



NATALIE NIXON

**THE
CREATIVITY
LEAP**

**UNLEASH CURIOSITY, IMPROVISATION,
AND INTUITION AT WORK**

"Natalie Nixon provides a fresh primer on how to cultivate creativity in the workplace."

NIR EYAL, bestselling author of *Hooked* and *Indistractable*

More Praise for *The Creativity Leap*

“For any of us who feel forced to choose between our creative and analytic selves, this book is a gift, a balm, and an inspiration. Natalie’s unique approach to rigor and wonder makes her a wise and relatable coach for building creative competency exactly where we are.”

—Amy Whitaker, author of *Art Thinking*

“In *The Creativity Leap*, Natalie Nixon seamlessly weaves together stories from her personal history with deep insights born from her research to expand on the definition of a ‘creative type.’ This book offers a new paradigm to those who desire more expansive thinking, imaginative outcomes, and game-changing results for themselves and their organizations.”

—Valerie Jacobs, Chief Insight and Innovation Officer, LPK

“*The Creativity Leap* is wondrous in its deft blending of insights from sources as different as jazz musicians and GE Healthcare to shed new light on the process of true innovation. Nixon is rigorous in laying out a practical approach that should convince even the most analytic reader of the business value of creativity.”

—Derek Newberry, Behavior and Culture Specialist,
Boston Consulting Group

“In her book *The Creativity Leap*, Nixon invites us to bring our whole selves to work and to create with curiosity, improvisation, and intuition. Leaders that want to take the professional development of their team personally and see greater innovation in their organizations should read this book.”

—Erica Keswin, Bestselling author of *Bring Your Human to Work*

“Through insightful stories from her life and innovators across every field, Natalie Nixon shows us how we can build practices that enhance our innate creative competency and provides a valuable re-frame on the nature of creativity as the dynamic tension between wonder and rigor. A must-read.”

—Sarah Brooks, Design Director, IBM

“Imagine a world where creativity is exponentially magnified. *The Creativity Leap* applies methods and insights for creativity in clear, understandable language. Natalie Nixon is a master teacher and has introduced me to that world.”

—**Stephen Spinelli Jr., PhD, President, Babson College**

“With this long overdue book, Natalie delves deep into skills and perspectives necessary for success in a disrupted and dynamic world. For anyone with a desire to construct artful, impact-driving solutions people choose to lean in to, *The Creativity Leap* is a must.”

—**Esther Franklin, Executive Vice President, Managing Director,
Global Strategy and Cultural Fluency, Spark Foundry**

“*The Creativity Leap* quickly gets below the buzzwords of innovation to help leaders develop the necessary practices to uncover growth opportunities unleashing new customer and business value.”

—**Saul Kaplan, founder and Chief Catalyst, Business Innovation Factory**

“In *The Creativity Leap*, Natalie Nixon does something brilliant and heretical—she declares that creativity is a teachable phenomenon. Nixon describes creativity as equal parts structure and looseness, focus and ambiguity, rules and no rules, guiding us to an understanding of this most critical ability and daring to suggest that we all have it in us.”

—**Alan Greenberger, Distinguished Teaching Professor,
Drexel University**

“We know that creativity is key to success in business, yet few companies actively encourage it, and few individuals in the corporate world really know how to develop it. *The Creativity Leap* is a guide through the process, citing current examples of it in practice and the benefits it brings to individuals and corporations alike.”

—**Sass Brown, eco-fashion writer**

THE CREATIVITY LEAP

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The Creativity Leap

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*To John, for being my steadfast source of encouragement
through the writing of this book.*

And for your daily supply of wonder—and rigor. ✪

Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working.

—Pablo Picasso

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A LEAP?

If you've ever made a running leap, then you are aware that there are several things at work. First, there is vision. You must have your eyes on a prize, somewhere off in the not too far distance. That prize is close enough to be almost within your reach. Second, you have to leap versus just walk or even run to that desired prize, because there is some barrier or impediment that you need to span. Third, leaps often require a running start. A kinesthetic, active motion is needed for you to gather momentum and propel yourself forward. Fourth, leaping requires that you suspend judgment. After doing all the analysis, gauging, and estimating of what it will take to make that leap, faith and intuition must take over. And fifth, leaping only moves you forward. It is impossible to leap backward. You can fall backward, but you cannot leap backward. Leaping requires exorbitant amounts of energy and trust in the unknown—and it always propels us into new territory.

WHY CREATIVITY LEAPS MATTER

Like a physical leap, a creativity leap is essential for crossing boundaries; it is also an active, dynamic process that honors

intuition. Creativity leaps are needed to bridge the gap between the churn of work and the highly sought-after prize called innovation. This holds true on both the individual and organizational levels. Creativity leaps matter because creativity is the engine for innovation.

How often have you heard people mutter, “Oh, I’m not a creative type”? Perhaps you’ve thought this yourself. This is a falsehood because to be human is to be hardwired to be creative. To be a phenomenal lawyer, manager, doctor, engineer, or plumber requires immense amounts of creativity. Yet our educational system teaches out creativity, and our boardrooms reference it as an afterthought. This is why so many people who are pursuing innovation fail to actually innovate. They expect to generate the new and the novel via systems, structures, and processes that do not honor the uniquely human creative impulse.

Sadly, creativity has been ghettoized and siloed in the arts. This is not fair to artists, and it isn’t beneficial to our society at large. People’s quality of life is at stake. Employees are experiencing a slow death in their office cubicles, while students are made to sit quietly and absorb massive amounts of information passively in classrooms still modeled after schooling in an agricultural economy. Currently, we have a tech crush. We are obsessed with big data, artificial intelligence, and virtual reality while forgetting that humans are at the beginning and end of all those data points. We are forgetting that creativity is the nonnegotiable ingredient in developing the most amazing tech app, healing the sick, and leading dynamic enterprises.

We live in a complex world where there are many shades of gray. Navigating this uncertain and ambiguous world is not easy. But it doesn’t have to be so complicated, either. Let me explain. The important thing to note here is that complication and complexity are not synonyms; they are two distinct concepts.

Complication is change that is difficult to control, yet ultimately that control is within our reach. By definition, complication has clear entry and exit points. You can find your way out of a complicated mess. Take, for example, the internal machinations of a wristwatch, the navigation screen in the cockpit of an airplane, and the electrical wiring infrastructure throughout the United States—these are all examples of complicated systems. If we zoom out to the 30,000-foot level, we can identify an underlying order and logic. Complicated systems have patterns that we can detect, and their conundrums can be resolved with the help of experts. They are predictive.

Complex systems, on the other hand, do not have obvious entry and exit points. Complexity abounds in our lives. Our brains are complex systems full of diverging and converging neural pathways. The American health care system is also extremely complex, confounding patients every day in their attempts to navigate it and get clear answers on what ails them and even how to pay their bills. We are embedded in complex systems today that are not predictive, are hard to manage, and require perspective and regular experimentation.

Complexity requires expansive perspective and multiple vantage points in order to see a full and complete picture. Imagine you are a tourist in Midtown Manhattan, standing on a busy street corner. Consider the sensory overload coming at you: the sounds of car horns honking, music from the jumbo screens, crowds of people walking rapidly past you, the smells from food trucks, and signage on the entry staircase to eight different subway lines can be overwhelming. It is only if you were able to see your location from the window of a nearby skyscraper that a pattern would emerge. And perhaps even more clarity would result if you saw the entire island of Manhattan from the vantage point of a helicopter. Complex systems typically require a level of zooming out beyond discrete amounts of time and scope to see the full picture.

Complex systems are self-organizing, adaptive, and emergent. This is one of the reasons why the more diverse skills you bring into play to solve a complex problem, the more likely you are to solve that problem. While control is a feasible goal in complication, that is not the case in complexity. If control is your goal, then you will be deeply frustrated when facing a complex problem.

The jazz bassist Charles Mingus said, “Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that’s creativity.” One outcome of applying creativity is that it simplifies complicated *and* complex problem-solving by juxtaposing and recombining previously unexplored counterparts, objects, or ideas. In fact, the best way to navigate complexity is through creativity. Since creativity itself is a complex system, the open-ended creative techniques of inquiry, improvisation, and intuition are most effective. That’s why creativity leaps matter; they are the only way to solve the complex problems of our time and to innovate for the future.

CREATIVITY IS A COMPETENCY

Wonder is our capacity to exercise awe, pause, dream, and ask audacious blue-sky-thinking questions. Rigor is our capacity to exercise discipline and deep skills, to pay attention to detail, and to spend time on task for mastery. Both are necessary for creativity to thrive. In fact, I define creativity as the ability to toggle between wonder and rigor in order to solve problems and deliver novel value. And I see inquiry, improvisation, and intuition as the practices that increase those capacities.

Creativity is not the domain of only one group of people in our society. To be human is to be hardwired to be creative. Anyone can be creative, and anyone can become *more* creative. As you will see in this book, truly innovative people in any

field—lawyers, plumbers, accountants, designers—regularly practice honing their creative competency. They apply a combination of the 3 I's—inquiry, improvisation, and intuition—to the ways they think through problems and work with others to continually increase their creative competency. I call this the 3iCreativity™ model (see Figure 1). They know that these are the tactical means to achieve creativity.

1. *Inquiry.* Curiosity results from an information gap. You want to know more about something that you currently don't understand. Inquiry triggers the leap that bridges that gap. It is the practice of honing your ability to frame and reframe questions, to use questions as a way of thinking through and processing. Inquiry is the root of wisdom and the precursor of empathy.
2. *Improvisation.* Improvising is about building on ideas within minimal constraints. There is freedom to experiment, but there are also rules and fluid structures that help you to correct course and embrace mistakes. It is a deeply observant and adaptive process. Examples of great improvisation show up in jazz, rap, comedy, sales pitches, and scientific experimentation.
3. *Intuition.* There lies in all of us a visceral, internal wisdom that allows for unconscious pattern recognition and insights for decision-making. Harriet Tubman, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs are examples of famous innovators and leaders who relied on and valued their intuition, coupling it with their rational intellect to make decisions.

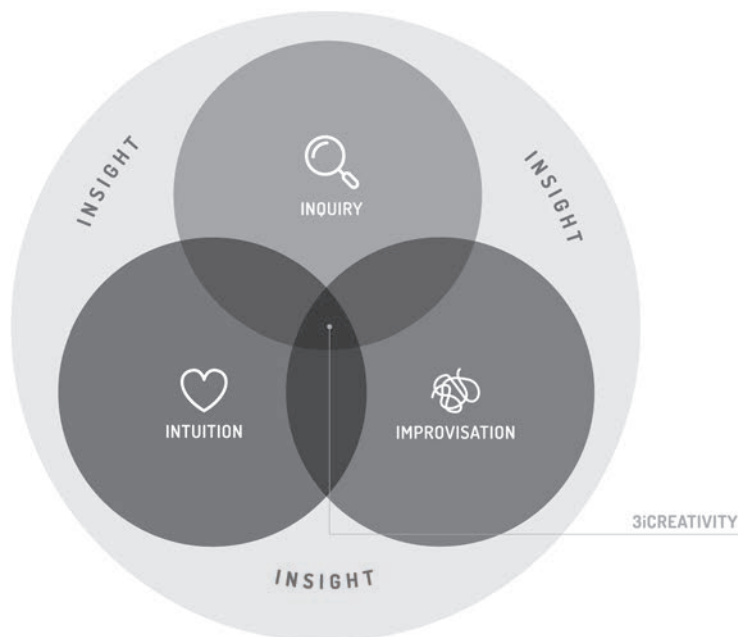


Figure 1. The 3iCreativity model.

These practices require tremendous amounts of trust, courage, and bravery in our times. We must trust that our naive questions will be received well, even if they don't make sense initially. We must have the courage to step out into the unknown, acting in new, untested ways in order to find our footing. We must be brave to follow the nudge in our hearts, that gnawing knowing that may not have any rational basis.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

This book has germinated within me for the past five years. The first seed was planted in 2014 after I gave a TEDx-Philadelphia talk, where I spoke about the ways in which the future of work mimics jazz. This was an outgrowth of my doctoral studies when I applied a jazz heuristic to understand

how the Ritz-Carlton Hotel designed experiences for its guests. That talk launched my consulting practice, Figure 8 Thinking, where I help organizations and leaders identify what business they are actually in and apply creativity for transformative business results. The next seed appeared around 2016 as a result of working with entrepreneurs in the start-up world. I observed their continued references to an intuitive nudge to go in one direction over another. I decided to build on that observation by crafting what I called at the time a mini-ethnography of intuitive leadership. I interviewed and observed the ways in which dancers, DJs, and chefs used intuition and pattern recognition to solve problems.

The third seed was planted when I came across Warren Berger's website, *A More Beautiful Question*. I was infatuated with the simple and compelling model he built around the value of inquiry in innovative companies.

At some point I realized that a practice of these three domains—improvisation, intuition, and inquiry—offers an accessible way for people to tap into their creativity and increase their creativity quotient (CQ). Just as IQ is an indicator of your share of intelligence and EQ connotes your share of empathy, it is also possible to have a share of creativity, or CQ. A creativity quotient is not fixed. It is dynamic and increases as you practice building it and exercising it. Specifically, your share of creativity can increase as you expand your capacity for inquiry, become more willing to improvise, and hone your intuition. Moreover, creativity quotients can be scaled: both individuals and organizations can have a creativity quotient.

For this book, I interviewed 56 people with diverse backgrounds—farming, law, plumbing, architecture, perfumery, medicine, education, and technology, to name a few—between June 2018 and August 2019. I wanted to understand how creativity manifests in their work. I discovered through

my conversations with them that a more dynamic and integrative approach is within reach. That approach is the practice of inquiry, improvisation, and intuition detailed in this book.

The Creativity Leap: Unleash Curiosity, Improvisation, and Intuition at Work is a provocation. Its goal is to help you to increase your CQ and your organization's CQ. It encourages you to integrate both wonder and rigor into your daily life in order to produce new and novel products, services, and experiences that deliver greater value to your community and your organization. To this end, you'll gain three major tools from reading this book: catalyzing inquiry, integrating improvisation, and elevating intuition. When you build these three practices into your work on a daily basis, you will discover true creativity—and its output, innovation—beginning to take place.

WHO SHOULD USE THIS BOOK?

At Figure 8 Thinking, I help organizations and leaders become more dynamic versions of themselves and design better experiences for their customers. Too often, I observe clients seeking to innovate without building in the time and processes that encourage creativity in a sustainable way. This is the case whether we are talking about regulated industries like financial services and health care, consumer product goods, or foundations and nonprofit organizations. Organizations may have the rigor down—the meetings, procedures, and rulebooks—but are woefully lacking in the wonder, their capacity to pause and ponder big, audacious questions. As you will learn in this book, rigor cannot be sustained without wonder; and without both capacities, creativity—and innovation—will suffer.

This book is for leaders who suspect there is a more effective and accessible means to go about the goal of innovating. It offers a more dynamic and integrative way to lead, adapt, and innovate, one that allows us the freedom to access our full

human selves. This book is for organizations that are struggling with silos, legacy systems, and either a too-big-to-fail attitude or a too-little-to-win complex. It will provoke, invigorate, and share tips on how to make the creativity leap that is necessary to continually adapt in an increasingly complex world.

Many books espouse innovation or creativity, but not enough reveal that the backstage machinations of innovation *are* creativity leaps. This book shares the manifestations of creativity in all its unlikely shapes, forms, and places, and will inspire you to make your own creativity leaps.

WHY ME?

I am a hybrid. I have a background in cultural anthropology and fashion. Both equipped me well, each in its own unique way. My work experience spans being an entrepreneurial hat designer in New York City in the early 1990s; teaching middle-school english; living and working as an expat in Sri Lanka and Portugal making bras and panties for Victoria's Secret; teaching for 16 years as a university professor in fashion management and strategic design; and now consulting as a creativity strategist.

My background in fashion has equipped me with a comprehensive way to approach business strategy. People who have never worked in fashion either dismiss it as frivolous or are intimidated by it. The truth is that only 2 percent of the fashion business is glamorous. The other 98 percent requires robust business acumen. Working in global sourcing—that is, figuring out how to get clothing made with the highest quality, shortest lead time, and lowest cost—taught me supply chain management; logistics; consumer insights; and the value of beauty, aesthetics, and desire in selling products and designing experiences.

I use my anthropology degree in my work every single day. It gives me a worm's-eye view of society and the skill to observe