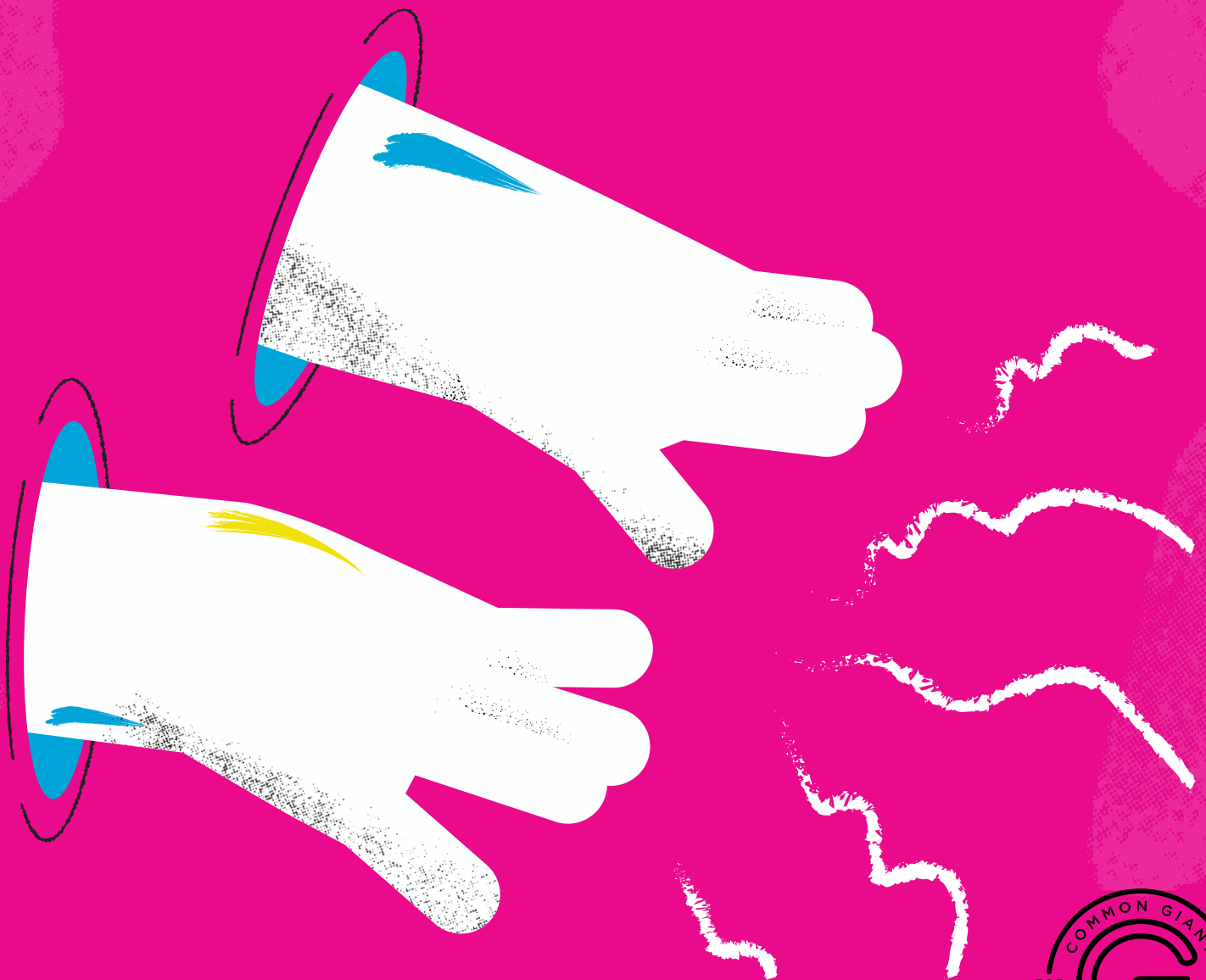


RITUAL & CREATIVE MAGIC

How to Craft a Process that
Conjures Creative Energy



A large, expressive pink brushstroke graphic that resembles a stylized 'R' or a calligraphic flourish, positioned behind the title text.

RITUAL & CREATIVE MAGIC

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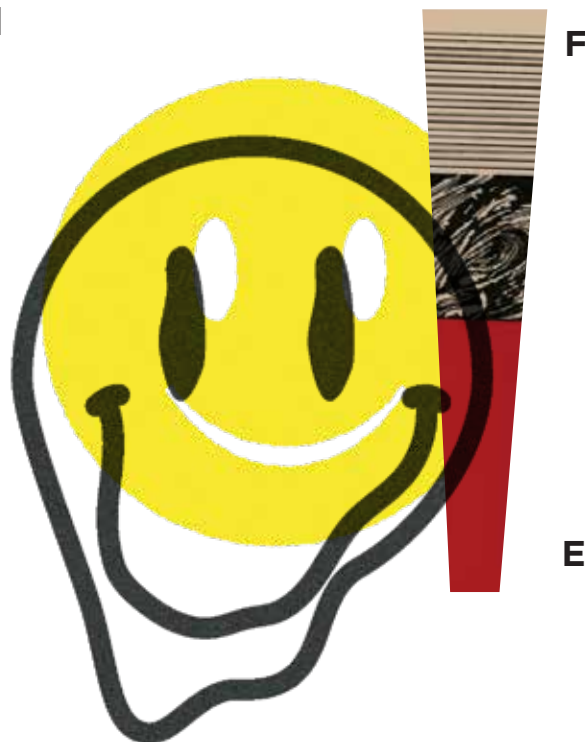
DOES DISCIPLINE *KILL* CREATIVITY?

In a word, *no*.

Most people understand that the relationship between discipline and creativity is more complex than the image of the free-wheeling creative genius suggests. If great writers and artists lived the wild spontaneous lives their myths suggest, we likely wouldn't have any art to talk about.

To put it simply, discipline and ritual are tools that allow us to access the creative mind. The trick is that discipline must come from within the creative person, not determined by an outside source or agent. You can see how and why this is a challenge in the modern workplace. If you are constantly setting rules and parameters, your team's creative energies will be quashed. However, there are several practices you can adopt to nurture creativity and autonomy in your workplace that enhance creativity through discipline.

Before going any further, we need to define creative work. For us at Common Giant, creative work extends beyond what is generally understood as creative—design, copy, video, etc.—and into brand strategy & anything in which a solution needs to be developed before it can be applied.

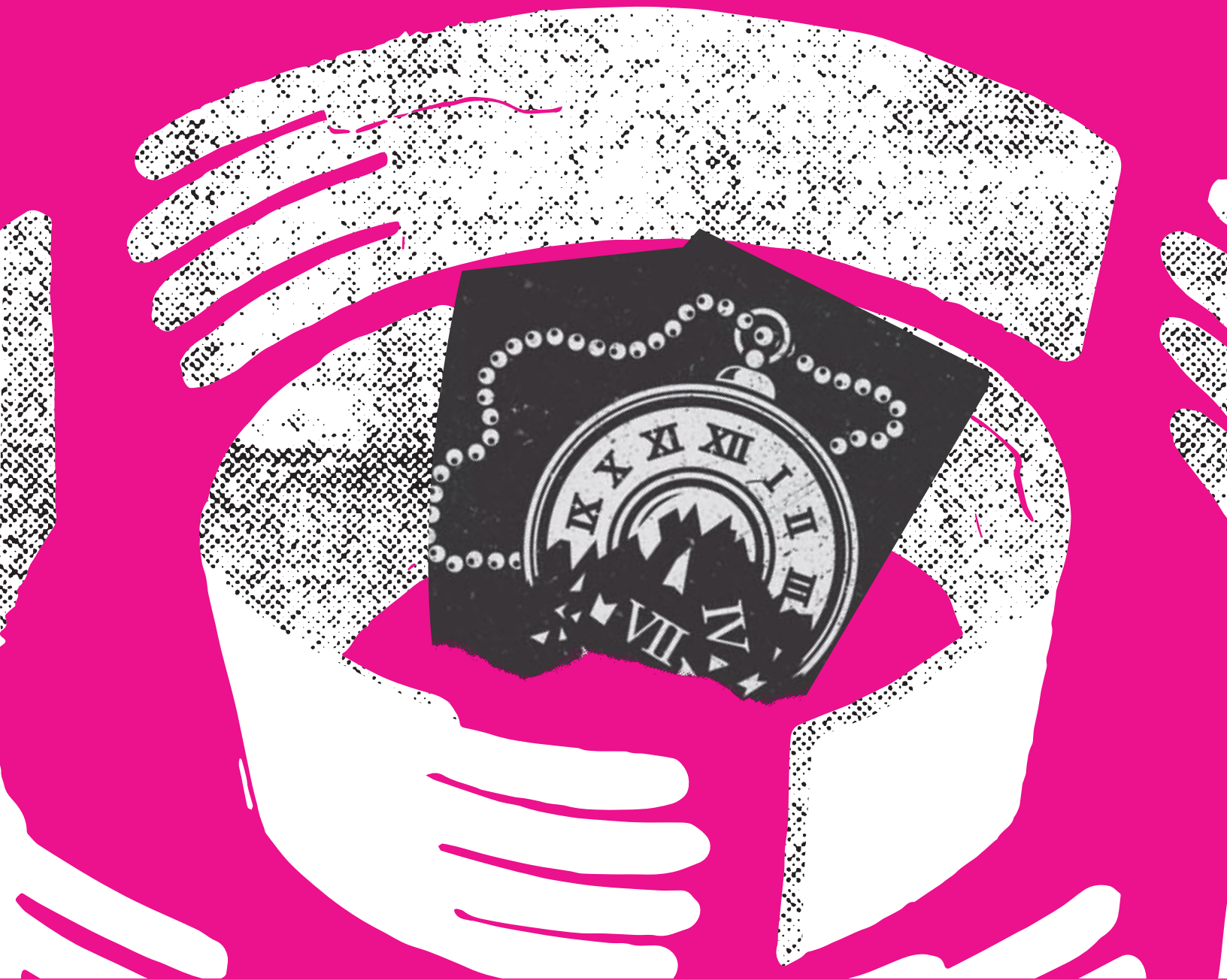


Say, for instance, a pharmacologist develops a new medicine. This is an obvious example of creative work being done. But if a doctor writes a patient a prescription for this drug, it cannot be considered creative work. The solution is quite literally pre-packaged and waiting to be used. However, if the doctor must find alternative methods and therapies to treat the ailment due to the patient's allergies (a constraint), then this could be considered creative work.

At some point, you will find yourself in a situation like the doctor without a specific cure. Very likely, unless you work in a widget factory, you find yourself in that situation fairly often. Sometimes creating the solution seems simple and other times it feels like crossing the Pacific on a kayak. This guide aims to give you practices and habits to invigorate your creative mind, making it easier to conjure the right solution when it is needed.

CHAPTER 1

PROTECT TIME TO CREATE *EVERYDAY*



This is crucial.

If you sit and wait for inspiration to come, you'll do a lot of sitting and waiting and little inspiring. When you have other obligations, protecting time specifically to focus on creativity daily is key.

The amount of time you block out in the day should depend heavily upon your position and responsibilities at your company. For CEOs and company leaders, finding the time to hone this creative muscle can be extremely difficult. This is why it is so imperative to protect the time on your calendar – whether it's in the morning before work, late in the evening, or midday —block out time to sit and create.

Do not use this time to check in with employees or catch up on emails.

In fact, set your phone and computer on the other side of the room.



Let everyone know you will be unavailable. They'll understand. Even if it's just fifteen to twenty minutes to sketch ideas, the regular practice will accrete over time, sharpening your creative mind. If you slot this creative time into your schedule and make it routine, others will adapt as well and protecting the time will become easier. After all, you're the company leader. You set the culture.

Other positions – copywriters, designers, brand strategists, artists – need significant amount of time to generate and produce quality work. Given their responsibilities, creative time is generally easier to protect, however, it is imperative they have time to disconnect from email, daily meetings, and other responsibilities to sit and focus solely on deep work.

Let's talk about the second part of this chapter's title and the importance of being creative *every day*.

A crude but effective analogy is to think of the creative mind as a muscle. If you don't take the time to work this muscle on a regular basis, it becomes lazy and can even atrophy.

It will always be easier to find another, simpler task, to perform, or put off the project until you're "feeling it." But the ugly truth is you probably won't ever feel the inspiration you're waiting for. What you're more likely waiting for is a deadline that forces you to act. So set an internal deadline daily and make it a habit. This will give you a sense of urgency but also control over your situation. This internal deadline should go hand-in-hand with your protected time. If you're only able to protect half an hour a day, it's unfair to set a deadline of writing a full blogpost or thought piece daily. You're simply setting yourself up for disappointment. Maybe just a few hundred words or a quick sketch of three to five ideas is all you can realistically get done. That's great. You're creating and engaging the mind in activity that's generative rather than responsive. Conversely, if you're putting aside two hours every day to focus on deep creative work, set goals that will force you to make the most of that time.

But do you really need to do it every single day?

Yes! ...and no.

Literally every single day will wear you out. But repetition and regularity are key. The human brain is habitual and highly responsive to ritual. The more you protect time to create, the more conditioned the brain will be to produce original work in that time (more on this in the next chapter). Some days creative work will be easy and liberating—you'll feel inspired. Other days, not so much. Simply writing a single sentence or putting together a rough mood board will feel impossible. This is normal. But the act of creating every day slowly increases creative capacity and output. The imagination functions more like a muscle than a battery. You'll need days off to recharge, to rest the muscle so you don't overwork it or injure it. However, the harder you exercise your imagination, the more you'll be capable of producing. Working regularly in manageable increments is the most efficient way to build this skill.

CHAPTER 2

CREATING RITUAL TO...

CREATE



Read up on some of your favorite creative types, whether they are artists, writers, or visionaries in business. We're willing to bet they have a pretty strict routine they work hard to protect. In fact, they likely speak of their routine as if it's sacred. A ritual, even.

When routine is determined by the individual, it actually bolsters creativity and frees the mind, allowing for those mercurial flashes of inspiration to strike. It also curbs the anxiety that arises when you feel you've hit a wall. If you're continually and methodically plugging away at something, you'll be able to sleep better. Maybe you did not find the solution today, but you experimented and now have a better notion of what doesn't work. You're one step closer to finding the solution.

The trick to developing a manageable routine is discovering when you are at your best creatively and working it into your schedule with your other obligations. Is it early in the morning? Late in the evening? Right after lunch? If your job requires you to be creative and you're a morning person, talk to your

boss or team and see if regular meetings can be moved to the afternoon. If you can't get anything done in a room with other co-workers, is there a private space you can use for an hour or two in your office?

Business leaders wanting to cultivate creativity in their workspace should be open to their team-members thoughts and ideas. If possible, equip your office with open spaces for collaborative creation and quiet hideaways for intense deep work when it is warranted.

Nobel-prize winning author Toni Morrison discusses the importance of finding the time and place your mind is at its creative peak and developing a ritual to take full advantage of that time:

“...for me this ritual comprises my preparation to enter a space that I can only call nonsecular . . . Writers all devise ways to approach that place where they expect to make the contact, where they become the conduit, or where they engage in this mysterious process.”

Ask your creative team to find the time of day at which their brain is most open “to be the conduit,” as Morrison says. What is the perfect creative space like? A quiet room? An open well-lit space? Is there music in the background? Is it silent? Encourage them to develop a ritual around this time, something to indicate to their body and mind *now is the time to create*. With practice, this ritual will help them find that inspirational creative space again, almost at will.

For creative directors or product developers who are required to generate ideas and deliverables regularly, developing a ritual is crucial. You’ve likely heard of Steve Jobs’ rigid morning routine which was simply a ritual he developed to access his creative mind. You’ll find countless buzzy headlines about “Why You Should Adopt Steve Jobs Morning Routine,” but the reason so few have found his success is that his ritual was perfectly in tune with his mind and what it needed. (The rest was because...well, Steve Jobs.) The point here is you’ll probably need to find what works for you, make it sacred, and stick to it as often as you can.

Do not discount the importance of repetition either. Author Haruki Murakami claims it is in fact the repetition itself that allows him to delve deeper into his imagination.

“I keep to this routine every day without variation. The repetition itself becomes the important thing; it’s a form of mesmerism. I mesmerize myself to reach a deeper state of mind.”

I mesmerize myself. Take note of the active language. In order to attain inspiration, you need to act.

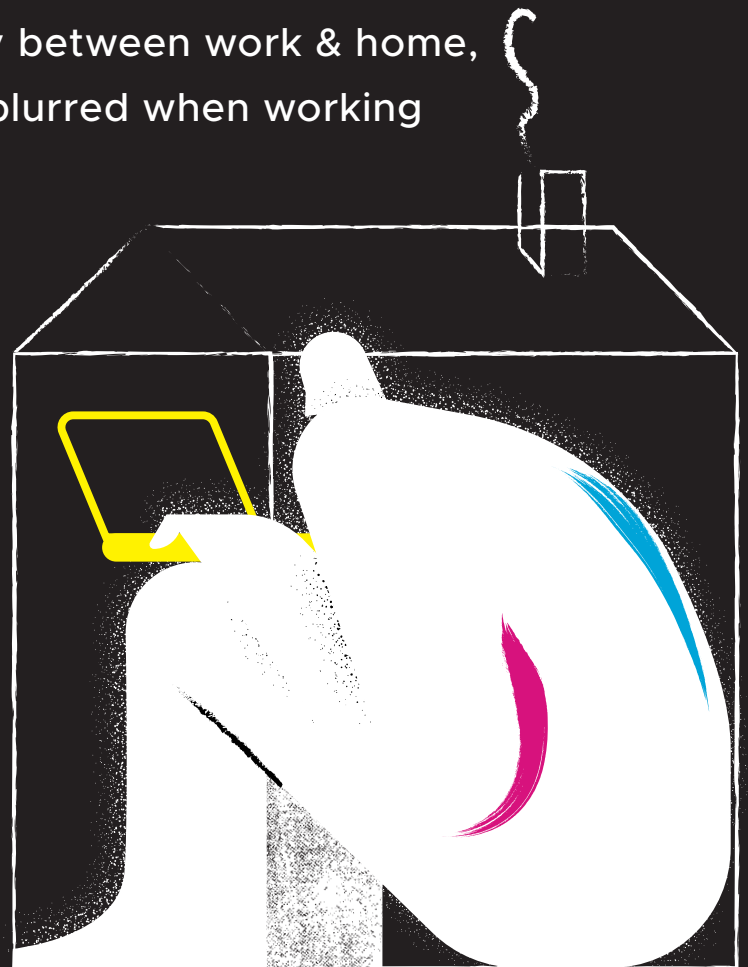
Of course, it’s unrealistic to expect every day to adhere to a defined schedule. Interruptions will happen. Both authors cited above acknowledge this in their interviews. The important thing is to make a ritual as sacred as possible so that on the odd day it is interrupted, a day off will not derail the project.

Aside: Going Remote? Make a ritual to work from home.

As more businesses shift to remote work, either as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or a change in work culture, schedules and work hours are becoming more flexible. While there is a natural hesitancy and fear this could result in lowered productivity, the relationship between work and environment is (wait for it) far more complex than initially assumed.

Business leaders should view remote work as an opportunity to empower employees to craft their own rituals. A ritual act will help define the boundary between work & home, something that is obviously blurred when working from your spare bedroom.

Educate and encourage employees on the mental and psychological power a personalized ritual has. Empower them with any tools or guidance necessary. A less-defined schedule gives them more liberty to craft something that works for them, something they can own. The ritual will help them stay on task and remain productive.



CHAPTER 3

LET YOUR CREATIONS EXIST



Does this sound familiar?

You have a brilliant idea and finally you found the time to execute it. After hours of fulfilling but exhaustive work, you're finished, and it turns out the idea sucks. Not only does it suck – it's awful. Embarrassing. What were you even thinking in the first place?

We'd argue this phenomenon is the real reason producing creative work in any medium is difficult. To quote Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The mind in creation is as a fading coal." Shelley's assertion is that an idea is hottest at the point of conception. By the time you've acted on it and created something, your idea has begun to fade, meaning whatever you produce is going to be a dull afterimage of what your consciousness envisioned. It's just the way the brain works. Blame the human condition. Shelley did. While talent certainly comes into play here – certain minds conceive of ideas so brilliant their "faded coal" looks like others' most inspired idea – it's still something everyone has to deal with.

The difference, at least the one you have control over, is you can learn to let your creation exist and not squelch it before it develops. You don't have to put it out into the world just yet. It will need time to grow. Maybe a lot of time. But don't trash it because it failed to live up to expectations.

This is where discipline comes into play. Every creative person suffers from "analysis paralysis." The type of critical thinking skills required to produce something original go hand-in-hand with deep analytical skills. Get comfortable with the notion that 95% of what you produce will be total crap that requires time to hone, experiment, and improve. (Good thing you've implemented a solid routine to work every day to improve your work.) If you expect your idea to shine in the world as brilliantly as it did in your mind, you're going to be sorely disappointed. Every. Single. Time.

We mentioned degree of talent earlier. It is important you honestly and objectively assess your own. To the best of your ability, remove your sense of judgement and rate yourself.

**Are your expectations *far too grand* for
your natural talent?**

If so, you're setting yourself up for failure. You likely don't need a ground-breaking solution that shifts the paradigm. Reaching to do so will end in a failed objective, disappointment, and a lot of unnecessary heartache. Learn to accept your talent level and work within that.

On the other hand, don't rake yourself over the coals for occasional shoddy work. It happens. Trust your talents. You wouldn't have gotten where you are if you had none.

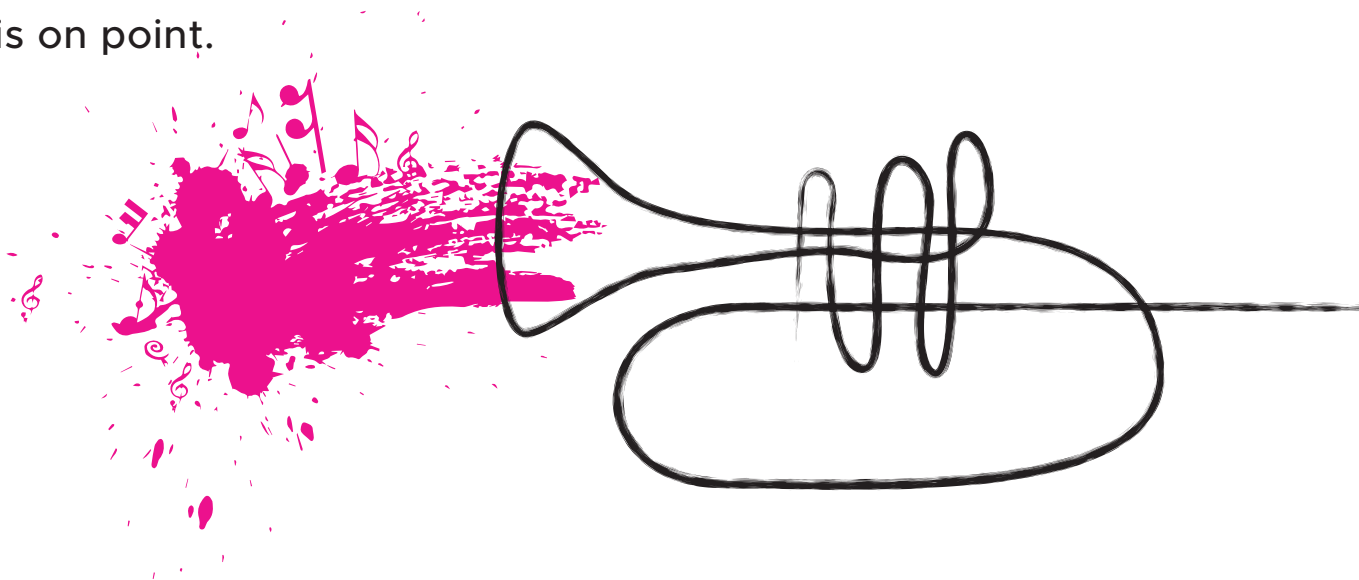
The bottom line: let your bad ideas exist. This way you can observe them, learn from them, and improve them. The last thing you want is to end up with countless aborted attempts at brilliance. This is so important in the workplace where it can seem like all ideas are bad except that perfect solution that's just out of reach. The truth is that good and bad ideas often look the same until they're put into practice. In order to reach the final product, whether it's a sales pitch, design deliverable, or even a new internal process, you'll need to cycle through some ideas.

Aside: Need out-of-the-box inspiration?

For some excellent examples of art that can help inspire you and make you comfortable letting your bad ideas breathe, explore the short stories of Haruki Murakami and the music of Daniel Johnston. These two artists are well-loved, and each has attained “cult like” status among fans. A key reason for this, and the secret to their creativity, is the way they embraced their stranger ideas. Rarely is their work weird for the sake of being weird, it’s an expression of something deeply felt.

Haruki Murakami’s writing style is plain and accessible, but his vision is singular, disquieting, and above all, extremely bizarre. The surreal and sometimes perverse nature of his work is like experiencing someone’s imagination unfettered and unfiltered. “Dreamlike” is the word thrown around most often when discussing his work, and it’s a fitting one due to the author’s professed interest in Jungian psychology. Sometimes his work is uncomfortable, sometimes confusing, but it is always imaginative and mentally liberating.

Daniel Johnston's music is poorly produced, often sung out of key, yet intensely vulnerable, sincere, and creative. He had a vision he allowed to exist, and his imagination made a genuine impact on the music world. Despite the subpar production quality, he is considered one of the most influential and original songwriters of his generation, in addition to being an accomplished visual artist. Musicians and countless songwriters, including Kurt Cobain, Jeff Tweedy of Wilco, and Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips, cite him as a major influence. In fact, his music was recently featured in an Apple advertisement to convey a message about unleashing creativity. While we have some reservations about commercializing the work of someone who openly battled mental illness and was an icon of outsider culture, the messaging about creativity is on point.



CHAPTER 4

OUTPUT IS CRUCIAL BUT...

INPUT

COMES FIRST



Part of being a creative person and actively honing your creative skills is practicing your ability to be a sponge. Don't mistake this as a passive activity either, you have a very active role in what you put into your mind and how much you get out of it. While artists and creatives of every ilk are judged on output, input is every bit as crucial. According to Stephen King, "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot." Notice he placed reading before writing.

No matter what field you are in, engaging and learning from other works is the single most important thing you can do other than actually practicing your technique. This is how you get new ideas, learn proven methods, and stay ahead of trends. However, engaging with creative work as a creative is different than engaging with it as a fan or enthusiast. Rather than evaluating something on whether or not you enjoyed it, or it made you feel good, you're looking to learn from it.

A line of questioning to take when engaging with other work should go something like this:

- What was the mission behind the creator's work? Was it to solve a tangible problem, in the case of business strategy, or was it to inspire or confront some aspect of the human condition, like in works of fine art?
- How did the creator engage with this issue? What strategies did they use and how successful were they?
- How does their approach differ from others in the same field?
- Why might they have approached the problem this way?
- How might I have engaged this problem and what from their process or method can I incorporate into my own?

In business, particularly any creative business, a similar line of questioning should be taken with your competitors and peers. As part of our brand building exercise at Common Giant, we run a competitor analysis. This allows us to get a sense of our clients' industries, and it gives the client the opportunity to study their peers as practitioners, not rivals or heroes. Many of the above questions –

What is their mission? What problem are they confronting? How successfully do they solve it? How are they similar or different from others etc.? – apply here as well.

Identifying and analyzing the processes and products of others with this frame of mind will not only teach you to appreciate things you'd otherwise dismiss or avoid, but will also slowly begin to expand your consciousness, increasing your imaginative capacity.

CHAPTER 5

REMAIN OPEN

BUT OBSERVANT



Now let's talk about how to actively practice keeping the mind alert and observant. A common tangible practice to do this is taking notes throughout the day. Did you see something on your drive to work that was remarkable in some way, big or small? Write it down. Did you hear something on the radio that struck you as fascinating or insightful? Jot it down. Whatever you do, do not use your phone. You'll be far too tempted to check into work or skim social media or your favorite app. There is a time and place for this type of behavior, but when you are actively trying to be open and observant, your phone is a hindrance.



For many people, meaningful input activities require more activity. Nature spurs an intense awareness of physical and internal environments, making it an incredibly effective way to open the mind. Reserve some time in your day to walk and watch the birds. Yes, we're serious. Take note of the wind moving through the trees. It may sound New-Age-y or granola-crunchy, but in fact there's considerable scientific evidence supporting the importance of these kinds of activities to creative thinking.

Hyper focus on things we take for granted – the shape of the trees outside our office, the sun shining on the cars in the parking lot, the smell of the breeze – can become a form of consciousness expansion when practiced with intent. Teach your brain to become aware of the world around you and you will deepen your mind, making it easier to reach into that creative space when it is necessary.

Try your best not to analyze what you are observing. Do not sit and think how you can apply your observations to your creative work. Remember, you're

working on input here. There's no pressure to do anything with these observations. When we're working all the time it's easy to think only about how information applies to our professional careers, but it's precisely this type of thinking that clouds judgement and narrows our perception. Simply observe and keep the mind open to receiving the experience. If your focus is solely on input, your brain will better process and internalize information, sharpening your creative axe for when it is time to work.

In essence, you're building your reservoir of intuition. It's a long-term investment that is not going to pay off right away, but through regular practice, you will begin to see your creative abilities increase considerably over time.

REFLECT & BE PATIENT



Finally, after all this talk of the active mind, the importance of reflection cannot be overlooked. To get the most out of your creative abilities, you need to let your mind wander. Here it is important to not actively control the mind but let your subconscious take the lead. This is where the stereotype of the head-in-the-clouds, dreamy creative type comes from, but the practice is important for freeing the mind.

Letting the mind go where it needs, and relinquishing control to the subconscious, can often lead to simple, overlooked answers, things the conscious mind is too busy or overwhelmed to process. It also allows for discoveries and epiphanies to occur. This is the reason people claim to do their best thinking in the bathroom; in these moments, they've removed themselves from the outside world, and likely the problem at hand, and their body is on autopilot. Their subconscious is then free to roam and "speak" to their conscious mind.

Maybe your best time for reflective thinking is during your morning shower, or while jogging or driving, or while you're trying to fall asleep. Experiment and find

what works for you. Better yet, take note next time you find your mind wandering naturally. Perhaps it's not a specific time idea, but under certain circumstances such as waiting in line for coffee or taking the stairs to your apartment. One of the most important aspects of this type of thinking is to let it occur naturally, without conscious intent. Like a timid animal, this portion of your mind will flee and hide if you acknowledge it.

Keep in mind, these practices take time and considerable effort to work into your schedule. Creativity in some form is needed in nearly all industries (recall our analogy of the doctor searching for a cure), however, certain industries foster environments that allow creatives to flourish, such as marketing, performance art, filmmaking, writing, technology development etc., while others may not. If you find yourself in the latter category, focus on introducing just one practice at a time until it becomes habit. Then introduce another. Many of them are complementary and you will find they support one another. Before long, your mind will begin to internalize these exercises, and accessing your

creative energy will begin to feel more natural and less intimidating.

We can't stress enough that honing the creative mind is a practice and not something you can perfect. If you are the kind of person who demands tangible evidence of consistent improvement, you will find these practices frustrating and become discouraged. We argue that makes them all the more important for you and that it is this frustration and impatience that is holding you back. Learning to adapt, accept limitations, and work diligently with patience isn't a part of the game—it is the game.