

# How's your creative fitness?

Utilizing the creative talents of your people is key to fully realizing the creative potential of your organisation. Nigel Collin looks at how well the not-for-profit sector does just that.

## The 360-degree Creativity Health Check.

Creativity is a major business driver. No argument there. It delivers ideas, outpaces competition, reaches markets, improves systems, and creates leaders of industry. In the competitive world of not-for-profit it helps streamline systems, create strategies and find new ways of reaching people. Creativity delivers real value on many levels.

However, in an attempt to harness creativity many organisations are not fully utilizing the creative talents of their people and as a result there are lost opportunities.

So how do you improve your organisation's creative fitness? Well it's a bit like when you join a gym. The first thing that happens is a fitness instructor sits you down and does a full fitness appraisal so they can devise the appropriate strategy. You could of course start without that, but chances are you'd be working on the wrong areas, focusing on the wrong things, or even worse, ultimately doing damage. So the first thing to do is figure out how creatively fit your organisation is.

Recently we undertook a short '360-degree Creativity Health Check' on how the not-for-profit sector utilizes creativity. Although not a full assessment, the results were both interesting and telling. And although it

covered the sector as a whole, rather than individual organisations, it certainly highlighted some trends and areas of focus. Here's what we found.

## The Creativity Gap

Firstly it's apparent that creativity is alive, well and valued within the sector. When asked, 'in business should creativity have a commercial value?' 67% answered yes and when asked 'should creativity be strategic?' 60% answered yes. And although it would be great to see that figure creep upwards, this certainly indicates that most people see creativity as an important element.

However, when asked 'do you fully utilize the talents of your creative people?' Only 47% of people answered yes!

So there's a gap between the value an organisation places on creativity and its ability to utilize it (although I admit I have seen bigger gaps, so the news is not all that bad). On one-hand most people agree



that creativity is important but on the other they admit that they are not fully tapping into the creativity of their people.

**Why is this?**

**1. ‘Perception’**

One reason is the perception we place on who creative people are. Creative people are often seen as those ponytailed, t-shirt wearing folks in the corner. Not true. Creative people are everywhere, all through your organisation, and the sad thing is they are often not recognised. A creative person is anyone who thinks differently. Yes, I admit that some people are more creative than others (and we should be very glad of that) but that doesn’t mean you should exclude and overlook the talents of everybody else. To do so is limiting your organisation’s creative potential.

**2. ‘Creative Culture’**

Another reason for the ‘Creativity Gap’ relates to an organisation’s culture, or more specifically, lack of a culture that supports and stimulates creativity. We asked a number of questions relating to this. Here are the main three.

‘Do people feel they have permission to be creative?’

Yes	58%
Somewhat	34%
No	4%
Not sure	4%

‘Do people feel they can put an idea on the table without fear of ridicule?’

Yes	64%
Somewhat	32%
No	3%
Not sure	1%

‘Are failures and mistakes openly discussed?’

Yes	52%
Somewhat	39%
No	8%
Not sure	1%

These are important questions because if people don’t feel they have permission to be creative then they won’t be. If they don’t feel they can voice their ideas safely then they won’t voice them. If they don’t feel they can try something new and fail, then they won’t try.

Looking at the responses, the outcome here is pretty good. But even though the majority said ‘Yes’ to these questions, there is a large percentage of ‘Somewhats’ which could easily be converted. With the right support and direction from leadership and by focusing on areas such as collaboration, workplace environment and use of time (creativity doesn’t work 9 to 5), the percentage answering ‘yes’ would increase.

**3. Creative Process**

The other contributor to the gap is lack of creative process, or perhaps the process. Because creativity is often seen as an intangible thing, in an attempt to make sense of it, organisations tend to adopt

one of two approaches. They implement restrictive, cookie cutter approaches which only limit and constrain creativity. Or they let it go unheeded, with no process at all to guide, so it goes unchecked, unstimulated and undirected. Truth is creativity thrives on structure, but you have to get it right.

When asked ‘does your organisation have a clearly defined creative process?’ only 17% of respondents said ‘yes’. That’s way too low. Having a good creative culture is one thing but you need to direct and focus creativity.

The good news is that of those who do have a creative process 89% have one which is flexible, or it has a loose/tight structure. That’s great because you need a framework that knows when to turn on and turn off the creative controls.

If your creative process is too controlled and too restrictive then it only limits the very nature of creativity. On the other hand, if your creative process is too loose then it will flounder with no direction or purpose. So there’s a balance to be found. A balance between having a structure that focuses and directs creativity but at the same time allows it the freedom it needs to flourish.

I’m a big fan of structure but that structure and process needs to support the very nature of the creativity itself and not constrain it.

When you think about it the process of creativity is like a big funnel, which is why we created and use ‘funnel thinking’. *See diagram*

**It works like this...**

- 1) You need to set clear and concise objectives and then establish parameters and boundaries to work within – that gives you direction. It’s one of the great ironies that creativity thrives when it has boundaries and parameters to work within.
- 2) You then enter the top of the funnel – the ‘blue-skying’ phase. This is where you play, explore and let creativity do its thing. This is where you open up to all possibilities. What’s vital here is not to judge your ideas and thoughts because rarely is an idea born fully formed, it needs room to grow and evolve. So don’t kill it off just yet.
- 3) At the bottom of the funnel you evaluate and filter all your possibilities and ideas until out of the bottom comes a range of practical ideas and workable solutions.

So it’s a tight / loose / tight structure, (objectives & parameters / blue-skying / filtering) which allows creativity to play but at the same time directs and focuses it, because that’s where the gold is.

**The Verdict**

All in all it’s a positive result. It appears that as a group NFPs understand the importance of creativity and mostly there are cultures in place to support it. Having said that, there is certainly room for improvement by allowing greater permission to play, be creative and to explore. And with the adoption of a good creative framework (one that lets you turn on and off the creative controls) creativity will thrive within your people and as a result within your organisation, delivering valuable outcomes and results.

**Full Report**

If you wish to obtain a report of the full results and findings, please visit [www.nigelcollin.com.au/360NFPN.html](http://www.nigelcollin.com.au/360NFPN.html) ■

*Nigel Collin specialises in creating synergy between business and creativity. For more information about his business ‘Leading Creatives’, ‘Funnel Thinking’ or the full ‘360 degree Creativity Health Check’ email [360@nigelcollin.com](mailto:360@nigelcollin.com) or visit [www.nigelcollin.com](http://www.nigelcollin.com).*