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Arne CARLSEN, Stewart CLEGG &
Reidar GJERSVIK (2012)
Idea Work: Lessons of the Extraordinary in
Everyday Creativity.
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This inspiring book is one of a number of contributions emerging from a four-year, large-scale empirical project co-sponsored by the Norwegian Research Council and led by a group of researchers at SINTEF, the largest independent research organisation in Scandinavia with some 2100 employees. The Idea Work project sets out to investigate creativity as a concrete, collective, and everyday form of practice, inherent in daily work. Its focus on the collective aspects and culturally embedded practices of creativity contrasts with the many contributions that glorify the distinctive characteristics of creative individuals, and with the how-to manuals that offer to nurture and unleash one's own individual creative potential.

As the authors rightly note, in-depth studies of creative practices that contribute to the transformation of initial insights and ideas into collective breakthroughs, an overall process that the authors call extraordinary idea work, are still missing from the otherwise abundant academic literature on knowledge management, innovation and managerial creativity. Mobilising the concept of idea work instead of knowledge work or innovation is precisely what allows Carlsen, Clegg and Gjersvick (2012: 22) to distance themselves from the established literature on so-called knowledge-based organisations (KBOs), or knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) and professions (Alvesson, 2004) that has long framed research on knowledge and innovation in organisations, and "broaden the recognition" of organisational practices that are considered to be creative (p. 25). More encompassing than either knowledge or creativity, the concept of idea work is loose-limbed but striking and evocative enough to capture a variety of very concrete and mundane processes, sequences and iterations and moments of interaction and collaboration that contribute to the generation, selection and realisation of ideas, unfolding in the everyday, not so exceptionally, rarely or fleetingly. The ingenious label of 'idea work' makes it possible for researchers and practitioners to take into account a wide range of activities and efforts over time, some of which may span a number of projects and even sectors, and to take into account the relational and personal dimensions of creativity.

Carlsen et al. (2012: 22) focus on those very collective tasks, processes and moments — a broad range of interdependent activities and mediating

artefacts that may, in some way, "all contribute to developing, visualizing, preparing the ground for, and realizing ideas" (p. 25) and have been neglected in the organisation and management theory literature. Here, creativity is seen as something people do together daily as part of organisational practice and, often, project-based organising, but occurs in a variety of organisational contexts and professional practices rather than being the privileged domain of a subset of actors, activities, organisations or professions. From the start, idea work is defined as

"work with ideas that require organizational attention and interaction over time, where one needs to consider alternatives, and where major changes or new deliverables are at stake. This is still a broad concept; idea work is part of all important development work, most project-based work, and all work with sustained end-user interactions in problem solving, such as setting up curriculums for teachers or planning the development of a farm or developing new products and services for a bank. Idea work is relevant for everyone engaged in problem solving and development work and everyone who works with projects or tasks that may differ slightly from time to time." (p. 31)

With this project, the authors aim to create a language that combines academic originality and rigour with practical relevance, a "research-based, tested, and usable language for a kind of work that dominates many organisations but has so far received modest attention" (p. 13). In pursuit of this aim, they base their research on a sample of six organisations drawn from different industrial and commercial sectors, each with a Scandinavian home-base and having demonstrated leading capabilities in their respective industry. These are an architectural firm (Snøhetta), the exploration unit of a major oil company (Statoil), a law firm (Thommessen), an alliance of savings banks (SpareBank1), a supplier of trading analytics (Point Carbon) and a weekend magazine (A-magasinet). Data were collected by combining a variety of qualitative methods, including 400 hours of observation, 200 interviews, a substantial number of feedback sessions and workshops, as well as active experimentation carried out across the six sites, although not evenly: fieldwork, for example, was more extensive at Snøhetta and Statoil as pragmatic considerations required. Data analysis was performed using a grounded theory approach that allowed the systematic coding and comparison of the idea work practices encountered across the six organisations studied and a controlled process of theory building from empirical materials through transversal categories. The team developed a new methodology combining visual and textual materials on A5 cards. This format made it possible to encapsulate "thin abstractions of tentative research findings" in the form of distinctive patterns or qualities of extraordinary idea work (p. 26) withactive involvement from practitioners.

The book owes its structure to ten key patterns or qualities that were identified as being present in extraordinary idea work (when idea work is at its best as the authors define it). Each of these ten qualities forms the basis of a chapter. Although they are not mutually exclusive, and are often based on a set of contradictory skills, these ten qualities have been grouped together under four meta-categories that convey the fact that idea work is interwoven, affective, material and controversial (p. 18). For the authors, truly striving for creativity entails the ability to "exercise such contradictory qualities in one's practice" (p. 19), although not all of these have to be present at the same time.

Each chapter starts with one or several quotes that describe and exemplify what

each particular quality of idea work looks like in situ. The narrative richness of the descriptive accounts provided —"stories with flesh and blood characters in the ten qualities of extraordinary idea work" (p. 30) — helps to convey the rich context of idea work and detail the specific experiences of several of the actors encountered in the companies studied. Each chapter concludes with a set of useful practical tips and exercises aimed at practitioners, academics and professionals who are interested in improving the quality and outputs of their work processes.

Interwoven

Prepping and zooming out, the first two of the ten qualities identified, are two interwoven sets of practices that contribute to the depth and originality (quality) of the ideas produced. Prepping consists of the detailed, systematic and sometimes tedious preparation work that involves resynthesising existing data across fields by bringing disjointed or fragmented elements of information and experience together, and reviewing them again. It provides a solid factual base for creative ideas and makes it possible to revivify existing data by seeing connections that might previously have been missed. Bringing new details into view, sometimes through conversations, can turn out to be "decisive for the quality of ideas" and can yield new breakthroughs. In order to contribute to greater depth of thinking, challenge established facts, familiar readings or explanations of events and bring out "alternative storylines, cases, metaphors, hypotheses or explanations" (p. 50), this preparation stage must be "wide and deep" (p. 47), i.e. conducted with an open mind. It may sometimes be necessary to borrow and incubate ideas from different places, inside and outside the organisation, in order to achieve "a wider range in the final moments of association" (p. 48). In this respect, prepping must combine with the practice of zooming out, the ability to step back from immersion in data and the analysis of detail, and connect small ideas to a larger whole. This involves seeking "the simplifying core" (p. 19) and adopting a broader perspective instead of "obsessing with details" (p. 66), thus creating analogies and breadth. Being able to embed one's knowing deeply and make one's specialism "an aperture through which a whole landscape can be zoomed with the resources of a deep, not shallow, framing, before finally focusing on a detail, a fold, in the overall image' (p. 63), constitutes the paradox of being a specialist

In their discussion of prepping, the authors eschew an exclusively cognitive reading of creative practice in thinking and knowing, favouring instead a much more encompassing embrace that sheds some light on little examined aspects of creative intellectual work. Interestingly, prepping is distinguished from the practice of establishing expensive ICT-enabled knowledge bases or repositories, a management practice (some would say fashion) that was implemented in many KIFs from the early 1990s for the very purpose of increasing organisational memory (Walsh and Ungson, 1991). Idea Work reasserts the necessity of relying on seasoned idea workers rather than information technology, who function as living repositories of knowing. , Their memories act as institutional filters for connecting relevant knowledge and as a spur to others' creativity.

Given the bold stand taken by the book in announcing its originality throughout, it is disappointing when the authors make a partial return to the mainstream

knowledge management literature. When they refer to combination (the combination of ideas and facts, p. 48), they display more than a hint of Nonaka's Socialization, Externalization, Combination and Internalization model (see Gourlay, 2006, for a critique); they echo the literature on knowledge brokerage. when they invoke parallel practices of cross-pollination (p. 48); and allusions to filtering and the generation of alternatives bear the stamp of Weick's (1979) bracketing phase in sensemaking.

The subsequent bold shift from combination to fold, which evokes Deleuze by describing idea work as the discovery of "new ways of folding the world into a new way of seeing by holding detail or prior understanding lightly, or letting them go" (p. 64), is an ambiguous sign of a generative attempt to unlock mainstream approaches and open up new vistas. But this understanding of the fold as enabling the production of an infinite number of combinations from a finite number of components (p. 64) unfortunately comes across as being somewhat mechanical against the intended fluidity of the overall argument.

Affective

The second section of the book incorporates affectivity into idea work through the identification of three qualities: craving wonder, activating drama and daring to imagine. All three qualities emphatically reaffirm how organisational expressions of imagination creativity are reliant first and foremost on strong affective drives, or knowing as an aesthetic experience — aspects that are simply ignored by the knowing-in-practice literature. Craving wonder flows from a "deep seated interest in the world", the desire to know and find answers that leads us to see it in terms of possibilities, mysteries to be deciphered and stories to be unfolded (p. 76). It powerfully acknowledges how a strong desire to understand and a sense of mystery drive people's search for ideas. This sometimes materialises as a craving for "the wholeness and beauty" associated with breakthrough explanations and concepts (p. 80), and is often pursued against considerable opposition. It is the quality of sensing something significant beyond the familiar and obvious, and the ability gradually to bring it into ever-clearer focus. Carlsen et al.'s understanding of a sense of wonder seems to incorporate two contradictory impulses: the drive for puzzle-solving and the more open and ambivalent intellectual engagement with mystery, the latter being closer to a solely contemplative take on the concept. Given existing contributions in the field, of which Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) is a prime exemplar, Carlsen et al.'s understanding of wonder could perhaps have done more to differentiate their distinctive contribution. They do incorporate an appreciation of the sensuous dimensions of mystery, a dimension with which Alvesson and Kärreman significantly fail to engage, and a Burkean sensibility first brought into organisation studies by Goodall (1991), but there is too much of a tendency here to commodify the concept of wonder, especially with regard to the spiritual drive, which at times gives craving wonder the unfortunate ring of a catchphrase.

Activating drama highlights the powerful emotional thrill of being at the heart of the action of exploring the unknown, indulging one's adventurous spirit, letting oneself be drawn by and absorbed into the onrush of the twists of discovery, and threshold experiences at the limits of what is currently known or possible, sometimes to the point of becoming hooked. The surfacing of the "dramatic

intensity of idea work" (96) is welcome as this is a defining dimension of consulting, creative and expressive professions, and a consideration that is obliterated from the relevant academic literature (the main focus of which has been on ambiguity, identity, autonomy and control, as in Alvesson (2000), Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) and Bilton (2007)). This is in contrast with many depictions from popular culture, including the buzzing of US daily paper newsrooms in films or the dramas of advertising work as narrated in the TV series Mad Men, for example. Sadly, the chapter proceeds by rehashing some conventional metaphors, implicitly referring to work done by Downing (1997) on dramatic logics, as extended by Fulop, Marechal and Rifkin (2009: 43-51) into six dominant plots, and work on organisation as theatre (Mangham and Overington, 1987; Schreyogg and Höpfl, 2004), rather than offering any new insights. This is a shame as the book emphasises a clearly important but neglected aspect of idea work.

Finally, daring to imagine emphasises the required cultural commitment to mechanisms for cultivating, nurturing and implementing bold ideas with an open mind, thinking in terms of possibilities rather than impossibilities. This needs to be supported by appropriate cheerleading, a celebratory spirit and an appreciation of the importance of forgiveness; both successes and failures are managed together as collective accomplishments and experiences to be learnt from (p. 112). This reinforces arguments made by Barrett (2000) on improvisation as an ethic of forgiveness. However, aspects of this quality that lead to withstanding opposition to clients' reservations or resistance, if they are to be combined with trying to listen carefully to the client and excel in client care (see craving wonder and double prototyping), generate contradictions inherent to these practices, which, although highlighted as such, could be better articulated. Whilst the fact that the three categories overlap in this section is not a problem, the contours of distinction could be brought into greater relief.

Material

The third section further engages with the physicality of idea work by putting more emphasis on the role of the senses in idea work with the introduction of two additional qualities: getting physical and double rapid prototyping. The first pattern (getting physical) draws attention to the often sensuous weave of creativity at work, those aspects that have hardly been researched or even acknowledged in relevant academic literature - a few notable exceptions include Austin and Devin (2003); Carlile et al. (2013); Ewenstein and Whyte (2009); Lennie (1999) and Whyte (2013). This chapter amply describes how collective creative processes are interlaced with material objects such as notes and scribbles, drawings, sketches, small-scale models, prototypes and wall displays, those artefacts which serve as visual bridges between different actors' half-worked or exploratory thoughts and ideas, facilitating interaction and collective co-creation. As the authors note: "Sounds, sketches, completion logs, books and reports from the shelf can all serve as media for physical interaction" (p. 123). Team meetings and discussions mobilising these artefacts enable both detail and whole to be viewed simultaneously as zooming out processes take place. The importance of sketches and of the physical embodiment in idea exploration work are underlined in several

places throughout the book, not least in the form of a touching reference to the physical roots of the inspiration for Bob Dylan's art. Although the authors' reference to grounded cognition is interesting, their flirtation with mainstream cognitivism in exploring the role of the senses in idea work does not contribute to establishing the distinctiveness of the concept of idea work and of the approach taken in the book as compared with other, more traditional approaches to thinking.

Double rapid prototyping, the second delineated quality, highlights a double-loop form of thinking that materialises 'the continuing importance of finding ways to connect to the client' (p. 143) through a process of imagining and rigorously testing user experiences. The concept of rapid prototyping is understood loosely here as an interactive set of very simple, small experiences, successful rounds of experiential learning that have "the function of assimilating many voices and testing their combined relevance in a speedy manner" (p. 144). A prototype can be many things other than a physical object: a sketch, a draft, the fragment of a song that concretizes an idea and allows others to become involved in the creative process. With the term 'double prototyping' the authors are referring to a process that first targets 'a larger idea space' through imagining, before favouring a concrete solution that is then tested again against users' actual experiences, finally locking the process in.

Controversial

The last section brings together three final, 'controversial' categories: liberating laughter, generative resistance and punk production. Liberating laughter emphasises that the ability not to take oneself too seriously is a necessity in high-pressure work environments, a useful way of reducing stress, a way of maintaining a positive atmosphere, and a way of productively exposing contradictions. Play is neither a distraction or release nor a confined technique for modelling strategy with building blocks; rather, it is a pervasive attitude, one that is 'serious' to the extent that it is inseparable from everyday creative practice and enables it (Kane, 2004; Sørensen and Spoelstra, 2012). It is often difficult to take humour seriously in organisations without importing an element of functionalist argumentation about the 'uses' of humour, sometimes as a management tool (Westwood and Rhodes, 2006). The evidence which the authors present is engaging but does not really bear the weight of Bakhtin's account of carnival laughter; meanwhile, it runs the risk of trivialising the significant divergence between the laughter of resistance and the laughter of accommodation.

Generating resistance builds on a rather anodyne understanding of resistance as friction rather than a more critical refraction of the concept. Here we are very far from the ways in which understandings of resistance are formulated within critical management studies, and particularly labour process theory (Thompson and McHugh, 2009). Although Carlsen et al.'s portrayal of the collective processes of confronting, questioning and challenging others' ideas is a faithful account of real-life idea work practices, its seems to encompass practices of positive conflict as familiar in organisational psychology rather than resistance as such.

Punk production, finally, emphasises two principles: 'being an outsider within' and 'the concept of do-it-yourself' (p. 189). The version of punk that is espoused (non-conformism coupled with activism) is, regrettably, an innocuous, ersatz variation of the values of 1977. The authors' oscillations between the yin and yang of contradictory mottos: 'anti-system and pro-customer', 'anti-tradition and looking for the blind spots' or 'anti-self and choosing a punk alias' are not well managed, and their attempts to present these as possibly being reconciled by adopting a punk attitude ends up, ironically, where the iconic punk bands did: thoroughly commodified and furthering the interests of the systems of authority that punk is supposed to challenge.

(W)rapping

In spite of its few weaknesses, Idea Work is a very engaging book which departs from what has become a common emphasis on creative individuals or geniuses (see also Bilton, 2007 for a critique) to explore collective creative processes in everyday business, the ordinary work involved in generating extraordinary ideas. It is acutely observant of the generating, hindering or channelling processes that enhance, kill or maintain this work. It is therefore difficult to do complete justice to such a cleverly written and imaginative book in a short review. A compelling and inspiring read, the real achievement of the book results from the balance between the thoroughly researched empirical phenomena and their narration. It is attractively designed as a versatile tool that can act as a stimulus for creativity and it convincingly does that. The abundance of real-life examples and authentic narratives throughout the different chapters successfully conveys the authors' close engagement with everyday creative practice.

The book itself is very well researched and written to exemplify its content, considering and crafting its design reflectively and taking in not a large number of sectors but certainly a wide range of them. It effectively provides a distinctively rich vocabulary to make sense of a variety of thought work practices: whilst the vocabulary is capacious, it is not limited to a single disciplinary perspective or restricted by a narrow range of conceptual origins. It illuminates a wide palette of phenomena that have not been considered to be part of knowledge work in recent work on knowing-in-practice or managing creativity. The sampling strategy may seem surprising —oil exploration is not usually included in the academic literature on KIFs or KBOs, for example— but it emerges from the way in which the authors define idea work and enables them to discern commonalities in activities previously considered to be disparate.

One of the book's weaknesses stems from its attempt to speak to a managerial audience, using a formulation of some of the principles that remains at times too imprecise, too populist, and too inclined to present what is already known elsewhere as a breakthrough. This leads the discussion at times to glide where it might otherwise penetrate.

Other than this, the design of the text complements the writing style. There is an openness about the design: the text's layout is intended to facilitate the addition of notes by the reader, and the multicolour scheme and numerous illustrations stimulate the senses and invite creative involvement in making the text one's own. Whilst the text has a didactic element, offering summary

definitions of the qualities it explores early on (p. 19), it wears this lightly without reifying or deadening the processes it describes. It seeks, rather, to embody them, accompanying the processes like a wave, supporting and magnifying them with a deft touch, accompanying the movement, without constraining the very phenomena it describes, with a caress. It is led by its storytelling, which narrates whilst opening up possibilities for reader participation.

In my own fieldwork experience of idea work at the Paris office of a major international management consulting firm, I sometimes found it difficult to satisfactorily describe and articulate my findings within the existing conceptual literature. The practices described by Carlsen et al. resonate very heavily with my own data, and their framework offers powerful tools for making sense of the processes observed. In this sense, Idea Work is liberating. It is not just about idea work; it offers ideas that work. For a text of this sort, it is a tour de force.

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