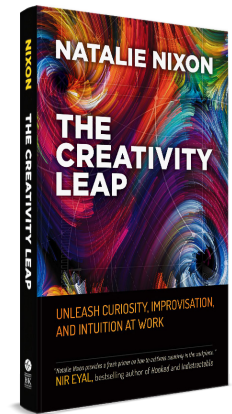


The Creativity Leap

Unleash Curiosity, Improvisation, and Intuition at Work

by **Natalie Nixon**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Too many people associate creativity solely with the arts, but being an incredible entrepreneur, scientist, or engineer requires immense creativity. And it's the key to developing breakthrough products and services.

In *The Creativity Leap*, Natalie Nixon argues that since humans are hardwired to be creative, it is a competency anyone can develop. She shows that creativity balances wonder with rigor and that inquiry, improvisation, and intuition are the key practices that increase those capacities.

Combining creativity tools and techniques with real-world stories of innovative people and businesses, Nixon offers a provocation, an inspiration, and an invitation to unleash the innate creativity that lies within each of us. She offers a more dynamic and integrative way to adapt and innovate, one that allows us the freedom to access our full human selves. Let *The Creativity Leap* show you how creativity can manifest in your work—and help you develop the tools to unlock creativity in yourself and your organization.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why creativity—and not just innovation—matters.
- The 3iCreativity™ model.
- To harness wonder and rigor in your creative process.
- To increase your creativity quotient (CQ).

Introduction

If you've ever made a running leap, then you are aware that there are several things at work. First, there is vision. You must have your eyes on a prize, somewhere off in the not too far distance. That prize is close enough to be almost within your reach. Second, you have to leap versus just walk or even run to that desired prize, because there is some barrier or impediment that you need to span. Third, leaps often require a running start. A kinesthetic, active motion is needed for you to gather momentum and propel yourself forward. Fourth, leaping requires that you suspend judgment. After doing all the analysis, gauging, and estimating of what it will take to make that leap, faith and intuition must take over. And fifth, leaping only moves you forward. It is impossible to leap backward. You can fall backward, but you cannot leap backward. Leaping requires exorbitant amounts of energy and trust in the unknown—and it always propels us into new territory.

Why Creativity Leaps Matter

Like a physical leap, a creativity leap is essential for crossing boundaries; it is also an active, dynamic process that honors intuition. Creativity leaps are needed to bridge the gap between the churn of work and the highly sought-after prize called innovation. This holds true on both the individual and organizational levels. Creativity leaps matter because creativity is the engine for innovation.

To be human is to be hardwired to be creative. Truly innovative people in any field—lawyers, plumbers, accountants, designers—regularly practice honing their creative competency. They apply a combination of the 3 I's—inquiry, improvisation, and intuition—to the ways they think through problems and work with others to continually increase their creative competency. This is called the 3iCreativity™ model.

- **Inquiry.** Curiosity results from an information gap. You want to know more about something that you currently don't understand.
- **Improvisation.** Improvising is about building on ideas within minimal constraints. There is freedom to experiment, but there are also rules and fluid structures that help you to correct course and embrace mistakes.
- **Intuition.** There lies in all of us a visceral, internal wisdom that allows for unconscious pattern recognition and insights for decision-making. Harriet Tubman, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs are examples

of famous innovators and leaders who relied on and valued their intuition, coupling it with their rational intellect to make decisions.

Just as IQ is an indicator of your share of intelligence and EQ connotes your share of empathy, it is also possible to have a share of creativity, or CQ. A creativity quotient is not fixed. It is dynamic and increases as you practice building it and exercising it.

Specifically, your share of creativity can increase as you expand your capacity for inquiry, become more willing to improvise, and hone your intuition. Moreover, creativity quotients can be scaled: Both individuals and organizations can have a creativity quotient. The goal is to help you to increase your CQ and your organization's CQ.

When you build these three practices into your work on a daily basis, you will discover true creativity—and its output, innovation—beginning to take place.

Create Like Your Life Depends on It

The management consultancy Capgemini published a report in 2015 stating that “Since 2000, 52 percent of companies in the Fortune 500 have either gone bankrupt, been acquired, or ceased to exist.”

It is not enough to say that these firms don't innovate quickly enough. They get complacent and stuck. Michael Forman, chairman and CEO at FS Investments, states that as organizations get larger and more focused on risk management, they easily fall into what he calls “the tyranny of no.” “They solve for ‘no’ instead of for ‘yes.’ Solving for ‘yes’ is the fulcrum of creativity.” He observed that the larger reason for why successful companies fail is that they do not cultivate their capacity for human creativity.

We don't hear creativity emphasized more in the boardroom because we don't actually understand creativity. Creativity is our ability to toggle between wonder and rigor to solve problems and produce novel value. While many companies are trying to figure out innovation, most corporate cultures rarely utter the word creativity, and there is not a carved-out space in the boardroom for creativity.

Perhaps creativity feels so inaccessible because it can be such an ambiguous process. It is not formulaic. It is complex. That lack of a rote, step-by-step approach can make it really uncomfortable. A creativity leap entails our seeing and listening with wonder and rigor in order to sort through

What we begin to wonder about brings us to the precipice of discovery. Therein lies the magic.

the ambiguity and uncertainty of a work process.

Does your organization have a department of innovation, an innovation lab, or an innovation studio? If it does, that is great, because it indicates a desire to not continue doing things in the ways they have always been done.

But going from having an innovation center to having a culture of innovation demands a creativity leap. It requires intentionality and the integration of a new mindset at all levels of the organization. Otherwise, you have created just one more silo in your company.

What do we mean by innovation? Innovation is invention converted into financial, social, and cultural value. Furthermore, the engine for innovation is creativity. That means that if we truly want to innovate, then we must design systems, processes, and experiences in our work environments that allow us to be creative and catalyze invention.

The first step is making creativity a resource that is accessible to all the people in your organization. Defining creativity as a competency consisting of wonder and rigor, and exercised through inquiry, improvisation, and intuition, is one way to democratize it. Viewed from this lens, creativity becomes available to all of us.

Flow Between Wonder and Rigor

Daniel Levitin's *The Organized Mind: Thinking Straight in the Age of Information Overload* and Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* demonstrate that innovation happens not during our intentional, laser-focused modes but when we are daydreaming. These psychologists offer up the science to help us value our intuitive thinking systems that allow ideas to germinate in our dreams.

Daydreaming leads to wonder. Pay attention to how many times you, your colleagues, and your teammates begin a sentence with "I wonder if . . ." or "I wonder what might happen when . . ." Observe what follows those two words, "I wonder . . ." What we begin to wonder about brings us to the precipice of discovery. Therein lies the magic.

Complex situations are grand in scale, so they deserve and require the grandiose thinking that wonder inspires.

The only way we get to make a creativity leap in the first place is by starting with wonder. Wonder is the catalyst. Then, rigor propels us forward and helps us to sustain the momentum of the leap.

Rigor and Rules

Modern dancer and choreographer Twyla Tharp has wisely advised, "Before you can think out of the box, you must start with a box." The box is the rules and the rigor. And there is no getting around it.

If wonder is the equivalent of experiencing opening night of a marvelous theatrical experience, then rigor is all of the backstage machinations. It's the cable cords holding the velvet curtains in place, the dark hallways and underground tunnels, and the rafters holding lights engineered to create surreal effects. It is the incessant practice that the actors, dancers, and singers must engage in all the way up to opening night.

If we romanticize creativity as a mystical, magical process only accessible to a select few, then we miss the point. Creativity is not something you pull willy-nilly from your arm-pit. Rigor is that essential feature of creativity that anchors the wonder; puts guardrails up; and requires us to do the sweaty, muscle-bound work with whatever muse we choose. The rigor is the part of creativity that is often missed—or avoided. But it is essential if we are ever to go about the work of creativity in a sustained way.

Rigor ensures that we actually complete the leap we started. It sustains the necessary momentum to create something tangible. Rigor is the grit and resilience that creativity requires for the long haul. It is the accumulation of commitment and knowledge needed to follow through, to get to value, to get to innovation.

The wonder-rigor paradigm consists of two important principles:

1. Rigor cannot be sustained without wonder.
Many companies across the United States fall in love with

the business-value results of innovation instead of with the processes that will make their employees innovative. Consequently, they get caught up in procedure, rulebooks, and meetings—all elements of rigor that are necessary but, without also allowing for wonder, lead to churn and fatigue in the organization.

What is needed are intentionally designed moments and spaces for wonder: the permission to ask audacious questions; experiences at work that allow for awe; and opportunities to physically and metaphorically wander and get lost in ideas.

2. Wonder is found in the midst of rigor. The corollary to the above is that wonder can be generated from the tedium of rigor. Think back to a routine task you have set for yourself: weeding the garden, threading a needle, doing your taxes, solving a difficult math problem, or preparing the agenda for a meeting. It is often in the midst of rote labor that wonder emerges. A new idea sparks within you, or you suddenly see things from a slightly different perspective. This is because rigor requires intense and deep ways to see, observe, and listen—the same practices required for creativity.

Inquire: Ask a Better Friggin' Question

While it has become popular in organizations to say that questions are embraced, employees often feel differently. They equate asking questions mostly with ignorance, not with inquiry. They are not convinced that they should risk humiliation or, worse yet, being fired for upsetting the status quo. But you can't generate something new and novel with the status quo.

Warren Berger, author of *A More Beautiful Question*, investigated the effectiveness of inquiry-driven leadership when he identified that the companies we think of as innovative, like Google, Apple, and Zappos, are actually quite good at leading with questions. He found that they start with asking “Why?” and then “What if?” and then land on “How?” sorts of questions. They start with divergent, big-picture, wonder-driven thinking and move to convergent, rigorous, and applied thinking.

An inquiry-led company may start by asking, “Why aren't we selling any products in the southern hemisphere?” or “Why do we recruit only from Ivy League universities?” It would then transition to some good “What if?” questions, such as “What if we started selling our products in Brazil?” or “What if we started recruiting from community colleges and sought out older adults with impressive work experi-

ence but a not-so-pedigreed formal education?”

Finally, they might land on tactical “How?” questions, such as, “How can we start establishing contacts in Brazil?” and “How will we build relationships with less traditional educational institutions?”

Normalizing Inquiry Within Your Organization

How a company sustains an inquiry-based culture is a nuanced thing. It starts with leadership, yes—but it also requires everyone to think about where opportunities are for fostering curiosity.

The educational nonprofit Leadership+Design (L+D) tries to vet for creativity and difference during the interview process. For example, they ask candidates to include a photograph of an artifact that tells L+D who they are as a person and to explain why they selected the artifact.

When we are surrounded by people who are different from us, it's like walking around with a gigantic magnifying glass projected onto ourselves. It is only through the discovery of what we don't know that we are prompted to go off course to ask different, better questions.

When Jerry Hirshberg was the president of Nissan Design International, he flipped the paradigm on friction. He emphasized the need for diverse teams that could approach problems from a range of perspectives. He insisted that colleagues from sales, marketing, manufacturing, and finance join his designers in the problem-solving process. He understood that the outcome of friction is energy. So why not convert the energy from friction into something positive? He called the messiness that resulted “creative abrasion.”

Improvise: Leverage Organized Chaos

In 1960, the iconic jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald and her quartet (pianist Paul Smith, guitarist Jim Hall, bassist Wilfred Middlebrooks, drummer Gus Johnson) toured Europe to great acclaim. In a live performance at the Deutschlandhalle arena in Berlin, Germany, she began singing “Mack the Knife.” It was a song she'd sung before, but around the second stanza, she suddenly drew a blank.

Did the great songstress freeze? Nope. She improvised—and in a self-effacing, cheerful way. You can hear her laughing at herself as she plows through making up words and scattering her way through the rest of the song, with her quartet fully supporting her all along the way. That re-

Recording went on to win a Grammy Award in 1961 for Best Female Pop Vocal performance. In 1999 it was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

The Future of Work Is Jazz

Jazz is the preeminent example of a complex system: adaptive, self-organizing, and emergent. The future of work in our increasingly complex world requires us to adopt the chaotic, improvisational methods of jazz musicians.

Coined by Dee Hock, founding CEO of VISA, the credit card company, *chaord* is used to describe the chaos and order that are both present in complex systems. That's right, the VISA card that is in your wallet is part of a history that embraced organized chaos. When Hock was tasked with building VISA, a global platform for the virtual exchange of currency, he quickly realized that trying to build such a complex system at scale would require a departure from the typical organizational chart.

He observed that nature abounds with systems that thrive in the midst of some chaos and some order. Keep in mind that chaos is not anarchy; it is randomness. And order is not control; it is structure. Wonder and rigor are parallel manifestations of the chaos and order in a chaotic system.

Frank Barrett, an academic and jazz musician himself, has written at length in *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* about what organizations can learn from jazz. Most helpful are his seven principles, which can be summarized in the following characteristics of jazz musicians:

- Provoke competence.
- Embrace mistakes.
- Use minimal structures to maximize flexibility.
- Distribute tasks.
- Borrow from the past.
- Value hanging out.
- Switch back and forth between following and leading.

If you can add even two of those principles to your daily work, imagine what a game changer that would be. For example, what would meetings look like if every now and then junior-level colleagues or people new to the company were invited to lead a meeting? Or if your workplace were designed to allow for more casual hanging out? Or if your manager used mistakes as a launching pad for new discoveries?

Have everyone on your team commit to incorporating into their work project every day at least two of the seven principles that Frank Barrett says we can learn from jazz. Ask them to share how it's going and if they experience any shifts. Then, decide as a group if you want to begin to incorporate their new work-around at scale and on a regular basis.

Going with your intuition is not a luxury. It is actually a primal and strategic tool for survival.

Intuit: Put Bravery Before Mastery

Going with your intuition is not a luxury. It is actually a primal and strategic tool for survival. That is because intuition gives us an attunement to our surroundings and a real-time distillation of what we should do. It allows us to tune and align when things are subtly off, and to pay attention to emerging signals to make new choices.

Intuition is feelings that reside in the mind (brain feelings!), offering up a nice simpatico in the left brain-right brain dynamic.

Western society's trajectory since the first industrial revolution has been to prioritize the rational, the material, the machine, and the predictive over the internal realm, the intuitive, and the emotional. But in ambiguous and complex situations with limited (or overwhelming) data and clues, cultivating your intuition alongside your intellect is critical. When you can't know or make sense of everything going on around you, integrating heart and mind is the game changer.

As Albert Einstein said, "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."

Intuition As a Tool for Strategy

Think of leading with intuition as three concentric circles. Wonder is at the core because stillness and observation are required for us to hear that little voice inside. The second

circle is discernment—finding the strength to act on our intuition and speak up. Rigor often comes into play here as we dig deep to find the data to back up our intuition. The outermost circle comes from making a practice of listening to and acting on our intuition. This is the point at which intuition becomes an essential tool in our leadership tool kit.

As Kelley Black, founder and CEO of *Balancing the Executive Life*, put it, “The rational mind can be self-limiting. We need to normalize the intuitive in leadership. Intuition in leadership is critical because it helps you see a broader field.” Intuition helps us lead with our whole selves—creatively and strategically.

Intuition Is a Data Point

What if we started acknowledging that intuition is a kind of data? Lily Fischer and Nima Etemadi, co-founders of *Cake Life Bake Shop* in Philadelphia, credit intuition not only for bringing them together but also for getting them out of a nerve-racking business deal that would have pushed them into growing at an uncomfortable clip.

Steve Jobs paid homage to intuition when he said, “Intuition is a very powerful thing, more powerful than intellect, in my opinion. That’s had a big impact on my work.” What do all of these successful leaders have in common? They take stock of intuitive moments as data points and internal alerts. They leverage their ability to unconsciously recognize patterns as a strategic tool.

Commune: Come Together to Create

A sense of community and the ability to work together toward a common goal are essential to creativity. Community is the ideal space in which wonder and rigor can thrive.

Research from the Institute for Corporate Productivity shows that profitability increases when people collaborate. That is because it is difficult to sustain a creative practice on our own. Community is a force more powerful than ourselves that can recharge and reorient us to continue the fundamentals of inquiring, improvising, and intuiting.

But as in any dynamic effort, there are both advantages and challenges in community. Community is the place and state of mind whereby, despite our differences, we are at one. But the same comfort that makes you feel so rock-solid can also inadvertently divide.

While tribes are the foundation for creative community, if

we leave the creative process only to incubate in tribes, we risk falling into an echo chamber trap. Tribal thinking can be divisive.

Sustaining community is a brave balancing act. Community is messy. The challenges of community require rigor to resolve. To be in community takes effort, reconciliation, and the creative abrasion referenced above.

Even in the most well-designed community, we must be vigilant to ensure diversity, avoid groupthink, and resist settling for the status quo. This is where practicing inquiry, improvisation, and intuition is essential—so that we have the space to adapt, grow, and take creativity leaps.

Designing Community for Creativity

The software company Autodesk intentionally builds teams that span boundaries. Randy Swearer, VP of learning futures, explained, “In a world where the software is updating every few weeks, the sectors it is applied in are transforming at astonishing rates, and the associated professional roles are morphing too, then learning becomes everything.”

“Our team’s job is to help Autodesk imagine futures out of this complexity: What kind of research will we need? What kind of business model? What kinds of issues are our customers facing? What new values are they trying to create?”

Randy believes this work is best done by having people from totally different backgrounds jointly examine scenarios. For example, an Autodesk team might include coders, a person with a PhD in anthropology, and a former military general.

In addition to forming diverse teams internally, Randy’s team hosts Summit Series, in which they reach out to strategic partners and convene diverse thought leaders and practitioners from around the world to focus on a theme that is important to Autodesk.

Autodesk’s cognitively diverse internal teams and external outreach through their Summit Series are examples of creative abrasion discussed above. They also point out how dynamic and far-reaching collaborative community building needs to be to spark creativity.

Forecast: Amplify What Is Uniquely Human

The fourth industrial revolution is here. Ubiquitous cloud technology, automation of tasks in both white collar and blue collar work, artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality,

Instead of trying to make AI creative, let's explore how we can link humans' innate creativity with AI.

and augmented reality—the preponderance of digital and soon quantum platforms are all part of daily life. History shows that rarely are we prepared for the leaps that each industrial revolution presents to us.

So what can we do to adapt to this one? How can we forecast what will be needed to survive and thrive in this new frontier of ubiquitous technology?

Perspective is a loaded oxymoron. We need it to forge ahead, yet it can only be gained from past experience. Perspective is about mining from the past in order to get insight into the future.

Forecasting is about mining those insights in order to anticipate and identify multiple possible futures so that we can adapt to bumps in the road.

To that end, forecasting requires a practice of inquiry, improvisation, and intuition; it necessitates an ability to toggle between wonder and rigor. In short, forecasting and preparing for what is to come requires creativity.

Creativity in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

Balder Onarheim, a creativity neuroscientist and president of PlatoScience, has proposed that we have been asking the wrong questions of artificial intelligence. Instead of wondering how to make AI creative, we should be asking, “How might we combine the calculating power of AI with the creative power of the human brain?”

Instead of trying to make AI creative, let's explore how we can link humans' innate creativity with AI. That, to Balder, is the more interesting and relevant question. For Balder, human creativity is at the core of what makes us unique and distinct from machines, robots, and computers—and the key to taking advantage of this ubiquitous technology is upping the ante on what makes us uniquely human.

In order to leverage our creativity in this fourth industrial revolution, Heather McGowan, a future of work strategist, has called for a shift away from learning to work and toward working to learn. In other words, the future of work is the future of learning.

Remix, Reframe, Repurpose

Originality is a steep expectation. While toggling between wonder and rigor leads to the new and the novel, originality depends on context. Being creative on an intentional basis might be a less threatening endeavor if we allowed ourselves to accept that we are regularly borrowing from one another, ourselves, our histories, and different adjacent cultures. Creativity is about the remix: repurposing, recombining, and reframing.

Originality is not the result of a purist singular production. Rather, it is the product of common memes that are consistent temporally and spatially throughout the world.

Don't make excuses about a lack of time, suboptimal staffing, or scarce funding to put off creating. Creativity loves constraints. All that you need is right within you and sitting before your eyes. You must shift your paradigm.

Take, for example, hip-hop music. Gen X is responsible for hip-hop music, currently the number one music genre in the world. But let's examine its origins. In the midst of the greatest rollback in funding for arts education in public schools in the late 1970s, black teenagers figured out a new musical instrument: the turntable.

As formal teaching in the music diminished in public schools, the scratching of the record player's needle on vinyl rose to the level of a percussion instrument. Now that's a paradigm shift! It is that level of reframing and repurposing that continues to spark hip-hop artists such as DJ King Britt, who, while rooted in hip-hop, R&B, and jazz, has acquired an adept muscle for constantly remixing what is in front of him—literally.

Another example comes from Susan Jin Davis, the chief sustainability officer at Comcast. She shared how her cultural identity as a Korean-American helped her to develop novel tactics: “As a child of immigrants, there is no blueprint. I've had to be creative to figure out my own path.” Susan credits her cultural identity as a marginalized minority with building her capacity to have vision and resilience in building the sustainability practice at Comcast.

Get Out of the Building: Final Thoughts on Increasing Your CQ

Dancers and musicians are experts at learning how to see in different ways. For example, when dancers learn choreography, they are mastering pattern recognition. They learn how to see movement outside of their body, incorporate it into their own, and execute it into motion that delivers meaning and story.

When we understand dancers' work process in particular, there are huge lessons to apply to our own work. Tinkering and moving in order to make and discover can spur us on to try prototyping, developing our work in iterative stages, and getting more physical with our work.

A second way to practice the lessons from dancers is to get out of our offices and visit our customers on their own terms and in their context. That movement will go miles in helping you see things from a new angle. Do not be surprised if shifting your work habits in this way compels you to revise your original plan, start over, or add in entirely new ideas, people, or direction to the mix.

LEAP!

Increasing your creativity quotient is about building on what has come before you. And that requires, well, building. Building is ambiguous and messy. While we may start with a plan, plans shift, agendas change, and assumptions are challenged. Creativity's ROI is a return on inquiry, on improvisation, and on intuition. These returns can be scaled to benefit you personally as well as organizationally. There are three leaps to make regularly in order to optimize your creativity ROI.

Leap from prioritizing deep specialization to valuing broad experience. Do not be confined to your sector, geographic location, or usual coterie of experts to get insights and advice.

Leap from deferring only to what's rational to embracing ambiguity. Murky and ambiguous contexts require the rigor to sit with ambiguity until a recognizable picture begins to emerge; they insist that you play the long game in order to get to understanding and insight.

Leap from organizational silos to networked community. Depicting our organizations with boxes and arrows and developing linear processes give us a false sense of security. In reality, our org charts are more like messy mind maps, and our products, services, and experiences exist in a macro-environment full of ambiguity and uncertainty that eschews linear thinking.

Try taking away some of the structure and leaving space for more open inquiry, improvisation, and intuition. Keep in mind that markets are unpredictable and inconsistent because they are made up of people. Embrace it—and make the creativity leap.

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- *Disciplined Dreaming: A Proven System to Drive Breakthrough Creativity* by Josh Linkner
- *The Innovative Sale: Unleash Your Creativity for Better Customer Solutions and Extraordinary Results* by Mark Donnolo



Author, global speaker, and consultant, Natalie Nixon is a creativity strategist who happily integrates wonder and rigor into her life and work. She converted a 16-year career as a professor into a successful consulting practice. At Figure 8 Thinking, she emboldens leaders to apply creativity and foresight for transformative business results. She's the editor of *Strategic Design Thinking: Innovation in Products, Services, Experiences, and Beyond* and a regular contributor to *Inc.* magazine.

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