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# Where ideas come from: the truth about creativity

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# In an economy re-inventing itself, creativity is a crucial asset.

But the dirty little secret about creativity is that it intimidates most of us. We've so mythologized the idea of creativity that we've turned a natural human drive into a burden—an unfortunate conundrum in an idea-based economy.

Among the widespread myths about creativity:

- Creative people's brains work differently.
- Creative people can conjure something from nothing.
- Creative egos demand a lot of stroking.
- Hard work and fruitless effort can kill the creative force.

Dead wrong, all.

## What makes creative people tick?

Four personality traits appear to differentiate more creative from less creative people, according to [John R. Hayes](#), a Carnegie Mellon professor of psychology and expert in creativity and cognition:

1. Devotion to work
2. Independence
3. Drive to do original work
4. Flexibility

A closer look at these traits will dispel some myths about creativity that can impede success in the workplace.

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## Myth 1:

### Creative people's brains are wired differently.

Research shows that people considered creative do not have higher IQs or earn better grades in school. No cognitive abilities are innate to "creatives." Rather, all of the variables that distinguish creative people are motivational. The opportunity to do original work, the freedom to try and fail, and the chance to develop mastery are the incentives that drive them to work longer and harder than their peers. [Sir Richard Branson](#) , [Paul McCartney](#), and [Steve Jobs](#) all have poor academic records, yet they built empires based on their creative drive.

## Myth 2:

### Creative people can conjure something from nothing.

The creative process moves from the concrete to the abstract, not vice versa. That's why goal setting is the pivotal element in creative projects. Spending time defining problems in ill-defined situations can be especially motivating to creative people. Also key is representing the problem visually. Sharing models, sketches, pictures, even color swatches, can trip the trigger for the creative process. Renowned choreographer [Twyla Tharp](#) starts every new dance with a box—filling it with pictures, news articles, CDs, and her scribbles. The box becomes a pushing off point.

# Myth 3:

## Creative egos need to be coddled.

Yes and no. Serious creatives are self-critical. Spotting flaws in one's own work, and taking action to correct them, is a hallmark of creative people. Because creative performance is rooted in motivation, not cognitive intelligence, creatives are often driven to define and refine. As Thomas Edison said, "There's a way to do it better - find it." [Pixar](#) seeks people not only masterful at hand-drawing, but also highly sociable - with the flexibility to let others draw on top of their drawings. The idea that creative egos are fragile is up for revision. As our workplaces demand more idea generation, the talent that will rise to the top, and thereby set the norms, will have resilient egos that seek out critique.

Understanding how creativity works has helped me cultivate it. Whether collaborating on a Web site design or generating unorthodox marketing strategies, I try to surround myself with people excited to jump into problems, frame them, and re-do their work until it shines.

The turmoil and decline we are witnessing in American business are common conditions right before a renaissance. For American business to transform fully into an idea-driven economy, creativity will be an essential attribute. And in today's work environment, where innovation is the new imperative, mastering the creative process will be everyone's job.

More insights into managing creatives can be found in my book, [\*RenGen: Renaissance Generation\*](#), Platinum Press, 2007, or on my blog at [www.culturescoutblog.com](http://www.culturescoutblog.com).

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