THE ACCIDENTAL CREATIVE

HOW TO BE BRILLIANT AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE

TODD HENRY

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INTRODUCTION

THE ACCIDENTAL CREATIVE

In some circles, the word "creative" has recently morphed from adjective to noun. If you are one of the millions among us who make a living with your mind, you could be tagged a "creative." Every day, you solve problems, innovate, develop systems, design things, write, think, and strategize. You are responsible for moving big conceptual rocks, crafting systems that form the foundations for future growth—creating value that didn't exist before you arrived on the scene.

Maybe you didn't set out to be a creative. In fact, perhaps you even cringe when you hear the word applied to you. Understandably, the tag "creative" sometimes conjures up images of SoHo advertising gurus flitting about in five-hundred-dollar designer jeans. You may prefer the term "strategist" or "manager," or something else that feels more *concrete*. Call yourself anything you want, but if you're responsible for solving problems, developing strategies, or otherwise straining your brain for new ideas, I'm going to call you a creative—even if you ended up being one accidentally.

Some people deliberately choose a career that allows them to exercise their creativity on a daily basis. They make their livings designing, writing, developing ad campaigns, or doing some other kind of conceptual work. They get to do something they love, and someone gives them money for it. Speaking as one of the last group, I think it's a pretty great deal. On our best days it seems almost unfair that we get paid to do what we do, but on our worst days our jobs feel pretty much like any other. Though creative fields may sound exotic to strangers at cocktail parties, our day-to-day work can often feel a lot like following recipes, taking familiar ingredients and mixing them together in slightly different ways.

Whichever type you are, creative or "accidental creative," this book will help you create faster and more effectively than you ever imagined possible.

For the traditional creatives, such as designers, writers, visual artists, musicians, and performers, this book will help you establish enough structure in your life to get the most out of your creative process. It will also teach you how to stay engaged and prolific over the long term, which is often a problem for artists who must produce continually on demand.

For the nontraditional creatives, such as managers, strategists, consultants, salespeople, and client service reps, this book will help you unlock your latent creative abilities. You will learn how to do what many brilliant creatives already do instinctively, and how to do it consistently. In short, you will learn how to be brilliant when it counts the most.

There are tremendous benefits to doing creative work. You get to add unique value, carve out your own niche in the marketplace, and watch your notions and hunches go from conception to execution; could there be any type of work more gratifying? But the flip side of this is that whether you are a designer, manager, writer, consultant, or programmer, you are required to create value each and every day without reprieve. The work never ends, and as long as there is "just one more thing" to think about, finding time to rest can be difficult. Your primary tool, your mind, goes with you everywhere. If your job is to solve problems—to create—then you are always looking for new ideas. In addition, you won't always have the option of going back to your desk to quietly brainstorm, vetting your ideas one by one. As a creative, you will regularly find yourself in situations that require you to generate brilliant ideas at a moment's notice.

This is no easy feat. If you want to deliver the right idea at the right moment, you must begin the process far upstream from when you need that idea. You need to build practices into your life that will help you focus your creative energy. There is a persistent myth in the workplace that creativity is a mystical and elusive force that sits somewhere between prayer and the U.S. tax code on the ambiguity scale. But the reality is that you can unquestionably increase your capacity to experience regular flashes of

creative insight—"creative accidents"—bring the best of who you are to your work, and execute more effectively, all by building purposeful practices into your life to help you do so. These practices will help you stay engaged and productive over the long term without experiencing the rampant burnout that often plagues creative workers.

In other words, purposeful preparation and training using the tools in this book will directly increase your capacity to do brilliant work, day after day, year after year.

> **If you want to deliver the right idea at the right moment, you must begin the process far upstream from when you need that idea.**

Why am I so sure it works? I've spent years working with traditionally "creative" workers (designers, writers, musicians, filmmakers) and traditionally "noncreative" workers (salespeople, real estate agents, accountants), helping them develop their creative strength and stamina. In addition to this work with my company, Accidental Creative, and my experience as a leader of creative teams, I've also conducted countless interviews with creative thinkers, productivity experts, and organizational leaders, such as David Allen (*Getting Things Done*); Seth Godin (*Linchpin, Tribes, Purple Cow*); riCardo Crespo (Senior Vice President, Global Creative Chief, Twentieth Century Fox FCP); Richard Westendorf (Executive Creative Director, Landor Associates); Scott Belsky (CEO of Behance and author of *Making Ideas Happen*); Tony Schwartz (*The Way We're Working Isn't Working, The Power of Full Engagement*); and Keith Ferrazzi (*Never Eat Alone, Who's Got Your Back*); among others.

Astonishingly, I've found little difference among the pressures experienced by these diverse groups of people. They each use a different set of specific skills in their work, of course. While a designer will solve a problem visually, a manager may solve it by developing a new process. But

they're both employing the same creative tools and wrestling with many of the same obstacles. The good news is that, regardless of role, you can improve your ability to generate good ideas consistently if you are willing to be a little more purposeful in how you approach the creative process. It won't be easy, but in the end your work will be more satisfying, more productive, and more fun.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book is divided into two sections. Chapters 1 through 3 deal with many of the pressures faced by creatives in the workplace, and why doing brilliant work day after day can be so challenging. Chapters 4 through 10 offer some practices that you can implement to help you experience higher levels of creative insight on a daily basis. While you may be tempted to skip ahead to the latter portion of the book, I would recommend that you begin with the first chapters. Some dynamics that affect the everyday experiences of the creative are painfully felt but are seldom diagnosed, and can have a dramatic effect on your ability to do your best work.

> **Anyone can improve his ability to generate good ideas consistently if willing to be a little more purposeful in how to approach the creative process.**

Before you dive in, however, there are a few critical ideas to digest:

It's not what you know that matters, it's what you do. Regardless of what others may promise, there are no quick fixes or easy steps to supercharge your creativity. You will unleash your latent creative ability through regular, purposeful practice of the principles in this book. There are most certainly insights and "aha!" moments to be found in these pages, but knowledge alone won't do the job any more

than knowing the fundamentals of how to exercise will keep you physically healthy. You must be purposeful and intentional. The results are worth it.

You own your growth. Regardless of your circumstances, you are the ultimate owner of your own creative growth. It's not your manager's responsibility, or your HR director's, or your mother's—it's yours. Many people waste years of their life pointing fingers at other people for their own problems. No doubt there are some very unhealthy organizations and managers out there, but at the end of the day, playing the victim is a loser's game. Own your growth.

It's going to take time, and short-term results may vary. As with anything worthwhile, restructuring your life to work in concert with the dynamics of the creative process will take time and dedication. In addition, there will always be circumstances beyond your control that affect your engagement from time to time. Because of this, the results of implementing these practices may vary during a specific period. Your eye should be on increased performance over time, not on snapshot productivity. Don't lose heart. Stay engaged.

This is about more than just your work life. It's more and more difficult in today's world to segment your life into buckets like "work," "home," "relationships," "hobbies," and so on. Every area of your life affects every other, and a lack of engagement in one area will quickly infect the rest. As you implement these practices, you will find that your newfound creative energy will infiltrate not just your work life, but all other areas of your life as well. A rising tide raises all boats.

I believe that your best work is ahead of you. Remember: No one lies on his deathbed wishing he'd had the time to reply to one more e-mail, but a

great many people express regrets about not having treated life with more purpose. By applying the principles and practices in this book, you will be poised to get moving on things that previously seemed unattainable.

Now let's get started.

PART 1

THE DYNAMICS

1.

THE DYNAMICS OF CREATIVE WORK

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 "burnout," 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?"

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 break-through 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.

2.

THE DYNAMICS OF TEAM WORK

In 2005, military strategist Thomas Barnett took the stage at the TED Conference, a gathering of intellectuals, innovators, and artists, to share some bold thoughts about the current state of the U.S. military. According to Barnett, there are two fundamental roles played by any military force: advancing in order to take new ground and occupying the ground after it has been taken. The challenge that military strategists perpetually wrestle with is how to train and equip a force to do both effectively. Each role demands a unique set of skills, and there is an intricate balance between the two. Without a "leviathan" force (as Barnett calls the force that takes new ground), there is no need for an occupying force, and to require soldiers who are trained to aggressively take ground to do the largely administrative work of occupying that ground is challenging to both the soldiers and the overall mission.

As creatives, we are wired to take new ground. We love the thrill of the chase, pursuing objectives and tackling goals that seem just beyond our reach. We are fundamentally wired to be a part of the leviathan force, or we would never have chosen jobs that require so much self-definition. Much of our time as organizational creatives, however, is spent occupying the ground that we've already taken. We must deal with systems, processes, and protocol in executing our ideas. We have to deal with the everyday demands of communicating and creating interdependently. While we certainly gain new opportunities when we organize around the creative process, we must also deal with the inherent limitations and side effects of collaborative creative work.

THE PROS AND CONS OF TEAM CREATING

Organizations organize. It's their reason for being. And organization is good, because it allows groups of people to leverage assets more efficiently and scale in ways that aren't possible for individuals. Many people have brilliant ideas, but unless they are capable of organizing around those ideas, it will be impossible for them to get much of any significance done. As much as we may venerate the ideal of the lone innovator, slaving away in the garage or studio to bring a vision to life, the reality is that most of the time brilliant creations are the result of teams of people stumbling awkwardly into the unknown.

> As creatives, we are wired to take new ground. We love the thrill of the chase, pursuing objectives and tackling goals that seem just beyond our reach.

Scott Belsky is CEO of Behance, a New York – based company dedicated to helping creatives execute their ideas, and author of *Making Ideas Happen*. Belsky believes that "the greatest breakthroughs across all industries are a result of creative people and teams that are especially productive." A significant factor in their productivity, Belsky has discovered, is their ability to organize. In most work, a well-organized team of creatives—even if they are not highly skilled—will produce exponentially more and better results than a lone genius. Strong organization is critical for teams of people who want to accomplish great things in the world, and a critical element of that organization is the ability to lead by establishing a culture obsessed with execution. Belsky continues, "History is made by passionate, creative people and organizations with the rare ability to lead others—and themselves."

While important, effective organization alone is not sufficient to ensure the success of a creative team. An environment must be established that offers sufficient resources, fosters the right organizational mind-set, and

breath, but we still have to exert a small amount of effort at all times to keep the rock from rolling back down the hill.

There are a few questions that this time-versus-value tension forces us to wrestle with.

Am I proving my worth?

This question keeps performance-driven people up at night. We wonder if we could have done more, or if we will be recognized for what we did. We wonder if our career is on track, and we think that perhaps if we just do that one more thing it will push us over the top for our next promotion. And now that we have technology to keep us connected to our work and our peers at all times, there is always one more thing that we can do right now to move the ball forward. We have eliminated the off switch. We're on all the time.

One creative director often found himself up at very early hours checking e-mail, sometimes even turning on his phone, which he kept next to his bed, in the middle of the night just to check if anything noteworthy was going on. Additionally, responding to e-mail was typically the last thing he did before going to bed each night, making it difficult to slow his mind and rest.

This perpetual inbox obsession wasn't an organizational expectation; rather, it was fueled by a deep insecurity that something important was going to happen and that he wouldn't respond in time to contribute meaningfully to the conversation. He admitted that it was rare that this behavior had actually increased his performance, but that it was really just a kind of pacifier to help him feel wired-in and needed. He was always concerned about whether he was adding enough value to the company. He implemented some of the techniques in the forthcoming chapters on focus and energy, including setting dedicated (but frequent) times for checking e-mail and buffers before bedtime to allow his mind to slow before sleep. Gradually he felt his energy level and creative performance rise as a result.

While there are certainly career-related factors that drive this insecurity, the drive to produce goes beyond the desire to be a good employee. We want to know that what we're doing matters. We want to know that if we were to disappear tomorrow, someone would notice. In a sense, we feel like we define our space in the world as we create value. Unhealthy? Probably. But often true nonetheless.

What kind of value should I create?

As a creative, you probably have latitude in defining your course of action on your projects. You may have a general sense of direction or some objectives, but you continually face the question: *What do I do next?*

This introduces the pressure to get it right each time, because there is tremendous opportunity cost associated with getting it wrong. It's possible to spend hours or even days heading down the wrong trail if you make one bad choice about where you should be spending your time and energy. This pressure can be paralyzing, especially when you're working on critical and timely work.

I was once involved in an off-site team-building session designed to teach better methods for collaboration. For one exercise we went out into the woods for a little "orienteering." We were broken into teams and tasked with finding an object hidden in the woods using only a compass and a set of instructions unique to our starting position. Pride was on the line as my teammates and I hurriedly worked our way through the first few instructions.

"Forty-five degrees northwest, twenty paces."

"Due south, thirty-five paces."

We practically ran through the first several steps before realizing that we were a significant distance from everyone else. Our initial thought was that perhaps we were the only geniuses in the bunch, but we quickly concluded that we were actually the ones who'd messed up—in a big way.

would measure the productivity of a copier than of a person.

As I was standing in the back of the room after speaking at a conference, a design manager for a software company spotted me, got up from his seat, and made a beeline in my direction. From the look on his face, my first reaction was that he was angry about something I'd said. As he got closer I could see that he wasn't angry, just emotional. He expressed that this "machinelike" expectation was the norm within his organization but that he hadn't previously been able to put words to it. He had felt many times that the *appearance* of busyness was much more important than the actual work that was getting done. Preservation and predictability had become the norm, and expectations were set upon very recent performance versus contribution over time. He was excited to apply the practices I'd just taught in my keynote as a way to mitigate these pressures.

His experience is not unique. Many managers subconsciously take a snapshot of how someone is doing *right now* and use that as the metric for the worker's overall performance. What is potentially devastating is when the organization catches the creative at a peak of productivity. From that point forward there is an unspoken expectation that he will predictably produce at this high level of output. Everything he does in the future will be compared to this high point, and if he doesn't hit this mark he is deemed to be in a slump. For organizations, managers, or individual creatives to expect these kinds of peaks continually is to violate the very dynamics that allowed for this kind of high-level productivity to begin with!

THE EFFECTS OF THE PREDICTABLE-VERSUS-RHYTHMIC TENSION

Because of the predictable-versus-rhythmic tension, expectations continue to rise. In the effort to make productivity predictable to the organization, our current work is benchmarked against our previous work. Over time, as a matter of self-protection, creatives begin to conserve their energy and take