

“A Curse on Being Creative” GUEST EDITORIAL by Ilan Kelman, CICERO, Norway. September 24, 2012

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I am often treated to the quotation, or variations thereof, “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used to create them”. Absolutely right. But who is brave enough to reward its implementation in science?

Long gone are the days when scientists were permitted to read and think on their own. Instead, it is work packages, deliverables, short-term projects, and writing one’s hours on a time sheet.

That is not all bad. It demands budget accountability and planning skills. It weeds out those who abuse their tenure by stymieing anyone better than themselves. It is certainly needed for science which must be large-scale, such as work requiring supercomputers, particle accelerators, and spacecraft.

That does not mean that all science should be that way. So why is it heading in that direction? Today’s ethos is that Big Science equals good science.

Why do research institutes impose a GroupThink mentality, despite reams of research showing how that inhibits innovation?



<http://fragilecologies.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/dont-think-out-of-the-box1.jpg>

Why does pursuing an idea for its own sake become dangerous only because it is not linked to an organizational stretch goal? If you fail to lower yourself to the level of the least mentally energetic person in the group, why is it you who is not the team player?

When did thinking outside the box lead to ostracizing because of that? Can science survive when critique is taboo in case someone's feelings are hurt?

Standing out creatively is a death knell. Originality, in method and content, is punished for being threatening. Those who turn initiative into success inspire not kudos, but jealousy and backbiting.

Whither the creative genius? Or can we develop options to deal with those contradictions?

We are not seeking a license for arrogance, power trips, trampling on others, or lack of evaluation. It is about nurturing different approaches to science, recognizing that key ideas such as the structures of benzene and DNA came to the scientists in their dreams (or so the stories go). It is fostering the solo, cloistered, individualistic work which Galileo, da Vinci, Newton, and Darwin are revered for.

Otherwise, we are simply venerating those from the past while hypocritically frowning upon a similar style today. The world has indeed changed. Let's take advantage of that, through some Big Science, without losing the magical journey of personal curiosity.

Yet science today is more about consultancy-based project management than producing a startling, seminal paper that advances knowledge in multi-dimensional leaps and bounds. If you are creative, then you are forever cursed to be punished by the system.

Even at a time when the system claims that we need new thinking to solve old problems.

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