiasm or commitment to follow through, and the team is back to business as usual.

**Ideally, individuals and companies should develop a creative process for planning and innovation that follows defined steps and allows a period of time for each step.** Instead of a one-day meeting, I encourage clients to consider multiple meetings. Even before the first meeting, each participant is taking stock of the current reality – Where are we this year compared to last year in terms of sales, expenses, customer satisfaction, or other critical metrics? How has the competitive environment changed, and how can we expect it to change in the coming year?

At the first meeting, participants share a vision of current reality and brainstorm a compelling vision of the future. Then, instead of narrowing the options down to a few easy choices for implementation, they select a number of options to explore. Some of those they choose to explore may seem wild and impossible. But the exploration may trigger a different, better idea. Christopher Columbus set out to find a new route to India and China, but found the new continent of America instead!

In the book, **Creativity, Inc. – Building an Inventive Organization**, authors Jeff Mauzy and Richard Harriman outline a seven-stage creative process for organizations. For each stage, they suggest creativity tools to stimulate novel ideas, to explore ideas, or to make decisions. The steps in the process can be adapted to individuals as well.

Of course, while all this creative thinking and planning is going on, business must go on as well. Companies must continue to provide the products and services to the customer. The trouble is many companies exist in constant fire-fighting mode and never get around to defining and practicing a creative process. These are the companies that seldom innovate, burn out their good employees, and gradually fall behind the competition.

Part of defining a creative process for the organization involves looking at all the business processes to determine how to make creativity and innovation part of the culture so that you can maintain productivity while you're inventing the next great product or service. For example, 3M Company allows employees to spend 15% of their time to explore new ideas. Post-It Notes were a product of this company practice.

Do you spend 15% of your time on creative thinking and exploration? If you were to do so, what would you work on? How would you carve out 15% of your time for creative exploration?

We all must go into production mode from time to time, as I did before Christmas. I'm now back to exploring new ways to put paint on paper to create meaning.

If you or your organization would like some help defining or reinventing your creative process, give me a call.

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