

A Plural Performance

circus





Imagination is potent.

*It creates movements, belief
and understanding for all of us –
whatever we do.*

Dilys Maltby
Senior Partner, Circus

THE POTENCY OF IMAGINATION



The essence of this booklet has been in my head for most of my working life. I just haven't found the time (or maybe, in truth, the discipline), to commit my whirling thoughts to the structured permanence of the printed page.

At Circus, we have built an advisory business which encourages organisations to be clear around their ambition and their reason for being. I am very proud of our work with clients and what we have achieved together.

We also host a cultural programme where we collaborate with rare artists and makers across disciplines. This is not a side line or a hobby, this participation is an important part of who we are, and our practice with clients.

For over thirty years, I have lived in and around boardrooms, and seen, in stark close up, how organisations are led, and to what end. I have worked closely with some instinctively creative leaders, who have left an indelible mark on the world. And, I have also collaborated with extraordinary artists, who create and gift perspective through their own practice. And when I reflect upon the success of both artist and leader, they have one quality in common – imagination.

This booklet explores the role of imagination – not just in commerce, but in life. Our series of films with Circus friends – clients, artists, former colleagues – contribute to this debate. Some are founders, others are teachers and artists, some are custodians of iconic brands. They are all leaders within their field.

We hope you enjoy the read and the watch.

The recent debate around creativity is stuck.

*The word creative suggests you are an artist
or a maker; or you might work in the creative
industries. These roles are vital for us all.*

But creativity should not stop there.

TIME TO RETHINK AND TO REDEFINE



We need creative intelligence in every facet of our lives – business, health, infrastructure, education; everything that can contribute to societal cohesion and harmony.

Our hope is that our reflections will reach those who inhabit boardrooms, contributing to the decisions that shape not only what a business does, but also how businesses behave and interact with the body politic and society at large. The hope is that they will find their way to politicians and public sector leaders. In particular, to those who influence the right of every child for creative exploration with music, drama, art and dance.

We also hope that we will reach that business-literate, traditionalist hard core who would naturally oppose its central thesis: namely that *imagination is of crucial value in commerce, in politics, in education, and in life generally* – and that it is undervalued at our peril.

I hope we might persuade people not to create false boundaries between culture and commerce; and to recognise that great business and great art come from an ability to imagine something new and exciting; the same vision that we need to keep society healthy and happy.

This ability is key to progress and enlightenment, and always will be. This is why, far from being a wistful romantic, I am in reality a brutal pragmatist. We all need imagination every bit as much as we need the banking system or transport infrastructure. We just don't always acknowledge this.

*Imagination is an asset and a currency.
Taken as a global whole, it is, of course,
the most important currency of them all –
crypto or otherwise.*

THESIS:

IMAGINATION IS A CURRENCY



My experience has been that leaders who access their own imagination are good news both inside and outside their own organisations. They have empathy which allows them to put themselves in the shoes of colleagues and consumers; shareholders and suppliers. They lead opinion and practice, as much as they lead and shape structures and propositions.

Imagination, in organisational terms, is about *consciously visualising alternative futures*; it is about being bold and active in creating such a future. Just because this value can't easily be measured, it doesn't mean that it isn't in play.

Without imagination, there would be no inventors or entrepreneurs. There would be no new businesses formed to develop and distribute such inventions. In business, imagination creates differentiation and competitive advantage. Imagination is required when entering new markets, or when seizing new opportunities. Imagination is charismatic. It attracts colleagues and customers alike.

*Those who lead have not always been
taught to value or nurture imagination –
in themselves or others.*

THE LEADER AT RISK



To cherish this currency, we need to value it. Yet, our everyday tech lifelines are in danger of impacting our appetite for unstructured exploration, our ability to empathise or consider long form challenging argument. With tech entrepreneurs recommending switch off and tape over; so much is written here, that I will not rehearse the arguments.

But what we can witness is that the CEO or Political Leader is probably most at risk. Culturally, and over many years, they will have been rewarded for diligence, hard work, delivery, performance, numeracy, analysis and linear thinking. It is highly unlikely that they qualified in fine art, creative writing or music. It is highly unlikely that they will have developed a talent for doing nothing – to see what happens next.

On the contrary, they are likely to be culturally trained to avoid down time, and to diary themselves into crisper and crisper meetings, with clearly defined objectives and highly measurable outcomes. What down time they do salvage is likely to be spent catching up on email and plugging into technology, Strava or the such like, that rewards them for highly structured exercise.

This is a parody, of course. But, only up to a point. And, in case anyone is taking offence, please bear in mind that I am, in part, describing myself and most of my friends. We are all implicated and affected by the weight of these cultural pressures. How could we not be? (Although in my case, the comment about exercise is risible – as my friends will confirm).

THIS MATTERS FOR ALL OF US



Given this context, it's clear that there is no magic solution to this situation. The undervaluing of imagination is a systemic, cultural problem which requires a multi-pronged response.

POLICY

EDUCATION

BUSINESS

POLICY MATTERS



At the policy level, we are calling on politicians from all parties (this is not a party-political matter) to consider the far reaching consequences of a culture in which imagination, creativity and boldness are not sufficiently encouraged.

A less imaginative society self-evidently gives rise to less successful business ideas and businesses. Invention, growth, reinvention are all fuelled by imagination, not just hard work.

We invite politicians to think far harder about the interdependency of economic growth and business creativity. And to open minds to the financial and cultural importance of all sectors. There is no evidence that the market is inherently imaginative – it needs other cultural and social inputs to become so.

Yes, of course, Governments have a responsibility to balance the books. But, whatever party they represent, we do not elect our politicians to be book-keepers alone. We expect more of them. We expect them to have ideas. We expect them to tackle major problems with imagination. We yearn for more of that in the future. We need greater bravery and deeper empathy.

Going further, a lack of creative thinking (i.e. the ability to imagine different futures) is not just about the economy in a narrow sense. The NHS will continue to require imaginative leadership and reinvention, if it is to survive. The challenges of migration and immigration will not be solved by looking to the past. The historic High Street will never return to its former self. Houses will not be built one by one; collective living will continue to evolve. And, of course, imagination will also be essential for our transport infrastructure – in the light of autonomous vehicles, hyperloops and drones.

Every major political and social challenge that we face requires a cultural mindset that gives explicit permission for fresh thinking. Every major social challenge that we face is *more likely* to be solved by imaginative leaders, rather than by those who do not access this critical faculty.

Our hope is that, in the future, politicians will advertise their own creativity and their imagination more boldly. Our sense is that there is a genuine hunger for such an approach. We are bored of the opposite. It is not working.

EDUCATION MATTERS



In many of the major economies around the world, education is not doing all that it could do to promote the importance of imagination and creativity. All too often, we see subjects that are not “practical” and “useful” (code for broadly vocational) being taken off the curriculum. This should concern us all, even if the subjects that are losing out are not those we have studied personally.

Today, within the education system, what is being tested and measured is questionable at best. Too often, we are encouraging cramming, memory and logic. Many of these skills are useful and valuable. We have nothing against STEM. But what is missing is a balanced recognition of the role of other disciplines. As more measurable forms of intelligence are elevated, so less measurable, more imaginative, more intuitive, more subjective talents are being devalued.

The historical, and much exaggerated, divide between The Arts and Science has much to answer for here. At a young age,

many intelligent and ambitious people are forced to identify themselves as Artists or Scientists. This arbitrary divide denies the role of creativity across the disciplines.

Over the last six months, letters and articles have appeared in the media talking to the impact of reducing access to creative exploration within our state education system. This matters not just to artists and performers; not just for the creative industries; but for all of us. As we all know, the greatest leaps of progress have required both analytical *and* creative skills.

We need to work hard to nurture imagination and exploration. What are we telling children about imagination when we delete music, art, dance or drama from the state orchestrated syllabus? What are we telling them when we teach them that what will be rewarded most is that which can be measured most easily? What if we have no playtime; no art; no music? What indeed.

BUSINESS MATTERS



The omnipresent power of data analytics allows organisations to measure pretty much everything and anything. This is good and essential. We revel in good facts, and this isn't an anti-technology or anti-data rant. Far from it. More we reflect that data should be a foundation for exploration; the start, not the end game.

In our experience, we are all becoming better at reading data, and less good at reading each other. We are becoming better at accessing facts, and less practised at creating original ideas. We need to rebalance, and recalibrate.

Circus primarily works with brands at scale. Organisations that are important and opinionated. They take responsibility for their actions. They value commercial return, but they do not see this as the end of their ambition; just the start.

When our practice was founded some 20 odd years ago, we were struck by the metaphor of Circus – the dedication, the rigour and the whimsy, the ability to create narrative through performance, the universal appeal, over geographies and over time.

We coined a mantra –the Circus Double Double: a set of four principles for sustainable business:

For us, **Ideology is key**. To succeed long term, brands need a clear purpose, just as much as they need sound finance. Truly great organisations carefully weigh their role in the world. They have nothing to hide. Their integrity flows from openness and clarity.

Great brands are creative and magnetic. They know that **Inspiration matters**. We want to be in their company. They are active participants, not bystanders. They are optimistic and engaging. They are interested in us, and we in them.

Strong brands are prepared to sacrifice opportunities and revenue streams that are not aligned with their ideology and principles. They recognise that **Sacrifice is necessary**. They walk away from money and partners. This is hard stuff. They use more than one measure to navigate their commercial futures.

We have all witnessed how difficult it is to stay consistent and aligned. **Discipline is underestimated**. Sticking to the knitting can feel dull – but, in our eyes, it is a worthy pursuit and builds for the long term.

CIRCUS



Here at Circus, we try to follow our own mantra.

Circus is singular in its practice: we work with senior teams to define why their organisation exists and for whom.

Circus is plural in its performance: we invite rare and extraordinary artists to share their wisdom and experience to illuminate, intrigue and delight.

Over the years, on projects near and far, we witness how much is shared; how much we have in common; how much we need empathy, energy and hope to invent a brighter future for us all.

Our new series of films are full of anecdote, meandering and imprecision; as much as they are full of determination, drive, and endeavour. We need all of this.

Many flavours, not just one.

More opportunity to get lost, as well as found.

Find our film series on our website.

Our practice is singular.

Our performance is plural.

Please find us at circuslondon.com and join us as client,
collaborator and colleague.





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