The “creative-schizotype”: Help or hindrance to team-level innovation?

By Giles St. John Burch
There is a growing interest in dysfunctional dispositions at work in the management literature; in particular relating to narcissistic leaders and corporate psychopaths. This article defines a different dysfunctional disposition in the workplace, the creative-schizotype: creative people who are eccentric, idiosyncratic and difficult to work with. The importance of team-working climate for innovation is highlighted and the impact that creative-schizotypes may have on the team’s climate considered. Subsequently, a paradox is raised. On the one hand, should organisations hire creative-schizotypes into the team, who, while coming up with novel ideas, may hinder the innovative processes of the team through the more anti-social elements of their behaviour? Or, on the other hand, hire those into the team who may be more prosocial and facilitate a climate essential for team innovation, although less original in their generation of ideas? Practical implications for managers are discussed.

The last two decades have been witness to radical changes in the ways of working as organisations compete to survive in the global marketplace. Currently, work organisations are characterised by decentralisation, globalisation and differentiation, and are designed around

Fostering organisational innovation presents a paradox: the anti-social behaviour of the individuals who generate ideas can often be detrimental to the positive team climate that is needed to nurture and implement those ideas.
a distribution model; facilitated by information technology and team-based leadership. In particular there is growing emphasis on innovation as a source of competitive advantage. This is especially true in New Zealand, where in March 2004, Jim Anderton, the then Minister for Economic, Regional and Industry Development, said that “New Zealand is a small country that cannot grow or produce enough commodities to raise the living standards of all New Zealanders. What other countries can achieve economically by their scale, concentration and proximity to markets, New Zealand needs to achieve using innovation and creativity.” A Government survey on innovation in New Zealand in 2003 found that 44% of New Zealand businesses engaged in “innovation activity” in the previous three years, and that businesses spent $1.8 billion on innovation activities in the previous financial year. Thus it is clear that innovation is important not only for New Zealand organisations, but for New Zealand as a whole if it is to survive in the global arena.

So how can we facilitate innovation in New Zealand organisations? One approach is through the effective management of individual-level, or person-centred, creativity. It is often suggested that one way in which innovation can be facilitated is through hiring creative people. However, a fundamental question is raised here as to whether we really know what this means, i.e. what is a “creative person”, what are their associated behaviours and characteristics, and how may this impact the performance of the team? This is particularly important given the growing emphasis on project and team-working, away from individual job performance alone, and the growing research literature describing the importance of interpersonal dynamics in the team for team-level innovation. We all have anecdotes about creative people we know and their eccentric and idiosyncratic behaviour, people with whom it may be difficult to work with in the team context, particularly if these behaviours may be threatening or inhibiting to other team members. However, it is necessary to move beyond anecdote and look at the psychological research that has been conducted if we are to really understand the behavioural characteristics associated with creative people and how these may impact interpersonal and team dynamics.

What is creativity and how does it relate to personality?
Creativity is defined as the production of original and novel work, which is both useful and appropriate for its context. It is important at this point to consider the difference between creativity and innovation. With the genesis of most innovations being creative ideation, the terms creativity and innovation become inextricably linked. However, it has been suggested that creativity is the underlying personality trait that contributes to the (individual) creative process, which results in the creative outcome, and if that outcome is adopted within its context, then that is the innovation. The same is true in organisations, where it has been stated that for organisational innovation there must also be an application component. Thus, creativity is concerned with the generation of ideas, while team and organisational innovation is concerned with both the generation of ideas and the implementation of these ideas. Therefore, creative people are an essential element of the innovation process, with the generation of individual ideas being the starting point for innovation in the team and organisation. However, what determines individual creativity? While studies of individual creativity historically focused on intelligence, more recently researchers have focused their attention on personality traits, believing this to be more likely to explain the variance between people. In particular, much research has been carried out looking at the relationship between creativity and general personality against the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality. The FFM suggests that personality comprises of five different factors: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness, descriptions of which are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neuroticism (N)</th>
<th>characterised by:</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>anxiety; irritability; sadness; self-consciousness;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>impulsiveness and an inability to cope with stressful</td>
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<td>situations.</td>
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<td>Extraversion (E)</td>
<td>characterised by:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>warmth; sociability; assertiveness; energy; excitement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and optimism.</td>
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<td>Openness (O)</td>
<td>characterised by:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>a vivid imagination; an appreciation of art and beauty;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>mood swings; wanting to try out new activities;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>intellectual curiosity and an openness to political,</td>
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<td></td>
<td>social and religious beliefs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agreeableness (A)</td>
<td>characterised by:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a belief that others are well intentioned; frankness</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and sincerity; a willingness to help others; a</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>preparedness to forgive and forget; modesty and</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tender-mindedness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness (C)</td>
<td>characterised by:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a sense of capability; good organisation; self-</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>government by conscience; a drive to achieve; self-</td>
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<td></td>
<td>discipline and deliberation.</td>
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Of these factors, psychological research has generally found Openness and Neuroticism to be positively related to creativity, while Agreeableness has been shown to be negatively related to creativity. This suggests that creative people are likely to be less agreeable than non-creative people; not a good indicator for working effectively with other people, particularly in the team-working context. Creative people are also more likely to be open to experience with a particularly active imagination and intellectual curiosity, and be more neurotic in character. This high level of neuroticism is particularly interesting to note (neuroticism has been described as the “undiscriminating predictor par excellence of all psychopathology”), given that it has long been suggested that creativity may be related to “madness” or mental illness. The contenders for this relationship have tended to be manic-depressive illness and schizophrenia. However, more recent research in the clinical literature suggests that the true relationship is actually between creativity and what is known as schizotypal personality. Schizotypal personality, or schizotypy, is described as a dimension of “normal” personality that lies on a continuum between “normality” and personality disorder/schizophrenia, and is characterised by increasingly strange, idiosyncratic and bizarre behaviours. Recent research has identified four factors of schizotypal personality, definitions of which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Components of schizotypal personality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Characterised by:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unusual Experiences</td>
<td>Unusual perceptual experiences; heightened awareness of one's visual world; hypersensitivity to smells and sounds; “pseudo-hallucinations”; magical beliefs and unusual/strange ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive Non-conformity</td>
<td>Impulsiveness; antisocial behaviour; tough-minded behaviour; and thoughts of harming oneself and other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Disorganisation</td>
<td>Difficulty in concentration and decision-making; thought blocking; and social anxiety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introverted Anhedonia</td>
<td>Social withdrawal; flattened affect; and a lack of interest in life or living.</td>
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There is growing evidence that creativity is most related to two of these elements of schizotypy: (1) Unusual Experiences, and (2) Impulsive Non-conformity. This suggests that the generation of creative ideas is a product of not only having unique ideas but also a preparedness to express these ideas, even if they are shocking or taboo. Indeed, the propensity to endorse socially undesirable responses appears to be key in the generation and expression of individual creative outputs. For example, recent research has found that creative cohorts score higher on personality measures of Unusual Experiences and Impulsive Non-conformity, highlighting the two possible processes in the presentation of creative ideas: (1) having the original or unusual idea, and (2) the preparedness to present the idea, however outrageous. Likewise, in the more general population, a consistent relationship has been shown between creativity and schizotypy, where those who score highly on measures of creativity also score highly on measures of schizotypal personality. Similar findings have also been demonstrated in the organisational psychology literature, where it has been found that within a range of occupations, a person’s potential for innovation is related to more impulsive and anti-social personality, as well as arrogant (narcissistic), manipulative (antisocial), dramatic (histrionic) and eccentric (schizotypal) behaviours, as measured by the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), a questionnaire widely employed by businesses to measure common dysfunctional dispositions. Thus, there does appear to be a consistent relationship between creativity and more dysfunctional behaviours or dispositions. It is suggested that while the creative person has originality and insight, which facilitates innovation and the person’s rise in the organisation, their eccentricity sets them apart from their peers and makes them difficult to work with.

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Typical characteristics demonstrated by these schizotypal and creative people, who we will refer to as creative-schizotypes, may include odd beliefs, magical thinking, strange behaviours – factors that are likely to facilitate the generation of original ideas. However, they are also likely to demonstrate impulsive, hostile, irresponsible behaviours, along with a disregard for others’ safety. These more anti-social behaviours may present a problem for those working with creative-schizotypes, particularly in the team context. Therefore, these findings should raise concern for human resource and line managers who seek to improve organisational innovation through hiring creative people into the team. It also raises a fundamental question of whether organisations really want creative people in the team? This question has been explicitly raised by organisational psychologist, Fiona Patterson, who questions whether organisations are ready yet to bring people with innovation potential into the organisation, who are likely to “challenge the status quo, question authority and are less conforming.”

Given these findings, suggesting that creative people may be more eccentric and asocial (acting independently of others) or indeed, anti-social (acting against others), does leave us wondering whether the possible negative impact of these persons in the team may actually hinder team-level innovation. A multilevel model of group performance on
tasks requiring creativity has recently been proposed, which describes individual personality as predicting individual creative behaviours, which subsequently determine individual creativity (the creative person). The model goes on to suggest that it is the group-level processes, e.g. group motivation, organisation, coordination, that subsequently determine the creative outcomes of the group. Another key team-level factor influencing innovation is team climate, including a climate of psychological safety. This is highlighted by organisational psychologists Neil Anderson and Giles Burch, who state that:

“If the team has a “safe” climate, in which individuals feel they can make contributions, and indeed take risks (e.g. expressing ideas that may be unusual), then more ideas will be presented to the group... Some team members – including creative thinkers – are only willing to try out new ideas, and risk appearing foolish, if they feel safe from ridicule or attack.”

Clearly therefore, an important and essential element of any team is a climate of psychological safety. Interestingly, research has shown that both Agreeableness and Conscientiousness are positively related with a preference to working in a group characterised by psychological safety. Agreeableness and Conscientiousness have also both been found to negatively relate to Impulsive Non-conformity. These findings suggest that for more asocial individuals, a climate of psychological safety is not so important, as they will experience less apprehension about expressing their ideas. However, what is of concern is whether the presence of more anti-social personalities in the team may inhibit other people from coming up with creative ideas, and interfere with the social processes and dynamics that facilitate innovation – these team members are likely to demonstrate more impulsive, hostile and even aggressive behaviour – hardly endorsing a climate of psychological safety.

It has been suggested that while the presence of creative team members predicts the radicalness of creative ideas introduced, the best predictors of actual innovation in management teams are the group’s processes, where participation and support are deemed essential for the facilitation of innovation. It is to the literature on team climate for innovation that we will now turn.

**West’s four-factor theory of climate for work group innovation**

There is much written on individual creativity and organisational innovation, but historically less research has been conducted at the team-level. More recently this imbalance has been addressed, particularly as the importance of team-working has become increasingly established out of the need for organisational change and innovation. In the late 1990’s, an extensive literature review was carried out by organisational psychologists in the U.K., examining in considerable detail organisational climate, team effectiveness and innovation at work. From this research, four factors were identified as being central in determining effective team functioning and propensity to innovation: (1) Participative Safety; (2) Support for Innovation; (3) Team Vision; and (4) Task Orientation; each briefly described below.

**Participative safety**

Participative Safety refers to the extent to which the climate of the team is psychologically safe and subsequently through this “safeness” encourages participation from each member of the team. When a climate of psychological safety is present within the group, team members will feel that they are free not only to contribute, but also to take risks, and thereby present more ideas to the team.

**Support for innovation**

Support for Innovation is concerned with the support provided by the team for innovative ideas. Two types of support have been identified: articulated and enacted. Articulated support is concerned with the expressed support, both verbally and written, to new ideas, while enacted support refers to the practical support given to new ideas in terms of the resources made available for ideas to be carried forward.

**Team vision**

Vision is concerned with the extent to which the team has clearly defined objectives. When the team has a vision, objectives can be set and the effectiveness of these objectives determined. It has been suggested that when individuals work as part of a team, they do so because they believe that by working with other people, they will be more successful in achieving their desired outcome. Thus, if the team is to be effective, it will need to be driven forward by either an implicit or explicit shared vision, which has been developed from within the group, is valued by the group and deemed to be attainable and realistic.

**Task orientation**

Task Orientation is concerned with the extent to which the team strives for excellence in what it is doing. When the team is committed to achieving its goals to the highest possible standards, it is likely to constantly review and appraise the ways in which it is working, through constructively critical discourse. This feedback loop will result in improvements and modifications in the ways in which the team works, resulting in a high standard of innovation produced by the group.

It is stated that a high positive presence of these team climates is essential if the team is to function effectively and generate innovation. Specifically, it is suggested that of these four climates, Participative Safety and Support for Innovation will primarily determine the quantity of innovation, while Vision and Task Orientation will primarily determine the
Thus, it is the quantity and quality of innovation that determine the overall team effectiveness and innovativeness, the principal relationships of which are shown in Figure 1.

Following the proposal of this four-factor theory, a measure of team climate was developed, the Team Climate Inventory (TCI). The TCI is a team-level questionnaire, which, when completed by each member of a team, provides a profile of that team across each of the four team climate scales. This profile is then used to direct team-level interventions to facilitate a more constructive team climate and enhance team effectiveness and innovativeness. For example, when low scale scores are present across Participative Safety, interventions such as interpersonal process review, communication audit and/or review of decision-making procedures are recommended in order to address these team development needs. Such interventions employing the “team climate” model have been used to great success across a range of organisations to develop and facilitate team-level innovation.

Having identified the essential dynamics necessary for team-level innovation, and a valid method for measuring these team climates, the next logical step was to develop an individual-level version of the TCI, which could be used to identify an individual’s preferred team-working climate, i.e. the climate of the team that they would feel most comfortable to work in. In explicit recognition of this need for a tool to assess person-team fit, a psychometrically valid and reliable questionnaire, the Team Selection Inventory (TSI), was developed. It has been suggested that the TSI provides an innovative tool for selecting people into the team in order to enhance team effectiveness and innovativeness. This is achieved by matching a person’s individual preferences scores against the overall team’s climate to identify the congruence between the individual and the team to enhance effectiveness and innovativeness in the team. Table 3 shows the descriptions of an individual’s preferred team-working climate.
climate as referenced by their scores on the TSI.

What is of particular interest to the current discussion is that research on the TSI has found that those who express a preference to work in a team characterised by a climate of Participative Safety are those who are more agreeable, i.e., have a more positive interpersonal style, a genuine concern for others, are more generous in nature, and also warmer in personality. At this juncture, it becomes apparent that this is in contrast to the research on creative personalities, who are less agreeable and more anti-social. Thus, here is a paradox: when seeking to develop creativity and innovation within the team, do organisations want team members who, while being more likely to express original ideas, will probably be more anti-social and thus likely to inhibit the team-level processes necessary for innovation? Or, do organisations want team members who may be more prosocial, and while more likely to enhance a climate that will facilitate innovation in the team, may come up with less unique ideas?

Clearly we do not want to exclude creative-schizotypes completely from the organisation; after all, they do generate some very useful and creative ideas, that important initial step in team-level innovation. However, what we do need to ensure is that our creative-schizotypes do not inhibit the less extraverted, assertive, or confident members of the team in coming up with original ideas, or disrupt the subsequent processes associated with innovation implementation. So, how can managers achieve this? This article will now consider how organisations and teams should manage their creative-schizotypes.

Practical implications

Having considered the literature that highlights our paradox, it is now necessary to consider what this means in practical terms.

The starting point is for management to be fully aware of the implications of hiring creative people into the organisation, recognising that they may have more asocial/anti-social personalities. While these people may work effectively when the role involves less interaction with other people, their style may be a hindrance to team-level innovation in particular by consciously or unconsciously sabotaging the processes necessary to follow ideas through to innovation. It would not be right, however, to advocate a complete embargo on bringing creative people into the organisation – not all creative people are necessarily schizotypes, and even when they are they will certainly have some useful and creative ideas. The key point here is that management should be trying to reduce the negative impact of schizotypal characteristics within the team, particularly those centred on Impulsive Non-conformity. There are a number of ways in which this can be achieved.

Firstly, senior management should identify the creative-schizotypes in the organisation and work with them through psychological coaching or counselling to develop a more constructive and appropriate style of interpersonal interaction. In particular, interventions should be directed towards helping these people fit in with a team climate characterised by Participative Safety and Support for Innovation. Psychologists and managers should work constructively with creative-schizotypes, recognising the adaptive value of schizotypy relating to creativity, and the neutrality of schizotypy in relation to psychopathology – schizotypy is not in itself a mental disorder.

It is also important for senior management to consider carefully whether, as creative-schizotypes rise up the organisation, they should take leadership positions. Certainly behaviours demonstrated by creative-schizotypes are not a good indicator of leadership responsibility; note for example, the growing literature on the importance of emotional intelligence (EI), e.g. empathy and self-awareness, and in particular, the literature on EI and effective leadership. We also need to take account of the writings on the importance of the authentizotic (or healthy) organisation in the 21st Century, characterised in part by “healthy” individuals, too at this stage. Nonetheless, creative-schizotypes are often identified as possible leaders given their ability to identify creative solutions to business issues and to come up with “out-of-the-box” ideas. This is often coupled with an entrepreneurial focus. In my own clinic, I have recently been working with a highly creative and intelligent senior manager in the R & D division of a global company, who was identified as a potential global leader of the organisation. This individual demonstrated a high level of competence in the areas of strategic vision and understanding the market, which is...
what attracted the attention of the talent development team. However, there was also an over-riding concern about this person's strange and idiosyncratic behaviours which impacted his ability to manage people effectively and build others' and the team's capabilities. Personality assessment revealed an interesting profile. Against the "Big Five" this client scored high on the Openness and Neuroticism factors, and low on the Agreeableness and Conscientiousness factors. On the Hogan Development Survey, his profile revealed particularly high scores on the Eccentric scale (reflecting schizotypal traits, in line with the earlier description of Unusual Experiences) and Manipulative scale (reflecting anti-social traits, in line with the earlier description of Impulsive Nonconformity). This was a clear profile of a creative-schizotype, which my client readily identified with, describing himself as "the mad professor" in the business. However, he also recognised the need to adapt some of his behaviours and to "grow-up", particularly if he were to make a significant contribution to the leadership of the business, which he believed he could and wanted to do. Through individual psychological coaching we were able to work together to develop his capability on these development needs. The effectiveness of this intervention was facilitated by my client's insight and above-average-intelligence. Interestingly, it has been suggested that intelligence might act as a moderator variable between psychosis and (constructive) creativity. It is very important to note at this point that coaching interventions can prove futile unless the individual is insightful and motivated, recognising the need to change, and holds a commitment to pursuing such development.

A second option when managing creative-schizotypes, particularly those more resistant to (or lacking insight of the need for) change and development, is to retain them but encourage them to develop their ideas in nominal brainstorming groups. In nominal brainstorming groups, individuals brainstorm alone away from others and then all the individual ideas are brought together after brainstorming has been completed. Research has found that individuals asked to generate as many ideas as possible on tasks requiring ideational proficiency (brainstorming), tend to come up with more ideas than do real groups. This can be a particularly useful approach when individual ideas are valued above all else. While creative-schizotypes are less likely to be effective in a leadership position, managed in the way described above, they can certainly remain functional and effective in an R & D role, for example.

While the two interventions described above focus on containing the creative-schizotype, either through coaching them to manage their own behaviour, or by literally containing the context in which they work, the third intervention proposed here is concerned with carefully identifying the people that are brought into the team. When selecting people into the team, not only should their personalities be analysed, but also their preferred team-working climate. Coupled with an understanding of someone's personality, knowledge of a person's preferred team-working climate can provide a rich source of information regarding their likelihood to fit in with a team climate that will facilitate the team's effectiveness and innovativeness. We should not rely on personality alone; use of tools like the TSI can be particularly useful in providing information which facilitates selection decisions beyond that of person-job fit, i.e. person-team fit. While the TSI is a measure of a person's preferred team-working climate, which is related somewhat with certain personality factors, it is not a measure of individual personality. Personality is subtle, complex and multi-dimensional, and while it may predispose one to behave in particular ways, behaviour is also dependent on other contextual or situational factors. Thus, it is useful for the organisation to bring into the team more creative individuals who also display a preference for working in a team characterised by Participative Safety, Support for Innovation, Task Orientation and Vision; thereby being able to constructively tap their creative qualities and ensure diversity within the team.

In adopting this approach to managing the organisation's creative people, managers can maximise individual-level creativity, ensuring that it is a help rather than a hindrance to team-level, and ultimately, organisational-level innovation.

References

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