

Think Like An Artist

A few years ago my wife and I learned something about our second girl as we were helping her prepare for her Direct School Admission (DSA) process. DSA allows students to apply for schools based on their specific talent before they take their final primary school exams; hers was Special Arts.

As I asked and observed I noticed that my girl sets out on her art pieces with very little concrete planning. My wife then told me that seems to be my girl's modus operandi in developing her art pieces- she has a general idea of what she wants to do and it 'happens along the way'. As I dug deeper I realized that my girl was alternating between conceptualising, executing her imagination, getting rid of imperfections and improvising on the go.

I believe her willingness to embrace uncertainty and improvisation are valuable skills and mindsets, something I often remind myself of.

I view artmaking as going beyond drawing a painting, moulding a sculpture or performing in a drama. It is a way of thinking. Within artmaking lies the flexibility of the mind to observe, consider, prob and keep probing, and the willingness to fail and appear silly. It embraces confident humility, vulnerability and a sense of adventure that 'I don't know all the answers, I am not totally sure of where I am going but I am willing to embrace the journey'.

You might be familiar with the story that Steve Jobs took a calligraphy class in college that later inspired Apple's typography. I think it is safe to say that the family of Apple products are simply Steve Jobs' sculptures clothed in technology; just look at the colorful iMacs!

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Perhaps it is then not so strange that founders of major new economy companies share an artistic streak:

- Jack Dorsey, the co-founder and CEO of Twitter and Square said he found key lessons and inspirations from an art book about painting
- Jim McKelvey, Jack's co-founder at Square made a living as a glass-blower in the late 1980s and early 1990s
- Evan Spiegel, CEO of Snapchat dropped out to build Snapchat while studying product design at Stanford. He was fascinated with design as a teenager and took two continuing-education courses at Art Colleges before Stanford
- Joe Gebbia and Brian Chesky, the co-founders of Airbnb were industrial designers, whose idea for Airbnb was birthed when all hotels were booked up when a design conference came to town.

Will adopting an artist's thinking benefit you and me?

- Can we see ourselves like a handcrafted piece of pottery- truly unique and free to be distinctive?
- Is it alright with you as a leader to tell your team you don't have all the answers?
- Can we lead or manage people like 'work-in-progress', unfinished poems with untapped potential?
- Will you become more fun to work with because you allow some messiness of collaboration instead of demanding for straight answers?

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- Can we refine our work as if moulding a sculpture, pursuing excellence?
- Will your stress levels reduce if you embrace the idea that you are experimenting with your career moves?
- Will your (family) business stumble upon a windfall because you are willing to explore a new venture that comes with a risk of failure?

In the words of Paula Crown, the Chair of MoMA's Trustee Committee on Education, 'Our future will be shaped by those who learn to unlock the adaptability and collaborative thinking of makers'.

Think like an artist, live like a creator. Even if it doesn't work at least we get to enjoy splashes of color. Even an odd-looking sculpture is a beauty in the eyes of its beholder.

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