

John Cleese on Creativity from his 1991 speech given to Visual Arts

When Video Arts asked me if I'd like to talk about creativity I said, "No problem. No. problem!" because telling people about how to be creative it's easy. It's only doing it that is difficult. I knew it would be particularly easy for me because I spent the last 25 years watching various creative people produce their stuff and being fascinated to see if I could figure out what makes creative people, me included, more creative.

What is more, a couple of years ago I got very excited because a friend of mine who runs the psychology department at Sussex University, Brian Bates, showed me some research on creativity done at Berkeley in the 70s by a brilliant psychologist Donald MacKinnon, which seemed to confirm in the most impressively scientific way, all the vague intuitions that I had heard over the years. So the prospect of settling down for quite serious study for the purpose of tonight's gossip was quite delightful and I, having spent several weeks on it, I can say, categorically, that what I have to tell you tonight about how you can all become more creative is a complete waste of time.

So I think it would be much better if I just told jokes instead. You know the light bulbs you know. How many Poles does it take to change a light bulb? One to hold it and four to turn the table....

You see the reason it is futile for me to talk about creativity is that it quite simply, cannot be explained. It's like Mozart's music or Van Gogh's painting or Saddam Hussein's propaganda. It's literally inexplicable....

Brian Bates – most of the best research was done in the '60s and '70s –

There is one negative thing I can say – and it's easier to say what creativity isn't – it's like the sculptor sculpting an elephant. It's takes away the parts that are not an elephant...

Here's the negative thing. Creativity is not a talent – it's a way of operating.

How many actors does it take to screw in a light bulb? One but there will be thousands who will say "I could have done that."

How many surgeons

Because you see, when I say a way of operating, I'm saying that creativity is not an ability that you either have or do not have. It is, for example, absolutely unrelated, and this may surprise you, to I.Q., provided your intelligence is above a certain level, that is, but MacKinnon showed in investigating scientists, architects, engineers and writers, that those regarded by their peers as most creative, were in no way, different in I.Q. than their less creative colleagues.

So in what way were they different? Well, MacKinnon showed that the most creative people had simply acquired a facility for getting themselves into a particular mood – a way of operating – which allowed their natural creativity to function. In fact, MacKinnon described this particular ability as "an ability to play." Indeed, he described the most creative in being in this mood as being "childlike," that they were able to play with ideas, to explore them, not for any immediate practical purpose but just for enjoyment."

Now, about this mood. I'm working at the moment with Dr. Robert Skinner on our psychiatry book on families and how to survive them, and we're comparing the ways in which psychologically healthy families function and then the ways in which such families in the ways in which most successful families corporations and organizations function. And we've become fascinated by the fact that we can usefully describe in which people function at work in terms of team mode – open and closed. So, what I can just add now, is that creativity is not possible in the closed mode.

By the closed mode, I mean the mode we're in the mode we're in most of the time at work. We have the feeling that there's lots to be done and we have to get on with it. It's an active, probably slightly anxious mode, although the anxiety can be exciting and pleasurable. It's a mode where we're probably a little impatient – if only with ourselves. it has a little tension in it, not much humor – we're purposeful. It's a mode where we're a bit stressed and even a little bit manic, but not creative.

By contrast, the open mode is relaxed, expansive, less purposeful, more contemplative, inclined to humor, which always accompanies a wider perspective and where we're more playful. It's a mode in which curiosity, for its own sake can operate, because we're not under pressure to get something done quickly. We can play and that is what allows our natural creativity to surface.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. When Alexander Fleming had the thought that led to the discovery of penicillin, he must have been in the open mode. The previous day he'd arranged a number of dishes so that culture would grow upon them. On the day in question, he glanced at one of the dishes and discovered that upon one of them no culture had appeared. If he had been in the closed mode, he would have been so focused upon his need for dishes with cultures grown upon them that when he saw that one dish was of no use to him for that purpose, he would have thrown it away. But thank goodness he was in the open mode because he became curious as to why the culture had not grown on this particular dish. And that curiosity, as the world knows, led him to the discovery of the light bulb...I'm sorry to the discovery of penicillin.

In the closed mode, an uncultured dish is of irrelevance. In the open mode, it's a clue. Now, one more example. One of Alfred Hitchcock's co-writers has described working with him on screenplays. He says, "When he came up against a block, and our discussions became very heated and intense, Hitchcock would suddenly stop and tell a story that had nothing to do with the work at hand. At first, I was almost outraged and then I discovered that he did this intentionally. He mistrusted working under pressure. He would say, "We're pressing. We're pressing. We're working too hard. Relax, it will come." "And," says the writer, "it always finally did."

But let me make something clear. We need to be in the open mode when we're pondering a problem, but once we come up with a solution, we must then switch to the closed mode to implement it, because once we've made a decision, we are efficient only if we go through with it decisively, undistracted by doubts about its correctness. For example, if you decide to leap a ravine, the moment just before takeoff is a bad time to start reviewing alternative strategies. When you're attacking a machine gun post, you should not make a particular effort to see the funny side of what you're doing. Humor is a natural component in the open mode, but it's a luxury when you're in the closed one.

Once we've taken a decision, we should narrow our focus while we're implementing it and then after it's been carried out, we should then switch back to the open mode to review feedback arising from our action in order to decide that the course we've taken was successful or whether we should continue with the next stage of our plan and whether we should create an alternative plan to correct any error we've perceived. And then, back into the close mode to implement that next stage and so on.

In other words, to be most efficient, we need to be able to switch backwards and forwards between the two modes. But here's the problem. We too often get stuck in the closed mode. Under the pressures, which are all too familiar to us, we tend to maintain tunnel vision at times when we really need to step back and contemplate a wider view. This is particularly true of politicians. The main complaint about them from their non-political colleagues, is that they become so addicted to the adrenaline that they get from reacting to events on an hour-by-hour basis that they lose the desire or the ability to ponder problems in the open mode. So, as I said, creativity is not possible in the closed mode.

And that's it, 20 minutes to go – well, how many women-libbers does it take to change a light bulb? Answer. 37, 1 to screw it in and 36 to make ...

Oh, there is one thing about creativity. There are certain conditions that make it more likely that you'll get into the open mode and something creative will occur. That happened to me last Thursday.

You need one
one, Space,
two, Time,
three, Time,
four, Confidence
five, A 22-inch waist. Sorry my mind was wondering. I was getting into the open mode too quickly....
in place of a 22-in waist, put in Humor, I do beg your pardon.

First, time. You can't become playful and therefore creative without sealing yourself off. You must make a quiet space for yourself where you will be undisturbed. Create your space for a specific period of time. Seal yourself off. Make a quiet space for yourself where you will be undisturbed ... where curiosity, for its own sake, can operate. I read a historical about play. Johan Huizinga, an historian who studied play, said that, Play is distinct from ordinary life, both to locality and duration. This is its main characteristic. It's secludedness. It's limitedness. Play begins and then at a certain moment, it is over. Otherwise it is not play."

So combining the first two factors, we create an oasis of quiet by setting boundaries and then of time. Now, creativity can happen because play is possible when we're separate from everyday life. You've arranged to take no calls. You're comfortable. And if you're anything like me, you've pondered some problem that you want to make into an opportunity, for about 90 seconds, and you find yourself thinking, "Oh I've forgot. I mustand I'm going to start and I'll do some thinking when I have everything out of the way....because, as everyone knows, it's easier to do trivial things that are not urgent than it is to do those important things that are not urgent, like thinking. And it's easier to start on little things that we know we can do than it is to start on big things that we are not so sure about it.

So, when I say create an oasis, your mind will start racing again. But you're not going to take that racing seriously. You're going to just sit there for a bit, tolerating the racing and the slight anxiety, and after a time your mind will quieten down again.

And because it take some time to quieten down a bit, it's absolutely no use to arrange an oasis of quiet that lasts 30 minutes because when you just get quieted down, you have to stop and that is deeply frustrating. You must allow yourself about an hour-and-a-half. And after you've gotten to the open mode, you have about an hour left for something to happen – if you're lucky. But don't put a whole morning aside. My experience is that after an hour and a half you need a break.

And there's another reason for that, and that's factor number 3.

Time – I know we've just done time. How to use the oasis you've created. Why do you still need time? Well, Let me tell you a story. I was always intrigued that one of my Monty Python colleagues, who seemed to be, to me, more talented to me than I was, did never produce scripts that were as original as mine. And I watched for some time and then I began to see why. If he was faced with a problem and very soon saw a solution, he was inclined to take it, even though, I think, he knew the solution was not very original. When I was in the same situation, and sorely tempted to take the easy way out and finish by 5 o'clock, I just couldn't. I'd sit there with the problem for another hour-and-a-quarter and by sticking at it, would, in the end, almost always, come up with something that was more original. It was that simple. My work was more creative than his, simply because I was prepared to stick with the problem longer. So, imagine my excitement, when I found that this was exactly what MacKinnon found in his research. He discovered that the most creative professionals always played with a problem much longer before they tried to resolve it because they were prepared to tolerate that slight discomfort, feelings and anxieties that come when we haven't solved a problem. You know what I mean. If we have a problem and we need to solve it, until we do, we feel inside of us a kind of internal agitation or uncertainty that makes us just plain uncomfortable. And we want to get rid of it so in order to do so, we make a decision. Not because it's the best decision, but because taking it will make us feel better.

Well, the most creative people learn to tolerate that discomfort for much longer. And so, just because they put in more pondering time, their solutions are more creative. Now, the people I find it hardest to be creative with are the people who need, all the time, to project an image of themselves as decisive. And they feel to be creative they need to decide things very quickly and with a great show of confidence. Well, this behavior, I suggest most sincerely, is the most effective way of strangling creativity at birth. But please note, I am not arguing against real decisiveness. I'm 100% in favor of making a decision when it has to be taken and then sticking to it while it's being implemented. What I'm suggesting to you is that before you take a decision, you should always ask yourself the question, "When does this decision have to be taken?" and having answered that, you defer the decision until then in, in order to give yourself maximum pondering time, which will lead you to the most creative solution and it's while you're pondering that somebody accuses you of an inability to make a decision, you can say, "Look, baby cakes, I don't have to decide until Tuesday and I'm not chickening out of my creative discomfort by taking a snap decision before then. That's too easy."

So, to summarize, time is the third factor that facilitates creativity. Giving yourself time to come up with something that is original.

Now, the next factor. Number 4.

Confidence.

When you're in your space-time oasis and getting into the open mode, nothing will stop you being creative, is the fear of making a mistake. If you think about play, you'll see way. True play is experiment. "What happens if I do this?" "What would happen if we do that?" "What if?" If there is any essence of playfulness, it is an openness to anything may happen. The feeling that whatever happens is ok. So you cannot be playful if you're fearful that moving in some direction could be wrong. Something you shouldn't have done. You're either free to play or you're not. As Allen Watts puts it, "You can't be spontaneous within reason." So, you've got to risk saying things that are silly and illogical and wrong and the best way to get the confidence to do that is to know that while you're being creative, nothing is wrong. There's no such thing as a mistake and any drivel may lead to the breakthrough.

And now, the last factor, the fifth. Humor.

And I happen to think that the main evolutionary sense of humor is that it gets us from the closed mode to the open mode quicker than anything else. I think we all know that laughter brings relaxation and that humor makes us playful, yet how times have important discussions been held, where really original and creative ideas were desperately needed to solve important problems, but where humor was taboo because the subject being discussed was "so serious." This attitude seemed to me to stem from a very basic misunderstanding of the difference between serious and solemn. Now I suggest to you that a group of us could be sitting around after dinner discussing matters that were extremely serious like the education of our children or our marriages or the meaning of life and we could be laughing and that would not make what we were discussing one bit less serious.

Solemnity, on the other hand, well, I don't know what it's for. I mean, what is the point of it? The two most beautiful memorial services that I've ever attended, both had a lot of humor and it somehow freed us all and made the services inspiring and cathartic. But solemnity? It serves pomposity and the self-important, always know at some level of their consciousness, that their level of egotism is going to be punctured by humor. That's why they see it as a threat and so dishonestly, pretend that their deficiency makes their views more substantial when it only makes them feel bigger.

"Fart...."

No, humor, is an essential part of spontaneity and an essential part of playfulness, and essential part of the creativity that we need to solve problems, no matter how serious they may be.

So when you set up a space-time oasis, giggle all you want.

And there, ladies and gentlemen, are the five factors you can arrange to make your lives more creative. Space, Time, Time, Confidence and Lord Jeffrey Archer. So, now you know how to get into the open mode. The only other requirement is that you keep your mind gently round the subject you're pondering. You daydream, of course. But you just keep bringing your mind back, much like with meditating. Because, and this is the extraordinary thing about creativity, if you just keep your mind resting against the subject in a friendly but persistent way, sooner or later you will get a reward from your unconsciousness. It may be in the shower later or at breakfast the next morning, but suddenly you are rewarded. Suddenly a new thought mysteriously appears, if you've put in the pondering time first.

So, how many Celeste Parkinsons does it take to screw in a light bulb? – one to screw it in, one to screw it up....

Oh, one thing – looking at you all reminds me. I think it's easier to be creative, if you've got other people to play with. I always find it if two or more of us throw ideas backwards and forwards that I get into more interesting places that I've got to, then I could have gotten to on my own. But there is a danger. A real danger. If there's one person around you who makes you feel defensive, you lose the confidence to play, then it's good-bye creativity. So make sure your play friends are people you like and trust. And never say anything to swash them either. Never say "no" or "wrong" or "I don't like that." Always be positive and build on what's being said. "Would it be even better if?" "I don't quite understand that. Could you just explain it again." "Go on." "What if?" "Let's pretend." Try to establish as free as an atmosphere as possible. And, I sometimes wonder if the success of the Japanese isn't partly due to their

instinctive understanding of how to use groups creativity. You know, Westerners are often amazed at the unstructured nature of Japanese meetings. But maybe it's that exact nature that very lack of structure, that absence of time/structure that frees them to solve problems so creatively. And how clever of the Japanese to plan that unstructuredness. For example, insisting that the first people to give their views are the most junior so that they can speak freely without the possibility of contradicting what's already been said by somebody more important.

Four minutes left – ah, how many Irishmen...

Look, the very last thing I can say about creativity is this. It's like humor. In a joke, the laugh comes at a moment when you connect two different frameworks of reference in a new way. Example: There's an old story about a woman doing a sexual survey about attitudes. She asks an airline pilot, amongst other things, when he last had sexual intercourse. He replies, "1958." Not knowing airline pilots, the researcher is surprised and queries this. "Well," said the pilot, "It's only 21:10 now."

At the moment of contact between the two frameworks of reference. The way we express what year it is and how we reference the 24-hour clock. Now, having a new idea is exactly the same thing. It's connecting two hitherto separate ideas in a way that generates new meaning. Now, connecting two different ideas isn't difficult. You can connect cheese with motorcycles or ... bananas with international cooperation. You can get any computer to make random connections, but these new connections or juxtapositions are significant only if they generate new meaning. So as you play, you can deliberately try connecting these random juxtapositions and then use your intuition to tell you whether any of them seem to have significance for you. That's the bit between you and the computer. It can make any kind of connections, but it's up to you to determine whether any of them smells interesting. And of course, you'll produce some juxtapositions that are absolutely ridiculous, absurd.

Good for you.

Because Edward de Bono, who invented the notion of lateral thinking, specifically suggests in his book, "Poe: Beyond Yes and No," that you can try loosening up your assumptions by playing with deliberately crazy connections. He calls such absurd ideas "intermediate impossibles" and he points out that the use of an intermediate impossible is completely contrary to ordinary logical thinking, in which you have to be right at each stage. It doesn't matter if the intermediate impossible is right or it is absurd, it can nevertheless be used as a stepping stone to another idea that is right.

Another example of how, when you're playing, nothing is wrong.

So, to summarize, if you really don't know how to start or if you got stuck, start generating random connections and allow your intuition to tell you if one might lead somewhere interesting.

Well, that really is all I can tell you that won't help you to be creative. Everything. And now in the two minutes left, I can tell you how to stop your subordinates from being creative too, which is the real threat. Because believe me, no one appreciates better than I do, what trouble creative people are and how they stop decisive hard-nosed bastards like us from running businesses efficiently. I mean, we all know, we encourage someone to be creative and the next thing is they're rocking the boat, coming out with ideas and asking us questions and if we don't nip this kind of thing in the bud, we'll have to start justifying our decisions by reasoned argument and sharing information - the concealment of which gives us considerable advantages in our power struggles, so, here's how to stamp out creativity and the rest of the organization and get a bit of respect going.

1. Allow subordinates no humor. It threatens your self-importance, especially your omniscience. Treat all humor as frivolous or subversive. Because subversive, of course, is what humor will be in the office, as it's the only way that people can express their opposition, since if they express it openly, you're down on them like a ton of bricks. Let's get this clear. Blame humor for the resistance that your way of working creates, and then you don't have to blame your way of working. This is important. And I mean that solemnly. Your dignity is no laughing matter.
2. Keeping ourselves irreplaceable involves cutting everybody else down to size. So don't miss an opportunity to undermine your employee's confidence. A perfect example of this kind of opportunity comes when you are reviewing work that they have done. Use your authority to zero in immediately on all the things you can find wrong.

Never, never balance the negatives with the positives. Only criticize, just as your schoolteachers did. Always remember, praise makes people uppity.

3. Demand that people should always be actively doing things. If you catch anybody pondering, accuse them of laziness and/or indecision. This is to starve employees of thinking time because that leads to creativity and insurrections. So, demand urgency at all time. Use lots of fighting talk and war analogies and establish a permanent atmosphere of stress, of breathless anxiety and in crisis. In a phrase, Keep that mode closed! And in this way, we nonsense types can be sure that the tiny, tiny, microscopic quantity of creativity in our organization will all be ours. But, let your vigilance slip for one moment and you could find yourself surrounded by happy, enthusiastic and creative people whom you might never be able to completely control ever again. So be careful. Thank you, and good night.