

Point of View: **William Buxton**

# What if Leopold Didn't Have a Piano?



One of the best ways to understand something is to ask the right question. When the question has to do with creativity in organizations, my question is this: “What if Leopold didn’t have a piano?” Now, you may well be asking, “Who is Leopold?” So, let me clear things up: he had a son named Wolfgang Amadeus, and his last name was **Mozart**.

Of course nobody can know the answer to this question. But in the back of my mind, I can’t shake the thought that if Leopold did not have a piano, young Wolfgang may well have grown up to be the best sausage maker in all of Salzburg.

As it was, Leopold not only had a piano, but a violin, and was a well known music teacher. And, as we also know, Wolfgang was arguably the most naturally-gifted musician in the history of western music – at least that we know about.

But what was it, besides choosing his parents well, that let us ‘know’ about Mozart? What allowed his natural talent to develop? The answer goes far beyond his parents, his natural ability or the proverbial piano – all of which were essential, but not sufficient. The deeper answer has to do with the culture into which he was born, and I believe there is a serious lesson to be learned here, insofar as helping us better understand how to institute a culture of creativity within an organization.

So, to begin with, let us recognize that it was not just his talent, parents or access to an instrument that let Mozart’s talent flourish. It also wasn’t just the concert halls such as the Estates Theatre in Prague, which saw the premiere of *Don Giovanni* in 1787, or Vienna’s Burgtheatre, where the *Abduction from the Seraglio* was premiered in 1782. Furthermore, it wasn’t just the schools that trained the musicians, nor the public that came to the concerts.

And while technological innovation played a role, it also wasn’t just about contemporary developments in the art of instrument building. This was the time, for example, where luthiers such as **Antonio Bagatella** of Padua was helping bring about a transition from the baroque violin of Leopold’s age into the singing ‘classical’ instruments that we know today. It is also the period where Wolfgang’s piano builder, **Anton Walter**, was helping to refine the ‘piano-forte’ into the instrument that we know.

And, on the side of finance, it was not just about patrons such as the Prince-

as important as this was, it was not sufficient to explain the emergence of Mozart.

The reality is, it was not any one of these things that enabled a Mozart to ‘happen’; rather, it was all of them combined – and then some. While perhaps obvious to most, in the ‘cult of the individual’ culture of today, I think it worthwhile to emphasize that even a talent as great as Mozart’s did not emerge from a vacuum. He was a product of a culture that had evolved to reflect a particular set of values, with or without him. But it was also a culture that embraced a talent like Mozart’s when it appeared. All of this cultural ecology was in place before

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Archbishop of Salzburg, **Sigismund von Schrattenbach**, who was instrumental, so to speak, in Mozart’s career. And it wasn’t just the expansion of music from the ecclesiastical to the secular. Nor was it either the development of civic music, or the growth of court orchestras that were employed by estates throughout Europe. Such developments were important and formed much of the infrastructure that enabled the young Wolfgang, before the age of 10, to tour with his sister Maria Anna Walburga Ignatia ‘Nannerl’ and father to Munich, Augsburg, Heidelberg, Mainz, Frankfurt, Koln, Brussels, Den Haag, Amsterdam, Paris, Zurich, Vienna, Presburg, London, Geneva, and Berne. But

Mozart’s birth; he came into a world where music and the culture that it represented was highly respected. It was a world where his talents would be recognized, valued, and could be cultivated.

But notice, the world is not populated by Mozarts. It is essential to understand that this ecology and these cultural values were not put in place to cultivate genius and did not anticipate the emergence of the likes of Mozart. Recognize and appreciate? Yes. But the fact is that all of this was put into place to cultivate more ‘mortal’ talents, such as Mozart’s contemporaries **Baguer, Clementi, Cramer, Gyrowetz, Herschel, Kozeleuch, Pichl, Pleyel, Stamitz** and the infamous **Salieri**.

In this, the expectations that determined the value system were rooted in reality. Success was not measured by how many Mozarts emerged, any more than the success of a business school would be determined by whether it created a **Bill Gates** or a **Warren Buffett**.

Our tradition of western music is a testament to what can emerge when an organization, a country, or a city structures itself around the valuing of creativity. What is often missed in this is the cost that was incurred for this to happen. None of what we have discussed came for free. At the risk of over-simplification, the fact was, according to the values of those who paid the price, this was a good investment.

What we see in all of this is not just the cultural foundation of creativity, but also the long-term commitment that it takes, and how deeply 'success' is rooted in values. Leaping ahead to the present, what does the cutting back of the creative arts in our school systems say about our values? In light of the de-emphasis on

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music, art, drama and even sport in our children's education, why should we be surprised that the level of creativity in business is somewhat wanting?

It isn't enough to just want to be creative: it takes work. But like Leopold's piano, anyone who is committed, and makes the effort, can reach a degree of competence, as an individual, as an organization or as a society. We can all get better. And in all of this, one should never forget the old joke:

*Says one New York tourist to a local, "Hey buddy, do you know how to get to Carnegie Hall?"*

*"Practice" was the reply.*

So you want a creative organization? Then learn from the joke. Practice. Practice what you preach, and don't delegate. Otherwise, nobody in your organization will think you take creativity seriously, and therefore they won't either. In the end, it is all about culture and values. ■

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William Buxton has a 30-year involvement in research and the design of technologies for creative endeavour, including music, film and industrial design. He was a researcher at Xerox PARC, a professor at the University of Toronto, and Chief Scientist of Alias Research and SGI Inc. He has been a lecturer at the Ontario College of Art and Design, and was principal of his own design and consulting firm, Buxton Design, in Toronto. He is currently a visiting researcher at Microsoft Research in Cambridge, England. For more information, visit [www.billbuxton.com](http://www.billbuxton.com)



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