

**This is the first paper in the CSI Excellence in Counseling Leadership Series. Dr. Gladding is a Past-President of CSI and a member of the Academy of Leaders for Excellence**

## **Creative Leadership**

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Creativity and leadership are often talked about but are seldom used in the same sentence. That is because individuals generally have difficulty understanding what these two words encompass and how they may be combined. To be honest, creativity is usually different from leadership but usually does not mean necessarily. The two can be combined.

### Creativity

The term creativity is not a synonym for newness. There are many new ideas and products produced each day that are not creative. For example, wearing clothes that don't match may be novel but it is seldom creative. Rather, creativity is the ability to combine elements in a way that results in a unique product or process that is useful or brings insight in a manner not previously available. History is full of creative inventions, two of the most noteworthy examples of the twentieth century being the formulation of Albert Einstein about the nature of matter and the production by Thomas Edison of the electric light bulb.

So how does creativity work? It is a process that is non-sequential where people give themselves time to incubate ideas about how to solve or resolve a problem or situation. An underlying and necessary aspect of creativity is that people employ divergent thinking that leads them past logical conclusions and onto novel ways of tackling what lies before them. Brainstorming is one type of divergent thinking process that can be helpful. In brainstorming, of course, many ideas are generated in a limited amount of time without being judged. It is only after the ideas are voiced or written out that they are evaluated for their practicality. Play is another form of divergent thinking where people have fun with ideas or materials by rearranging them in as many possible ways as they can. Think about how children stack blocks or work with playdoh. The important characteristic of divergent thinking is to open one's mind. For instance, answer the following question both in a logical, rational way and in a divergent, playful way.

Question: "What is it that goes up and goes down but does not move?"

Logically and rationally, a person would most likely think of either a machine or an animal and then try to eliminate machines or animals not found in the "does not move" category. It is not a bad way to think but the result would most likely be an answer that was mundane, limited, or incorrect, such as a "pile driver."

Diverse and playful thinking follows a different path. In such a procedure a person would generate answers, even silly ones, without paying any attention to having to be correct. So answers might

initially include, "a pogo stick," "streak lightning," "a plant that is growing," "a car on a lift," and "the temperature." The point is that some of these answers would be more creative and correct than others and only after they were generated would they be judged. (Oh, the most correct answer in this case would be the temperature).

## Leadership

In contrast to creativity, leadership is about people helping others, especially in groups, envision and achieve goals in a timely and productive manner. In order to lead, a person must have energy, vision, a sense of self, interpersonal skills, and knowledge about the nature of groups, such as the fact that they go through developmental stages. In addition, a person must know how to break down goals into doable pieces so that the group can reach its destination in a timely manner without becoming discouraged. Both processes are easier to describe than to achieve.

Groups are best led when members feel unified with each other and a part of the whole. Such a feeling only comes after individuals work through their initial anxiety and conflict in being with others. Ways of helping groups get through the initial stages of a group (forming and storming) to achieve unification and productivity (norming and performing) include making sure members have an opportunity to talk ("air time") and receive feedback. Positive feedback works best early in the group process. Members also need to feel they have something in common with others in the group. The leader can assure such connectivity by pointing out similarities in backgrounds and thoughts, a procedure called linking. In addition, the leader needs to make sure that all members of the group buy into the goals the group wishes to achieve as a whole. Group members who are reluctant or resistant will not only slow the group down but also contribute to its failure.

Leadership is also exercised in a group by delegating tasks to members. A leader who tries to do everything ends up doing nothing (and becomes exhausted and discouraged as well). Thus, it is important for leaders to identify talents in their followers and help followers make the most of their abilities. In such a process, cohesiveness is strengthened and the leader helps to grow future leaders.

Like creativity, leadership evolves over time and like creativity, leadership can be taught. Thus, a leader can instruct a person within a group on how to assess himself or herself on an intrapersonal level and simultaneously relate to others more effectively. Like creativity (and counseling for that matter), leadership comes through first knowing oneself and then deepening that knowledge through interpersonal interactions or situations that are challenging and demanding.

## Being A Creative Leader

Given the facts covered so far it is not surprising that leadership, let alone creative leadership, is a rather rare commodity in society. After all, a commitment to being a leader requires a great deal of work and even some sacrifice. Adding a creative element to such a commitment demands even more from a person. Yet, becoming a creative leader is possible. As noted, dedication to the process is paramount, but after that there are some concrete practices persons can employ that will be helpful. Three of the processes I have found most useful are as follows.

- 1) Do something different from the way you routinely conduct yourself. Thus, if you are normally

outgoing in relationships, be shy. Such a stance gives you a new perspective on the world and invites others to relate to you differently. This behavior may not be a stance you want to take on most occasions but it gives you a new way of being and seeing your environment. It also creates opportunities for people with whom you associate to interact with you differently. By behaving the opposite of your regular routine, you also learn to empathize with those who are like the way you are acting.

2) Tell or write a story (about yourself or the group) from a new perspective. By highlighting different aspects of a story, the emphasis within it changes and events either lose or gain importance. For example, in relating the life history of prominent theorists, we, as counselors, stress aspects of their lives that help determine why they acted as they did. For example, Fritz Perls' unfortunate encounter with Sigmund Freud could be underscored to explain his development of gestalt theory; however, the influence of his wife, Laura, on him could equally be emphasized. The important point here is that one thing in and of itself is usually not responsible for the development of people and by underscoring a number of events that are normally left out about a person or group, much is gained.

3) Finally, to be a creative leader, cultivate a sense of humor. It is crucial for the processes of creativity and leadership that those who are at the forefront of groups be able to laugh at themselves or situations that are absurd. Without an ability to see the levity in oneself or others, life and groups become way too serious and boring. An example I can think of personally that illustrates this principle is when I recently got up in front of a group I was giving a speech to at 7 p.m. and said: "Good morning." Everyone just looked puzzled for a moment and realizing what I had done, I followed my statement by saying: "Or 'good afternoon' or more properly 'good evening' -- it's been one of those days." The last line eased the tension both for the group and me and I wound up saying: "Please feel free to contribute to the group today at any time" which again was well received by the group since we had just gone through the day verbally with my initial greeting.

### Conclusion

Creativity and leadership are like chocolate and peanut butter. They can be considered individually but they are also wonderful together. The hard part in combining them is making sure that diverse thinking is mixed with knowledge of self and the ability to work well in groups. Such a process is easier to focus on than to perform but it is possible to achieve. As James Baldwin is purported to have said: "Not everything that is tried can be changed but nothing can be changed unless it is tried." Putting creativity and leadership together is well worth the effort.