Creativity and dysfunction in strategic processes: The case of scenario planning

Brad MacKay [a], Peter McKiernan [b],*

[a] University of Edinburgh Business School, 7 Bristo Square, Edinburgh EH8 9AL, UK
[b] School of Management, University of St. Andrews, St Andrews KY16 9AD, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to open up a new line of enquiry into the dysfunctions of creativity within strategic processes. Generally, the impact and results of introducing creativity (and innovation) into organisational life are perceived to be wholesome and beneficial. But recent research in the area of organisational psychology has documented a 'dark' side to its introduction, e.g., low employee morale, stress, theft, sabotage, destructive conflict. Learning from this work and shifting the domain to strategic management, this paper focuses on scenario planning—a strategy process widely regarded by participants and facilitators as creative and innovative in structure, content and output. First, the creative credentials of the process are established with reference to the literature and definitions from the creative and cultural industries. Second, the process is deconstructed into activities and each is examined for the extent of its embedded creativity. Third, informed by case evidence, four dysfunctions of the scenario planning process are conjectured: creativity layered on fantasy; heightened expectations and confusion; pride and passion; and creativity leading to excess. The paper concludes by suggesting four options for handling these potential dysfunctional effects and, in the light of the dialogue presented, re-interprets the definition of scenario planning presented earlier in the text.

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1. Introduction

Creativity and innovation, like entrepreneurship, are projected in the general management literature as unequivocally wholesome and appealing. Clearly, in certain contexts, e.g., corporate or sector ossification, their stimulus to change management is necessary and acknowledged widely [22]. Each has a strong and influential role in the facilitation of constructive conflict and as a trigger for improving employee attitudes and emotional well-being [20]. Logically, the theoretical prognosis for performance from any process engaged with them is positive and recurring [17]. But, there is a more disturbing aspect to this pairing, revealed often in empirical work [1], whose existence remains covert and whose effects can be damaging, e.g., increasing concerns over privacy and security in free flowing ideation [19]; innovation leading to destructive conflict, negative employee attitudes and increased stress [17]; innovations and ideas leading to theft, sabotage and harmful behaviour that undermines group goals [16]. Scarcely is this shady aspect recognised in mainstream management research or teaching so reinforcing the prejudice of endless, bountiful returns.

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* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: pm4@st-andrews.ac.uk (P. McKiernan).

The purpose of this paper is to begin the exploration for such dysfunctional effects in a foresight process renowned for its creative and innovative ingredients and experiences, and one that has been adopted widely in recent years by nations, organisations and individuals—scenario planning. Although 'pitfalls' of the scenario planning process have been identified previously [34], these tend to be generic obstacles to getting a 'good job done' rather than a deep, investigative focus on the potential dysfunctions of the 'creative' aspects of the process. To achieve this objective, the paper is structured into four sections. The first section of the paper examines the creative and innovative process as depicted, in the main, by social psychologists concerned with managerial productivity and human performance and spirit. Definitional issues are discussed and the psychologist's emphases are informed by literature from the creative (or cultural) industries on the nature of the creative process and its constituent elements. The second section recognises the rich arsenal of scenario planning processes and focuses upon those with a deep heuristic platform underpinned by 'disciplined intuition' or 'intuitive logics' [2–5]. Here, the creative credentials of the process are assessed by comparison with the creativity definition and nature of the creative process illustrated in section one. The third section examines the scenario process stages in detail and explores the potential dysfunctions of the creative aspects of the individual stages and of the process as a whole. The concluding section reflects on the impact of this 'darkness' and offers suggestions for process improvement.

2. Creativity and innovation

2.1. Definitions of creativity and innovation

Definitional dialogue in the management, psychology and 'creative' industries literatures has raged long and sharp over each of the terms 'creativity' and 'innovation' and over the distinction between them, with no emergent consensus. In received management discourse, definitions of creativity have emphasised both individualism, as in the isolated, mythical genius, and novelty, as in the path breaking idea or invention. Bilton [6] argues that this 'conflation' to the individual and innovation, with its pathology in Western philosophy, reinforces a one-sided stereotypical view of creativity and creative people as it disconnects them from the context that fertilises their ideas and talents and so gives them meaning and value. Consequently, by idolising individuals over the creative process, '*we start to build . . . systems of management and organization which are at odds with the real needs of creative people and processes*' [6, p. 7]. Definitions in psychology are seen as superior to those in management as they hint at a 'duality' of novelty and utility with deference to the context in which the creativity occurs.

In social psychological research, West and Farr [7] have provided one of the most respected definitions of workplace innovation:

> "…the intentional introduction and application within a role, group or organisation of ideas, processes, products or procedures, new to the relevant unit of adoption, designed to significantly benefit the individual, the group, the organisation or wider society" [p. 9].

First, the definition distinguishes between the two variables, with innovation embodying both intent and process improvement, and with creativity, defined *in absentia*, left to refer solely to idea generation. This creates what King [8] has referred to as an 'ideation–implementation dilemma'—the generation of original ideas as creativity and its separation from innovation as intentional introduction and application of new ways of doing things.

Second, as Anderson and Gasteiger [9] point out, innovation, rather than creativity, must provide quantifiable benefits to at least one of several stakeholder groups both internal and external to the organisation. Hence, innovative ideas must be 'fit and beneficial for purpose'. Third, innovation focuses on novelty relative to existing practice and knowledge [*P-creativity* in Boden [10] terms], allowing for the import and export of innovation from other work groups. Both the relative and absolute dimensions of innovation are context specific, i.e., what is new to one group in organisation 'x' may be *de rigour* in organisation 'y' and what is new to organisation 'z' may not be known elsewhere in the world. Fourth, central to the definition is the considerable benefit to be delivered by innovative ideas to the many stakeholders. Any deleterious effects of these ideas or conflictual outcomes of process implementation are either absent or anonymous. This restricts the definition to innovations that have wholly positive effects and, arguably, renders it solely a theoretical definition that is impossible to embody in practical observance.

For the purposes of this research, we adopt the directed, process-based definition provided by West and Farr [7] where both creativity and innovation are embraced as integral parts of a specific or continuous process that contains ideas or actions of *novelty* and *utility* but adapt it by allowing for adverse or surprising, unintentional outcomes. Contrary to managerial prescriptions of 'brainstorming', lateral thinking [11] and 'thinking outside the box', Bilton [6] argues that this duality of creativity emerges from the combination of different types of thinking, both convergent and divergent. As in a combination of left and right brain activities, creativity occurs at their intersection bounded within an envelope of 'conceptual space'. This space is not too close to conventional systems and thinking in the organisation where it will be absorbed rapidly but lack novelty, and not too far away that there is too much novelty for the system to digest—the creativity should surprise but not shock. This creative envelope follows Boden's [10] notion of 'boundary tweaking'—where the creative idea can embrace the fully known while creating new boundaries through its inspiration at the limits of conceptual space, i.e., of chaos and order. Noting that such tweaking involves a combination of stretching and retaining forces that allows both incremental and step changes in knowledge, we turn our attention to how these features manifest themselves in a creative process.