

The grey side of creativity

By Michael Mai Ke

CREATIVITY has been identified as a critical driver for economic growth and social reform at the macro level, and an enhancer of individual performance and competitiveness at the micro level.

The notions of creativity and innovation are tightly linked – one cannot do without the other. Recent years have seen Singapore investing in nurturing creativity and innovation to boost initiatives in research and enterprise.

For example, the convergence of creative ideas with technological capability is spurring the startup community on the island state.

In 2016, the republic saw US\$3.5 billion of private equity and venture capital (VC) investments flowing into the startup scene, especially in disruptive companies that have transformed the way that consumers use products and services.

Notable investments include Softbank's US\$750 million in ride hailing technology company Grab, and Alibaba's US\$1 billion acquisition of a controlling stake in e-commerce platform Lazada.

According to the World Economic Forum, cre-

ativity will be one of the top three skills that employers value most by 2020. However, organisations looking to hire such personalities should exercise caution as there may be unintended consequences.

By definition, creative minds are able to perceive things that remain obscured from the view of others, and interpret problems from a unique perspective. These personalities often go against conventional ways of thinking and consider information that appears irrelevant to others.

Creative individuals have the ability to reconnect given information and restructure knowledge in multiple ways. This trait helps them to formulate innovative viewpoints and find alternative ways to solve problems.

While these benefits of creativity are acknowledged, are there circumstances where creativity can do more harm than good?

Prior to joining the National University of Singapore Business School, I conducted a series of studies with two colleagues on circumstances when creativity can result in unethical behaviour.

The three studies to measure creativity in-

involved more than 430 individuals. In one study, half of the participants were introduced to tasks that can activate their creative personality such as constructing Lego pieces or designing a backpack, while the other half took part in routine tasks such as following instructions to build Lego figures.

CHEAT AND LIE

We further embedded the option of engaging in unethical behaviour by allowing individuals to cheat in order to complete their tasks. For example, they were allowed to lie to get larger remuneration at the end of experiments. We found that creative individuals do cheat or lie more when they were asked to perform a task that can activate their creative personality.

There is the role justification plays in defending one's actions. Creative personalities contemplating unethical behaviours often face making a choice between gaining a valued outcome versus maintaining their moral ground.

However, if the individual is able to justify questionable decisions, they are more likely to behave unethically. For instance, stealing from a wealthy company may be rationalised as hav-

ing little impact, or questionable decisions may be blamed on superiors. Such self-serving justifications facilitate bad behaviour as these personalities can retain their moral self-image while still engaging in questionable behaviour.

While creative personalities are generally viewed as desirable employees, the creativity, once activated, may also be used for less honourable reasons. Recruiters and employers need to be mindful about hiring people who are able to strike a delicate balance between creativity, profit and lack of integrity. Managers should also be careful to not let their employees engage in any tasks that can activate creativity prior to a morally relevant work.

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