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# THE DYNAMICS OF CREATIVE WORK

## 1.

### **Creative work comes with a unique set of pressures.**

We're compensated for the ideas we generate, the value we create, and the problems we solve, and though we may be good at what we do, many of us may feel at least a little out of touch with the mysterious process by which any of this happens. On some days, ideas spring forth effortlessly, and we feel poised to attack any problem that comes our way. On others, we struggle with a single obstacle without any significant momentum. It can be frustrating to be held responsible for something we have so little control over, especially in the marketplace, where our career success is directly tied to our ability to generate great ideas consistently.

Many of us assume that our creative process is beyond our ability to influence, and we pay attention to it only when it isn't working properly. For the most part, we go about our daily tasks and everything just "works." Until it doesn't. We treat our

creative process like a household appliance. It's just expected to work quietly in the background, and we lose sight of how much we depend on it until the day we're stuck with dirty socks.

Adding to this lack of understanding is the rapidly accelerating pace of work. Each day we are faced with escalating expectations and a continual squeeze to do more with less. We are asked to produce ever-increasing amounts of brilliance in ever-shrinking amounts of time. There is an unspoken (or spoken!) expectation that we'll be accessible 24/7, and as a result we frequently feel like we're "always on." And because each new project starts with a blank slate, we feel like we have to prove ourselves again and again. No matter how successful we've been in the past, each new project elicits the question: "Do I still have it in me?"

## LIFE IN THE "CREATE ON DEMAND" WORLD

A few years ago my company, Accidental Creative, coined a term to describe this workplace dynamic: "create on demand." You go to work each day tasked with (1) inventing brilliant solutions that (2) meet specific objectives by (3) defined deadlines. If you do this successfully you get to keep your job. If you don't, you get to work on your résumé. The moment you exchange your creative efforts for money, you enter a world where you will have to be brilliant at a moment's notice. (No pressure, right?)

No matter whether you are leading a team, developing marketing strategies, running a small business, or writing copy, when you are compensated for creating value with your mind, the pressure to perform is palpable. Because brilliant ideas seem to be a free and renewable resource, it's easy for you (and your boss) to believe that you can incrementally ratchet up your productivity without experiencing side effects. But this understanding of the economics of creating is not only false, it can also be damaging both to your ability to do your best work now and to your

long-term sustainability as a creative. To attempt to be perpetually brilliant and increasingly productive, without changing the basic habits and structure of your life to accommodate that undertaking, is a futile effort.

The always-on manner with which many creatives approach their work is arrhythmic, but the creative process is naturally rhythmic. There are peaks and troughs of productivity, an ebb and flow to idea generation. Working harder and staring more intently at the problem to achieve better ideas is like trying to control the weather by staring at the clouds. Rather, you need to incorporate practices that instill a sense of structure, rhythm, and purpose into your life. You need to create space for your creative process to thrive rather than expect it to operate in the cracks of your frenetic schedule. This will not only help you generate better ideas now, but it will also ensure that you are acting on the things that matter most instead of drifting through your days.

Many young creatives I've worked with have looked at me skeptically, and even angrily, when I talk about being more purposeful about where they spend their time and energy. To them, creativity flows freely from a spigot; they can work fifteen-hour days with little reprieve and no apparent side effects. But eventually this kind of behavior catches up to you. When you violate the natural rhythms of the creative process, you may initially produce a very high volume of work, but you will eventually find that you're not producing your best work. Instead, you may find that you are trending toward mediocrity, and that great ideas are no longer coming with the frequency you'd prefer. This is a very unsatisfying way to live and to work, and feels a lot more like surviving than thriving.

**To attempt to be perpetually brilliant and increasingly productive, without changing the basic habits and structure of your life to accommodate that undertaking, is a futile effort.**

This book is about learning to *thrive* in the create-on-demand world. To do so will require you to make some real changes to the way you structure your life, and the way you think about what you do. Your best creative work will follow.

## BEING SUSTAINABLY BRILLIANT

Whenever someone asks me what I do, I like to say that I'm an "arms dealer for the creative revolution." My job is to equip creatives for the pressures and demands of the marketplace by providing them with the tools they need to experience consistent brilliance in their life and work. Because of this, whenever I speak to a group of creatives at a company or conference, or sit with anyone one-on-one in a coaching session, I challenge them to adopt the goal of being prolific, brilliant, and healthy:

Prolific + Brilliant + Healthy = producing great work  
consistently and in a sustainable way

This is the most effective way to live and work. It means producing a large volume of high-quality work over long periods of time. In my experience, most creatives consistently perform very well in two of these areas, but are lacking at least one of them. For instance,

Prolific + Brilliant – Healthy = Burnout

While the overstressed, "gasping for air" worker is the celebrated hero of office folklore, for the creative, being one of these is simply not a realistic and sustainable way to do great work. Many creatives sacrifice their long-term viability on the altar of short-term productivity; they eventually discover that the trade-off simply isn't worth it. They find that they can no longer sustain their pace and that their ideas—which were once plentiful and

brilliant—have dried up. The common term for this is “burn-out,” and unfortunately, it doesn’t just affect our work. Creatives who struggle with burnout find it infiltrating their home life, relationships, and personal projects as well. Not good.

Hard work is an absolute necessity if you want to do anything worthwhile. In fact, if you apply the principles in this book, you will probably end up working harder than you ever have in your entire career. But what you must avoid is the kind of frenetic activity that seems like productivity but is really more about the appearance of being busy than the actual accomplishment of effective work. You want to work strategically, not desperately. When it comes to your effectiveness, fake work is often more dangerous than no work at all.

Brilliant + Healthy – Prolific = Unreliable

The create-on-demand world requires that you produce results consistently. While there are a few untouchable genius creatives who are capable of cranking out only a few new projects per year—and then are paid tons of money for their efforts—most creatives are required to produce consistently if they want to keep their jobs. This means that you need to have great ideas and execute them consistently in order to meet expectations.

**When it comes to your effectiveness, fake work is often more dangerous than no work at all.**

Similarly, many creatives have a lot of great ideas but are ineffective at execution. They never “ship” because they are too busy obsessively perfecting and tweaking their ideas. To be prolific means that you not only have great ideas, but that you actually do something with them. You can’t be bound by insecurity and neurosis. You must ship if you want to thrive.

Healthy + Prolific – Brilliant = Fired

At one point or another you've probably worked with someone who just couldn't keep pace with everyone else in the office. You don't want to be that person. With the ever-increasing competition in the workplace, creatives who keep their jobs and get promoted are the ones who can separate themselves from the pack. Mediocrity is unacceptable and will not be tolerated for long in most good organizations. Brilliance, on the other hand, is about rising to the occasion, seeing clearly and incisively to the core of the problem, and identifying great solutions quickly. If you apply the practices in the later chapters of this book, you can consistently experience this kind of brilliance in your work.

So where do you fall in this equation? Would you describe yourself as all three—prolific, brilliant, and healthy? Or is there room for improvement in one or more areas? If you find that you're doing pretty well on two of the three, don't worry, you're not alone. I rarely meet creatives or teams that are firing on all cylinders. With the complexities and shifting landscape of many workplaces, just to stay ahead of the work is often challenging enough.

## CAN CREATIVITY TRULY BE INFLUENCED?

When I consider the confusion that surrounds the creative process, I'm reminded of an insight I had while sick as a dog on the living-room couch. Home from work and bored silly, I decided to see what was on TV at two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. (If you've never tried it, prepare for disappointment.) Eventually, I landed on PBS, where I was immediately entranced by the persona of Dr. Julius Sumner Miller, host of *Demonstrations in Physics*. Dr. Miller wielded a plank of wood in one hand and a newspaper in the other. He placed the plank on a table in front of him with about a third of it protruding off the edge. He laid the newspaper carefully over the part of the plank resting on the table. Glaring intensely into the camera, he asked, "What do you think

will happen when I strike the protruding end of this plank of wood?”

Having a basic understanding of how levers work, I deduced that the edge of the table would act as a fulcrum and that the plank would flip the newspaper into the air and, if I was lucky, provide some comic relief as the plank broke a flask or two on the table behind Dr. Miller. (Maybe my afternoon could be salvaged after all!)

Imagine my surprise when Dr. Miller’s hand snapped the plank in two! How could this be? It made no sense. The newspaper surely wasn’t heavy enough to hold a quarter-inch-thick wooden plank so tightly. There was something else going on here.

Cold forgotten, I sat forward on the couch as Dr. Miller explained the unseen force at work: There were close to fifteen pounds of atmospheric pressure pushing down on every square inch of the newspaper. This added up to several thousand pounds of pressure on the paper as a whole. When the plank of wood was struck, as long as there wasn’t time for the air pressure to equalize under the paper, this invisible force would hold the plank like a vise as the strike snapped it in half.

I had a sudden insight. I couldn’t see atmospheric pressure, so I hadn’t been aware of its power prior to this little experiment. I didn’t consider its potential influence until Dr. Miller’s karate chop showed me how it could be leveraged to accomplish a task—breaking a plank.

I don’t think it’s much of a stretch to say that many of us view the creative process in the same way. It is a mysterious, unseen force that can have powerful, unanticipated effects. We know it’s there, but we don’t understand it, and so it seems beyond our ability to control. But like atmospheric pressure, once we grasp a few of its governing dynamics, we can harness its power by building structure to leverage it.

**“The enemy of art is the absence of limitations.”**

**—Orson Welles**

This suggestion that structure and creativity are two sides of the same coin is often an eyebrow-raiser for my clients. There is the persistent myth that creativity results only from complete lack of boundaries and total freedom. The reality is that we are not capable of operating *without* boundaries. We need them in order to focus our creative energy into the right channels. Total freedom is false freedom. True freedom has healthy boundaries.

I often see in newly minted entrepreneurs the paralysis that results from total freedom. One person I encountered was a highly functioning, brilliantly creative manager in a large company. He had been building his business on the side for quite some time and was somehow able to balance the pressures of his normal 9-to-5 role with the demands of his new venture. At the point he thought it made sense, he struck out on his own and left the corporate world. Finally, he thought, he'd have the capacity to focus full time on his passion for building his business.

But it didn't work that way. Instead, he found that his days lacked structure. He wasn't producing good work. In fact, he wasn't producing much work at all. The highly capable, broad-shouldered manager had vanished, and in his place was a drifting, overwhelmed slacker.

What happened? It wasn't that he was no longer motivated. In fact, he was more motivated than ever. What changed was that the rhythms in his life—many of which were forced by his day job—had disappeared. He no longer had to plan his week according to when he could get work in on his side project, because he had all the time he needed. But time alone isn't sufficient without good structure. Once I was able to work with him to build some simple structure into his week for creating, strategy, and relationships, he found his productivity skyrocketing again. All he lacked was the foundation of rhythm in a few key areas.

You must not confuse structure with formula. They are not the same. A formula is something you apply to get a predictable result on the other side. There is no formula for effective

creating. Structure, on the other hand, is the undergirding platform that gives you enough stability to feel free taking risks. It gives you a sense of mastery over your process.

Mastery over your creative process is critical in today's workplace. Unfortunately, when you fall into a pattern of reacting to the everyday pressures of your work, you may unknowingly do things that cause serious damage to your creative muscles. When you feel no control over where and when your next good idea will arrive, you may compensate by working harder and staring more intently at the problem in the hopes that the extra effort will cause brilliance to flow. But this "always on" approach works against you.

## **AMOS—THE "ACCIDENTAL" CREATIVE**

Meet Amos. He is a manager at a Fortune 100 company, and though he's not a typical creative, he faces all the pressures that accompany creative work. Amos is a brilliant, accomplished, and fast-rising leader who is currently helming five major projects for the company. He manages the communication and marketing needs for his department, gleans consumer insights that can be applied to new projects, and coordinates product development input from R&D. In addition, Amos is responsible for developing his direct reports and ensuring that the organization that reports to him is in alignment with the company's priorities. There are several constituencies to please at multiple levels in the organization, and Amos spends a lot of his time just trying to identify his true objectives within the barrage of input he receives from his superiors.

Amos has several meetings over the course of a typical day. Many of these are simple check-ins with his direct reports or with his manager to discuss progress. He may also have longer meetings with his leadership team or with the representatives from

the agencies that help his company craft their communications. In addition, Amos manages an insane amount of internal communication, especially e-mail. “It’s like a dog trying to swim on a lake,” he says, “and the lake is my e-mail. I’m never caught up or able to swim my way out of the lake.”

The most difficult thing, according to Amos, is that in the midst of all of the meetings and “pseudo work,” he knows that his main job is to “move the needle” and make progress on his projects. He knows that the real value he brings to his company is the ability to generate key ideas at just the right time to properly direct the course of a project. But due to the frenetic schedule he keeps, the constant influx of e-mail, and the pressures of managing the relational expectations, he finds “there is not very much time to actually do work.” Amos gets to think about his work much less than he’d like because he’s so busy just trying to stay ahead of everything else.

Amos’s struggles to gain creative traction are largely the result of pressures he feels in five key areas of work: Focus, Relationships, Energy, Stimuli, and Hours. Let’s take a look at how Amos is affected by each of these five areas:

#### **FOCUS**

Amos says that gaining Focus can be a real problem in his role. “No one wants to make choices,” he explains, “and everyone likes to revisit every decision.” As a result, he finds it difficult to know what to focus on at any given time. Old decisions are always open for reanalysis. In addition, Amos says that “work is pushed down, but decisions are pushed up. Thus, it’s hard to ever make things move together.” For example, critical and timely projects frequently appear on Amos’s plate from his manager, but after Amos rearranges his life in order to squeeze the extra work into his schedule, it then takes weeks to push approval of his decisions through to the upper layers of the organization, or he discovers that

the scope and priority of the project has changed in the process. To Amos, it seems that objectives are a constantly moving target.

### **RELATIONSHIPS**

To get stuff done, Amos needs buy-in from a herd of stakeholders. As such, there are numerous relationships to manage in order to make progress on his work. This face time takes a toll on him, since much of his real work gets done in his ever-shrinking alone time.

### **ENERGY**

Although Amos says that he's kind of a dynamo and energy is rarely a problem, he frequently struggles with motivation and sometimes lacks a genuine desire to engage with his work. He believes that this is because he has so many conflicting priorities that by the time he manages to engage with one of them, he has to disengage and move on to something else. As such, it's difficult to ever feel like he's doing his best work. His life is full of work of various levels of urgency screaming for his attention.

### **STIMULI**

Amos is required to regularly process truckloads of information. In addition to e-mail, phone calls, and face-to-face conversations, he's required to stay abreast of industry trends, process studies, and reports that may be helpful in making strategic decisions.

“Did you read this case study?”

“Have you connected with XYZ Learning Organization to get their thoughts?”

“A retired employee worked on an idea similar to this twenty-five years ago—you should give him a call to discuss it.”

All of these are valuable leads that could help him generate ideas for his projects, but the sheer quantity of data to synthesize is overwhelming. He feels as though he's trying to drink from a fire hose.

#### **HOURS**

Much of Amos's time is spent in obligatory meetings discussing his projects, managing internal relationships, and dealing with other company priorities. "My plate is always American-sized, food falling off the sides," he explains. "Finding time to think during the day is nearly impossible. Thus, I have to work nights, let stuff go, or just accept that not everything I do can be great, even though that's the expectation." Amos feels like much of his time is spoken for, and there's precious little left to actually think about the work.

Amos's situation is typical. It's reflective of conversations I've had with creatives in various roles and nearly every industry. The single contribution they feel most accountable for—bringing brilliant new insights and ideas into their business—is the first thing that gets squeezed out by the everyday demands of their role.

## **CREATIVE RHYTHM**

To unleash your creative potential now and thrive over the long term, you need to establish your own rhythm—one that is independent of the pressures and expectations you face each day. This Creative Rhythm will provide you with the stability and clarity to engage your problems head-on. This rhythm is set by how you structure the five elements you observed in Amos's story above.

## Focus

If we could harness the sum total of wasted energy each day in the workplace, we could probably power the earth for a year. There is so much ineffective work because there is often a lack of clarity around what we're really trying to do. In order to create effectively, you need a clear and concrete understanding of your objectives. In chapter 4 you will learn how to weed out urgent but unimportant activities, and how to direct your efforts toward only those things that will increase your level of creative engagement.

## Relationships

One of the most powerful sources of creative inspiration and rejuvenation is other people. Unfortunately, many successful creatives are haphazard about their relationships and only intentionally build on them when the stars align or when it's otherwise convenient or expedient. When you go "outside yourself," it frees you up and unlocks latent parts of your creativity. If you want to thrive, you need to systematically engage with other people, in part to be reminded that life is bigger than your immediate problems. In chapter 5 you will learn how to be purposeful about the relationships in your life, how to build creatively stimulating friendships, and how to limit access to the creativity vampires.

## Energy

Simple time management is not enough. It does you no good to micromanage your time down to the last second if you don't have the energy to remain fully engaged for that time. To make the most of your day, you need to establish practices around energy management. In chapter 6 you will learn how to account for

energy in your daily life and how to build bulwarks against some of the more pervasive energy drains.

## Stimuli

The quality of the output of any process is dependent on the quality of its inputs, and this holds true for the creative process. I call creative inputs “stimuli” because they stimulate creative thought. Despite their importance, remarkably few people are intentional about the kinds of stimuli they absorb on a day-to-day basis. If you want to regularly generate brilliant ideas, you must be purposeful about what you are putting into your head. As the old saying goes, “Garbage in, garbage out.” In chapter 7 you will learn how to ensure that you are getting good creative nutrition.

## Hours

Time is the currency of productivity, and how you handle it will ultimately determine your success or failure. But in order to really thrive, you need to shake yourself of our collective obsession with time efficiency and learn instead to focus on effectiveness. You need to ensure that the practices that truly make you a more effective creator are making it onto your calendar. In chapter 8 you will learn how to ensure that your time is being spent effectively and to great result.

Practices in each of these five areas (F-R-E-S-H) provide the foundation for a life that is prolific, brilliant, and healthy. In later chapters, we will dive deeply into each of these. But there are obstacles we face on the road to everyday brilliance. Often these pitfalls are the result of organizational tensions that inevitably emerge whenever there is an attempt to organize the creative process or to instill systems around creative work.

## POSSIBILITIES VERSUS PRAGMATICS

To create is to explore possibilities. There are a nearly infinite number of possible solutions to any given problem, and if you explore long enough you will almost always uncover another one. In many ways, the creative process is a never-ending chase after the possible. You have permission to think big about your projects, to dream and to innovate. You are told to really stretch yourself and to try to come up with something truly new. This creates a kind of “race to brilliance” with each new project.

But no matter what is said, the reality is that your work life is full of constraints. You have deadlines, budget limitations, and client requirements to deal with. The result is that you probably often feel pulled back and forth between possibilities and pragmatics. On the one hand, the lure of another conceptual breakthrough is seductive, but on the other, you must deal with the reality that your work is being both timed and judged.

**“You can’t wait for inspiration, you have to go after it with a club.”**

**—Jack London**

The pull between possibilities and pragmatics has us serving two masters at once. Even as we’re exploring some new idea and getting really excited about our direction, we hear the little voice in the back of our head asking us, “Are you sure you want to try this? This is risky!” So we don’t go quite as far as we might. Over time, as we deal with more and more of these practical compromises, we feel the effects on our creative drive. Our passion wanes, because it’s difficult to stay excited about the work when we feel that practical limitations will ultimately prevent us from really doing something we believe to be truly great.

Both creatives and organizations are constantly dealing with

this tension. Organizations recognize the need to give creatives permission to innovate and explore, but they also realize that boundaries are necessary to ensure the sustainability of the organization. No one is to blame here—it’s just a reality—but it can feel very frustrating. Creatives are hired because of their capacity to create value for the organization, yet they frequently feel they must navigate a series of hurdles in order to do their best work.

How does this affect your creativity? You probably feel the pressure to be brilliant and—at the same time—to be practical. These are conflicting tensions, and they are the source of most of the burnout, frustration, and organizational strife I’ve seen within creative organizations. It’s such a significant factor that we’re going to tackle it in depth in the next chapter.