

Matthew: Hello. Welcome to Marketing Smarts, a podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs. I'm your host Matthew Grant, Managing Editor here at MarketingProfs. Thank you for listening.

Creativity. A 2010 study of 1,500 chief executives conducted by IBM's Institute for Business Value identified creativity as the number one leadership competency of the future. The recent passing of Steve Jobs only highlighted how much we prize creativity and the innovation it can spawn.

Unfortunately, we tend to think about creativity as something you either have or you don't, dividing the world into the creative few and the uncreative many. The good news is, however, that this view of creativity is not only outdated, it's wrong.

Today there are emerging schools of thought which see creative capabilities and potential in everyone and moreover emphasize the ways that creativity within organizations is not one person's job, but something that calls for a true group effort.

To discuss creativity, how we can define it and how we can unleash its power as individuals and organizations we've invited Alicia Arnold to Marketing Smarts. Alicia is Senior Vice President of Digital at Hill Holiday and author of the book *Creatively Ever After*.

Alicia, welcome to Marketing Smarts.

Alicia: Thank you, Matt.

Matthew: Before we get started, I was wondering if you could introduce yourself to our listeners and tell us a little bit about yourself.

Alicia: Sure. My name is Alicia Arnold. I've been in the advertising and marketing world since the early 1990s. I have MBA from Bentley College in Marketing and recently completed a Graduate Master Science in Creativity, Innovation, and Change Leadership.

One of the things that got me into creativity, it seems to be a common question, is when I was younger – I tell the story about a one legged stool. There was a teacher that I had when I was 9 years old who was trying to talk about teamwork and had used the analogy that teamwork is akin to having three, four, more legs to a stool and that there was no such thing as a one legged stool.

And though I understood inherently what he was trying to get at with his example, the thing that just kept popping into my mind was the fact that you really could have a one legged stool, it just depended on what that leg looked like. So if you picture a diner stool or a stool where the leg is flared out like a pair of bell bottom pants, it just really depended on the design.

So I got a little hung up in terms of the one legged stool and had mentioned to my teacher that really there could be such a thing as a one legged stool. He wasn't open to hearing my answer and that caused me over time to start shoving down those ideas that were in my head, because they tended to get me conversations or situations that just weren't positive.

So I found out in the early 2000s that there was a need for this thing and it was called creativity. At the end of the day it really wasn't an affliction, but it was really something that businesses, CEOs, companies across the world were really looking to be able to tap into. Going to school helped me understand what creativity really was and how I can best apply it to the different situations that I faced.

Now what I'm looking to do is help others tap into their personal creativity.

Matthew: First of all, I love the story of the one legged stool, because you're absolutely right. Certainly I know working with camera people and things like that, of course they have a monopod. That's like saying you couldn't have something that just has one foot and supports what you need.

Alicia: Right.

Matthew: I'm curious though, so you ended up following this creative problem solving path and getting this Masters. But, if you had already gotten into advertising and marketing in the early 1990s you must have already had a sense or tapped in on some level to your creativity.

Alicia: Absolutely. I think when you think about advertising and marketing it's probably one of the fields that people most closely associate with creativity. But, there was still a little bit of discomfort with me being in advertising and marketing, because it was just never enough. I wanted to do more, I wanted to break out of the box a little bit more. And when you're working with clients you can sometimes only go so far.

What I realized was that in looking at the realm of creativity there's a point where everyone kind of comes together and that's like the median. The way that I was thinking and the way that I wanted to pull out of the box, I was really far outside of that median and it always caused me a bit of personal stress.

After learning more about creativity and how to tap into my creativity, how to help others tap into theirs, what I started to realize is that I could help bring about better outcomes with teams by helping everyone become great at what they do. So if I was able to do that I would also be able to tap into my creativity and bring those ideas a little further along.

One of the biggest learnings was how to get the most out of the most out of the teams that you work with, how to come together and really solve tricky hard problems that folks might feel are impossible or you're unable to solve them.

Matthew: I'm actually now curious about what you were just saying about working with clients and in certain situations it felt like you weren't able to basically be as creative or get as far outside the box as you wanted. One of the first things that occurred to me though, in saying that, is isn't one of the challenges of, let's call it applied creativity, is figuring out how to be as creative as possible within sort of clearly prescribed limits? Like when you said to solve particularly tricky problems, usually what makes those problems particularly tricky is all of the dependencies and contingencies that kind of keep you in a certain kind of box. Does that make sense?

Alicia: It does. There are always going to be those different dependencies, those different assumptions, those different guardrails that you're going to need to work within. What I learned is how do you take those guardrails and get the most out of them that you can because guardrails in and of themselves are also mutable and changeable. Sometimes when you're faced with a problem there may be guardrails that you know of or that you're assuming that may or may not actually be there.

So one of the techniques and tricks that I learned that really helped to open up creative thinking was to ask questions and to clarify, which wasn't really my natural state. I'm the type of person who comes into things and sees lots and lots of ideas. I dream about ideas, I even have a notebook next to bed because I come up with ideas in my sleep.

What I learned is that while there are going to be these guardrails, these assumptions and these dependencies, if you actually take the time to look at those assumptions and dependencies and talk to people about them, they may not really be those barriers that folks automatically assume are there. There may be some white space within those. In learning and asking questions and clarifying you just learn a little bit more to understand what you can really start to push on and what really needs to stay as is.

Matthew: One of the biggest challenges I think people face when confronted with tricky problems or the need to accomplish something quickly or in an innovative manner is really teasing out what are the true limitations or what are the physical limitations or what are the temporal limitations and then what are the limitations that we're bringing to it conceptually.

I want to find out more about the practices that people, teams and organizations can do to find that white space that you talked about. But, before I do that I want to back us up a little bit and talk about sort of creativity from a more broad cultural perspective.

As you've pointed out, many companies see creativity and innovation key to their success now and into the future. But, it seems that the concept of creativity itself is fraught with a host of myths and misconceptions about what it is and where it comes from, who has it and who doesn't. So I was wondering if we could talk about what are the most common myths that you've seen around creativity.

Alicia: Sure. It's a really interesting thing because I think creativity in and of itself, that word is confusing, although many folks won't actually admit that. If you talk to them about creativity there's lack of understanding of really what it is, it seems like it's a mysterious process.

A lot of people assume that you're either born being creative or not, which really isn't the case. Everyone is creative and it's just a matter of understanding how people are creative. To explain that to folks, one of the things I like to talk about is the fact that creativity can be measured and creativity is made up of skill sets, and skill sets are learnable. That's the other myth that's out there, that creativity can't be learned.

So when you think about creativity, the average person probably sees creativity as being a person who is in the arts, someone who can sing, someone who can dance, someone who is in that real world of self expression. When I think about creativity it's about a thinking process and it's about the different skills sets that you bring to the table.

So to be able to tap into creativity takes four different things. It takes the ability to come up with questions, the ability to develop ideas, the ability to bring those ideas together in solutions and the ability to get things done. So being able to implement those things that you form as solutions. Those four skills of ideating, developing and implementing are teachable skills.

So that's the other part that I had mentioned, is that folks don't feel like you can learn this skills. But, in reality you're born with these skills and you're naturally inclined to be better at one or more of them. That's why creativity takes teamwork.

Creativity isn't about being a lone contributor, it's really about coming together, especially with very complex problems, to solve these issues as a team because more than likely it's going to take more than one person to come up with the answer to those things.

In groups or organizations the biggest misconception is that creativity comes from a particular department. So in advertising we sometimes call the group that does the art direction and the copywriting the creative team, the creatives. By labeling folks as creatives there's an assumption that the rest of the folks who aren't within that department are not creative, which really is a misperception. Folks in the creative group are creative in a particular way. Others

outside of those areas, such as the finance team, human resource, account management, project management, are creative in their own ways as well.

Matthew: Getting back to this notion of you say it's teamwork. Is it a question of helping each person develop these specific skill sets that you mentioned, being able to ask questions or ideate or develop solutions, or is it really a questions of finding out what part of creativity people are really good at and then assembling a team where you make sure you have people who represent each one of these elements of creativity? Does that make sense?

Alicia: Right. It sure does. It's actually a very important question. For teamwork to happen I believe you need to have a self awareness, so understanding how you are creative versus another person is helpful. To do so, I do like to develop skill sets. But, the second part that you mentioned, do you also look at teams and determine the best fit, that's something that I do as well.

I'll give you an example of how this plays out in a couple of ways. A few months ago I did a training session for project managers who work within the advertising industry. One of the things that the project managers were saying to me was that A) they felt like they weren't creative and B) when it came to projects involving the creative teams, meaning the art directors, the copywriters, that the creative teams shut them out.

So it took a little bit of helping the project managers understand how they were creative and understanding how the creative teams themselves were creative to really start to build that awareness of how folks can best come together on a team. So project managers, generally speaking, and this is not to say that it's an absolute, but the project managers tended to be folks who really liked to slow down, to think about things, to ask a lot of questions. When they were working with art directors and copywriters, those types of folks really like to come up with lots of ideas and move faster, the more the better.

They really had trouble coming together as a team because on the one hand project managers were slowing the down thinking of the creative folks, but on the other hand both groups were feeling frustrated. So knowing how those teams were creative really kind of helped the situation.

What it did was we were able to say with the creative folks, "We know you're trying to come up with lots and lots of ideas. We understand that it's really tough to come together with project managers who are very different than you and whose natural inclination is to ask questions, to control risk, and to (in the designer's eyes) slow things down."

But, if we come together as a team a couple things happen. A) if we allow the project managers to cess out and to understand the situation, bring to us some of the key problems we're looking

to solve, it helps the designers really start to focus on the areas that are going to make the most difference. So rather than ideating about every possible thing that could happen in the world, you're very much focused on what are the things that are really going to drive this project, this business, this client's situation forward.

When each person on the team has that understanding of how they're creative, while there still may be some tension in communication and inability to work together, understanding that it's not a personal affront, understanding that it's just how the person is made up helps, as well as it gives the creative teams the ability to think about the different problems that are being solved and to take the time to start to develop solutions a little bit more coherently.

Matthew: All right. First, I just want to remind people, you are listening to Marketing Smarts and we are talking with Alicia Arnold, author of *Creatively Ever After*.

So it sounds like there's two things that need to happen then. On the one hand people need to develop self awareness about the ways that they are creative. And then an organization needs to have an awareness of how different people within their organization contribute to the creative process.

So I'm wondering what are exercises that you teach people or encourage people to practice that help them develop this self awareness and recognize and acknowledge the ways that they are already creative, especially when they say things like "I'm not a creative, I'm a project manager." or something like that.

Alicia: Sure. A couple of the exercises that I try are for coming up with ideas. What I'll look to do is I'll ask people, "How far do you want to stretch in coming up with an idea?" A lot of times in advertising you're going for a big idea, you want something that's going to be really differentiating for your clients, you want something that's going to be not generally out there because you want it to be new and exciting.

So what we'll do is we'll do excursions. I'll take folks outside of the agency or client environment and we may visit museums or we might visit a park and we start to make forced connections. I'll have people think about the problem that they're trying to solve – and you can do this in the room while you're listening to the podcast.

Think about your problem, pick an item in the room and look at it and think about what the characteristics of these items might be. So right now I'm looking at a green chair. I might say it's green, it's comfortable, it's fluffy. And then when you look at your problem you say, "What ideas does that chair give me for solving my problem?"

What we start to find is that you make different associations in your mind, so the ideas that you would have come up with originally tend to be those ideas that are more near in your mind. By forcing yourself and stretching to look at objects in the room and think about how they help you solve your problem it really forces you to get outside of your comfort zone and to make associations that are not readily within your stocked mind.

The way that your mind works is that when you try to solve a problem you tend to go back into your memory bank and come up with things that are naturally in there from your past experiences. By opening your experiences to looking at new things and making new connections that helps you get outside of the box so that the solution you develop is very different than the solution that someone might have done had they not used a creativity technique.

Matthew: So that's how someone can learn and a practice that someone can do to break out of their routinized ways of coming up with solutions for problems. I'm wondering do you do, or have you done this, to get people to actually appreciate the way that they are creative? For example, when you were doing this training with the project managers they come in there saying, "I'm not creative. I just want to be able to check things off the box and move it through the process." Did people emerge saying, "Wait a second. I am creative after all, Alicia showed me that."

Alicia: Yes. That's an interesting thing. I think it's hard to tell someone they're creative, they have to experience it firsthand. One of the things that I've done for project managers and folks whose main function is to control risk, we'll take the topic of risk and we'll turn it into an ideation session.

So if you're main role is to control risk, you might not be the same type of person who likes to come up with lots of ideas. So we teach them how to come up with ideas for solving risks. One of the things that we'll do is we teach the technique of asking open ended questions.

So a lot of times project managers are the types of folks who are stuck at the end of the day with budgets and schedules. And inevitably with any project it's hard, you're not going to make the deadline or you're not going to be able to stay within schedule or the budget parameters.

Rather than saying, "We're not going to make the deadline," I'll ask project managers to rephrase that as a question. So they'll say something like, "How might we meet the deadline? What might be all the ways to meet the deadline?"

And just asking that question of themselves starts to take out a roadblock and they start to realize that there are lots of ways to solve that problem. So it's not a yes or no anymore, it

could be a number of things. You could add more people to the project, you could outsource, you could do any number of things.

So that trick that they use within their own situations they then can teach people on their teams. When I have folks come together in workshops we have them practice it as teams. What they start to realize is that rather than closing down the dialogue and making people feel like this problem can't be solved, by asking open ended questions, which is something that they're naturally inclined to do, asking questions, it helps to open up the conversation and it helps to make people feel like you're bringing solutions to the table.

Just by practicing that is something that the project managers have come away with the realization that "Wow, I am creative. And I'm actually helping my team move forward in these solutions." It's not usually after I do the training folks come up and say, "Wow, this is an eye opening experience."

But, in about a week they'll come back and say, "I've been trying the techniques and I can't believe the results I'm getting. People are more open to me, the creative team is actually inviting me to meetings rather than shutting me out." And they are able to have stronger relationships and dialogues within their teams and they're seen as problem solvers versus folks who may have been seen in the past as people who put up roadblocks.

Matthew: How do you move then to this organizational level? I totally get it, I think it makes perfect sense, you can't tell people that they are creative, they have to experience it. I love the process you were describing how you can get people to actually have that experience of being creative.

But, then you were talking before in the relationship between the creatives, art directors and those folk, and the project managers, and there was sometimes the logger heads, "You're slowing us down. We don't need your questions." So what do you do at the organizational level?

We talked about what you can do to get people to recognize their own creativity, what needs to happen then organizationally so that, especially an ad agency I'd imagine, the creatives can broaden their own minds and start seeing what the other folks and the other team members bring to the table?

Alicia: That's a good question. It's actually a very tough question because it's rooted in the culture of the organization. I feel like regardless of the organization it's much better to show folks how they can come together and let them feel it rather than tell them about it.

So what I tend to do is I bring together folks within the organization and I try to model the way and try to help others within the organization do the same. So when we come together on a project one of the first things I like to do is I'll ask people, "What is it you're looking to get out of this project? How would you like to contribute? How can the rest of the team really help you do those things that you see yourself wanting to do, to either help you move forward in this position or help you move forward as you progress your career?"

So we start by making wishes. I capture these wishes and we send them around so that everyone understands what these wishes are. Over our course of time working together we try to fulfill one another's wishes. And one of the things that I really try to instill is that it's not about your title within the organization, it's not even about your discipline, but we come together and everyone has different perspectives that can help us solve our problems.

So folks start to orient themselves and it's a little bit different at first, because it's like "Wow, you mean I can comment on this topic that usually you wouldn't be looking for me as the subject matter on?" So it takes a little bit of adjustment, but over time what ends up happening is that people tend to gravitate to those things that give them energy and that gives them the best way of achieving those goals that they set forth.

Over time people really start helping each other get there. So they'll say, "I noticed that when we first started this project you said you wanted to learn a new skill set in this particular area. I found a way of doing that for you."

So my role as a person who brings these different team members together is to really understand what folks are looking to do and to set the right tone, as well as help remove the barriers. So for me it's more of being a facilitator of the process and that's how the teams who I work with really start to understand creativity and really start to learn how to come together with diverse teams.

As they go out, one of the things that I'm finding is that when my team members disperse and go into different areas of the organization, folks will come back and comment and say, "People think I'm different." I'm like, "Different in what way?" They're like, "You know, they feel like it's really fun and enjoyable working with me in that I'm helping them more so than they may have had in other projects."

So it's that support structure that takes building that culture and the culture spreads over time to different parts of the organization.

Matthew: I think that makes sense. I know if people say that they're not creative it's usually with a kind of glum resignation. I think our culture, and I think we've seen it just in the last day with this outpouring of appreciation for Steve Jobs, people really appreciate creativity and they

see it as something very special. Everyone wants it in their life to some degree and they feel bad if they don't have it or they feel inadequate.

I think what you're describing seems really cool that as people themselves become more creative and start taking more creative approaches to the work they're doing, it starts making the people working with them feel like now there's creativity, something good and positive and powerful is happening around me and it makes them really psyched.

I'm wondering then, sticking at the organizational level, because I think it's easy for people to see how creativity fits in the ad agency and we're trying to do work for clients and we're trying to come up with something that's really spectacular or novel or innovative. But, how does creativity work if you are doing budgeting?

A lot of the people who listen to our podcast and who come to MarketingProfs, they're marketers who have to do a lot of executional work. So how do you bring this creative thought process to list management or media buying or something like that? Something that people don't even think of as an innately creative process to begin with.

Alicia: That's an interesting question. I think at the heart of it when you consider creative problem solving it's really about what problem are you trying to solve. Regardless of whether you come at it from a list management perspective or a media buying perspective, you're trying to solve a particular issue. In doing so you're also trying to come up with novel ways of getting at those answers.

So for someone who buys media the question might be "How can I best target this particular type of person that I'm trying to reach with my media?" Some of the things I like to do with teams like that is you sometimes get stuck in your old patterns of thinking, because it's hard to get outside of that. You've done it for so long, you've been in the industry, you just know the set ways and the set patterns for doing it. So one of the things I might recommend for someone in this type of marketing or media buying is to think about your target audience and who you're trying to reach with your buying and maybe go and spend some time where these people live.

Let's say you're trying to reach folks who drink coffee. You might spend some time in local coffee shops getting to understand what people do. You might do some ethnographic studies to really say "what does coffee mean" to these folks and kind of follow them or get them to journal for you. By understanding what the habits are, the behaviors and the attitudes of this target audience that you're pursuing it will bring new light to your media buying and you may learn new things about maybe it's the day part or what coffee means to them or some other way of reaching them that you might not have known inherently before.

So I think one of the techniques to very pragmatic tactical problem solving is getting out there and knowing more about the audience that you're trying to reach.

Matthew: Taking a field trip or taking an excursion, as you said before. There was something you said early on that I was really curious about and wanted to follow up on. So we talked about two myths about creativity. One, that it's sort of in born and can't be learned. But, the other was that creativity can be measured, because that's something that people also believe, that you can't measure it.

I'm very curious about that. How do measure creativity?

Alicia: Oh boy. That's a good one. There are actually lots of different ways of measuring creativity. Creativity as a science has been up there for, let's say the last 50 years or so, and over time folks have come up with lots of ways of measuring creativity, some of them valid and reliable, some of them not.

So what I'll do is I'll share with you a couple of my favorite tried and true. I call them favorite tried and true because they've been tested worldwide and they've been tested with different populations to show that the way they measure is valid and is statistically relevant.

Matthew: Okay.

Alicia: One of the ways is to go by what's called the **Kurtain Adaption Innovation** survey. It's abbreviated KAI. What that survey does is it asks a number of questions and then it plots your preferences along a bell curve. On the right hand side you have innovation innovator and on the left hand side you have adaptor or adaptation.

What it basically says is when you look at a situation do you look at it from the perspective of solving the problem within what is generally known. If so, you fall into the adaptive category. Or do you look at the situation and you say, "I'm going to change the rules. I'm going to work outside the structures." If that's the case you fall more into the innovator side of the survey.

I call them preferences because they're preferences, it's how you naturally behave versus a label. So it's not to say that you're innovative or you're adaptive, it's to say that's how your mind is naturally patterned to work.

So, for example, lots of times marketers fall on the right hand side of the curve, so they're innovators. That's their preference. The folks who may be in accounting and finance may fall on the left hand side of the curve. And it makes sense because they have to look within the rules, they have to look inside of what's generally known to be able to solve the challenges that they have on a day to day basis.

One of the things I mentioned earlier when we first started the program is that it was really tough for me growing up as a kid because I would see things a different way, I would say “the stool really could have one leg.” It’s because I fell in the far right hand side of the curve. What that means is that the further outside of that bell curve you fall, either on the right or the left, the harder it is for you to stay within the lines and to cope, so it causes a level of stress in your life because you know you’re on the far right hand side where most people are kind of in the middle, or you’re on the far left hand side where most people are in the middle.

So the KAI, for me, is one of the tools that really changed the way that I look at life, because I started to realize “Wow, it’s not that these organizations aren’t right, that they’re different,” it’s that I’m different. And at the end of the day there are so many people like me.

So knowing where you kind of fall within that curve is helpful. And if you plot organizations and look at all the people who make up organizations, organizations have their natural preferences as well. I would have to say an organization like Apple, you mentioned Steve Jobs, is probably closer to the right hand side of the curve. An organization like Google may also be on the right hand side of the curve. So when you look for fit, you look at the organization and say, “Where might they be within this adaptation and innovation survey?”

The other one that I like to look at is called Foursight and that measures creativity on the four dimensions that I had spoken about earlier. So it measures your preferences for clarifying, for ideating, for developing, and for implementing. It tells you based on how you respond to particular situations and questions where you might be within that preference scale.

Knowing how you score, knowing how you’re assessed, helps you understand your blind spots. So if you’re very high in coming up with ideas, you’re probably very low at being able to ask questions. So knowing that helps you understand where you need to kind of keep an eye out, but it also helps you understand what types of folks you might want to collaborate with in order to bring ideas forward.

Matthew: I wasn’t familiar with either one of those tools, so thanks for introducing us to ways of both assessing and measuring that creative potential of individuals. But, then I also like this idea that you can apply it to organizations more broadly.

Alicia, we’re getting near the end of our time here. I did want to spend a few minutes on your book, *Creatively Ever After*. I’m wondering specifically if you could say whose really the target audience, who did you write the book for in order to help them?

Alicia: Sure. I actually wrote this for a business audience. The reason I wrote it that there were all kinds of studies and all kinds of papers coming out saying that the world needs more creativity. IBM had done a study and globally across the world in many countries one of

the top skills that they felt executives would need in the future was creativity. Then on the flip side there were lots of studies saying that creativity was in decline.

So I thought to myself, “Wouldn’t it be great to teach folks how to be creative?” And to teach in particular business folks how to be creative, because that’s where the need seemed to be coming from.

Matthew: So you wrote the book for a business audience, in part driven by IBM studies saying that creativity is going to be critical in employees and in organizations. I feel like there’s so much more we could talk about in the limited time that we have. There must have been things that you left out of the book. So I’m curious what was stuff that you were really hoping to have in there that you just couldn’t get in there?

Alicia: There was a lot about teamwork and relationships with people, communications that I left out. So it’s a very practical guide and it’s a how to guide that takes you through the different steps that your mind naturally goes through when you’re solving problems.

In doing that, one of the greatest learnings I had, the greatest insights, was once I understood creativity a little bit more and once I knew a little bit more about how I was creative, it actually helped me in business in a very unique and unthought-of way. I thought it would help me come up with better ideas, better solutions, better implementation of these ideas and solutions, but one of the things that it really helped me do was form better teams and work better with people to help folks get the best out of the work experience that they could.

I think every day if I can come into work and make people happy it actually helps my creativity flow as well as their creativity. I think teamwork is one of those things that I would have liked to have talked about a little bit more, but it was a little bit outside of the how to that I was looking to write.

Matthew: Right. Well, that’s your next book then.

Alicia: There you go.

Matthew: All right. That’s all the time that we have today, Alicia. Thank you so much for joining us. If people want to find your book or find out more about your thoughts on creativity, do they go to local bookstore, Amazon, where do they go?

Alicia: Either one. Amazon has it, as well as BarnesandNoble.com. I also have a website that I put out there, a blog at Alicia-Arnold.com.

Matthew: Thank you very much for joining us today on Marketing Smarts.

Alicia: Thank you.

Matthew: And thank you listener for joining us for today's program. This has been Marketing Smarts, a podcast brought to you by MarketingProfs. I am your host Matthew Grant. Join us next week when we will be discussing social media monitoring and business intelligence with Aaron Weber of Spiral16. Talk to you then.