

CREATIVITY AND CONTEXT

WHERE IDEAS
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Many creative ideas are influenced by the places we live or work in. As IESE prepares for the inauguration of its new building in New York City, it's worth recalling that immersing yourself in a new culture is one of the best ways to become more innovative, not just for people, but also for organizations, including, as luck would have it, business schools.

INNOVATION AND CHANGE • LEADERSHIP AND
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If there is one thing that characterizes our pursuit of innovation, it is the search for creative geniuses and their brilliant ideas. Most researchers agree that innovation is the key to long-term survival and success – so where do we find those new ideas? It is a puzzle we must solve, and the future of our companies seems to hang in the balance. Often we put our money on individuals. Maybe we're wrong.

To understand the future of creativity, it is illuminating to take a look at its past. When the denizens of Caesar's Rome spoke of a "genius," they were not referring to creative individuals as such. Rather, the Romans believed that ideas came to us from a guiding spirit, an external being who whispered wise thoughts into our mortal ears, similar to the Greek concept of a muse. In their time, people like Archimedes were not thought of as geniuses; their special talent, rather, was their ability to *attract* the genius, the muse, so that they could be the vessels of divine inspiration, the chalice that could capture the insights of the gods. This notion – that creativity comes from the outside – can even be seen in the etymology of the word "inspiration," which originally comes from the belief that ideas were quite literally blown into our minds, inspired by the gods, carried on a divine breath.

Gradually, however, the perception of creativity as an outside in-

fluence was replaced by a more individualistic way of thinking. During the Renaissance, the word "genius" slowly came to mean the creative person and not just the ethereal spirit that advised him or her. And in modern times, when research into creativity dawned in the 1950s, starting with the psychologist J.P. Guilford's famous call for studies of creativity, the individual-centered notion of genius was very much dominant. In a telling parallel to early studies of leadership (an equally elusive phenomenon), many creativity researchers focused on the study of the Great Men of creativity, scrutinizing the lives of Einstein, Picasso and other luminaries to discover what was special about them.

The individual-centered focus has since been supplemented by other approaches, but one lesson from these studies is clear: when it comes to creativity, not everybody is equal. Research into personality differences has shown that some people are much more likely than others to come up with new ideas or inventions. Specifically, as measured through the widely used Big Five model of personality traits¹, people who score high on the trait referred to as "openness to experience" are more likely to be creative.

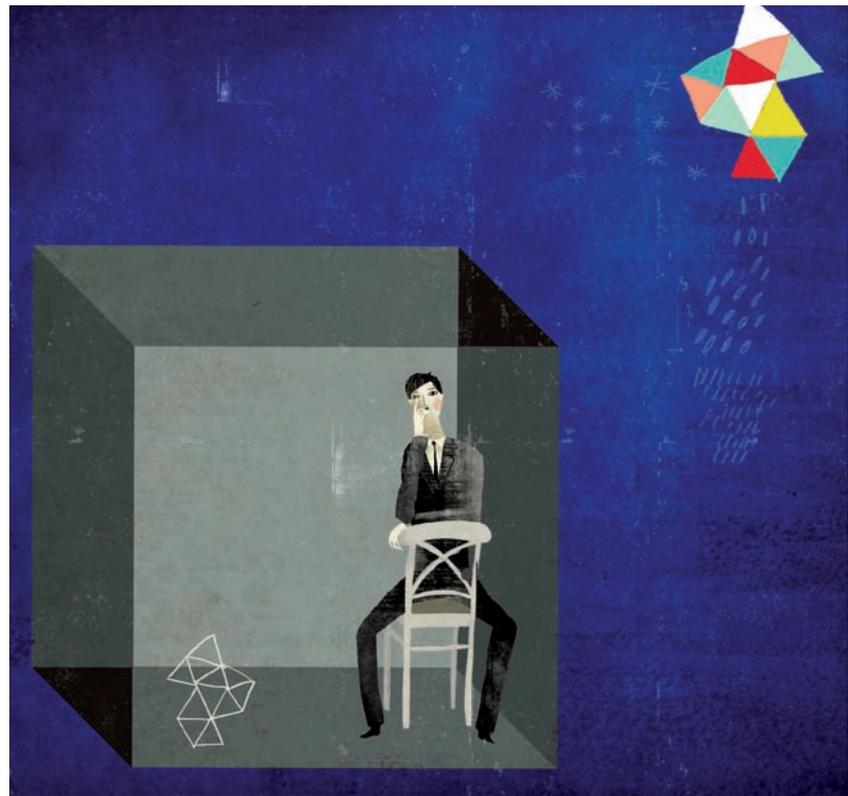
There is reason to believe that our understanding of creativity and genius is about to come full circle, going back to the ancient way of thinking about creativity as an ex-

ternal factor. The classification of attributes such as openness never quite touches on what we intuitively understand – someone has a gift for creativity, an ability to combine a mixture of intelligence and instinct and solve a complex problem. And that gift is influenced more by context than it is by character. It is less about who you are, and more about *where* you are. It is about creative spaces.

One of the most fascinating pieces of evidence for this was discovered in 2009 by researchers **William Maddux** and **Adam Galinsky** in their study of how living abroad affects creativity². Conducting a number of creativity tests, **Maddux** and **Galinsky** found that people who had been living abroad (expats) were significantly more likely to find innovative solutions to problems, such as negotiating a complex deal. The really interesting thing about their study was that they controlled for personality factors including openness. The results showed that people who had not lived abroad tended to be less creative than expats, *even if they were equally high on the openness trait*. It was not the personality trait as such that made them creative; it was the behavior it caused – the act of exposing themselves to new ideas and new ways of living and working.

In other words: Creativity is not just about who you are; it is equally about the environments you choose to live in. And this makes the research operational for executives, because, while it is very difficult to change your personality or your employees' personalities, it is often much easier to do something about the environment you live in.

To increase the likelihood of getting good ideas, hire and promote people who have lived abroad, and send your employees on longer stays in foreign divisions. A week in Shanghai will not suffice; it's got to be a year or more. The president of an innovative and successful mul-



tinational we have worked with expressed this clearly:

“I believe diversity is one of the key things to promote. Our current leadership team is very diverse, with people hailing from Turkey, Ireland, Pakistan, Colombia, the U.S., Spain, Belgium and France. And that is how it should be. If you only want to work with clones of yourself, it is going to be hard to make things happen.”

The idea that creativity is about seeking out new spaces is, of course, also relevant for IESE and our current global expansion. By coming to New York, we are not just bringing world-class management education to the United States (in case anyone hadn't noticed, the United States is not exactly short on good business schools). What we are really doing is changing ourselves, changing IESE yet again and making ourselves more creative, by the simple act of moving to a new place. And what better place than New York City, one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world?

IT IS LESS ABOUT WHO YOU ARE, AND MORE ABOUT WHERE YOU ARE. IT IS ABOUT CREATIVE SPACES.

1. For more on the Big Five model, see Goldberg, L.R. (1993): “The Structure of Phenotypic Personality Traits,” *American Psychologist*, 48.

2. Maddux, William W. and Galinsky, Adam D. (2009): “Cultural Borders and Mental Barriers: The Relationship Between Living Abroad and Creativity,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2009, Vol. 96, No. 5, 1047-1061.