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The Resilient Professional: Cultivating Creativity to Drive Impact in the Army Civilian Workforce

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In today's rapidly evolving professional landscape marked by complex challenges and dynamic environments, the ability to think creatively is no longer a luxury, it's a necessity. Just as adaptability is crucial for navigating life-and-death situations, it is equally vital for Army

civilian professionals (ACPs) to strive for excellence and impactful contributions. Plans often do not turn out as expected. Exceptional information can appear as an unforeseen threat to mission success or an unanticipated opportunity. "Exceptional information usually reveals the need for an

adjustment decision.”¹ But the resilient and creative professional can detect the clues to emerging exceptional information and poise Army leaders to mitigate threats or seize opportunities so they can plan fast and replan faster when adjustment decisions are forced by exceptional information.

What is Creativity, and Why Does It Matter for ACPs?

At its core, creativity represents the human brain’s remarkable ability to adapt to fast-changing environments, overcome emergent challenges, and seize new opportunities. This application of creativity is narrative creativity which “is a new, neuroscience-based approach to innovation, problem solving, and resilience.”² This narrative approach has a connection to positive psychology connected to human resilience as creativity enables individuals to adapt to challenges.³ Much like creativity is needed by soldiers wargaming plans to anticipate future states and prepare for them, so ACPs need creativity for cognitive flexibility.⁴ For ACPs, this translates into a powerful capacity to develop novel, surprising solutions, think beyond standard protocols, and drive innovation. This inherent power enables effective performance and success in volatile and unstable domains where traditional rule-based intelligence might fall short. A more creative civilian workforce, therefore, serves as a significant

organizational advantage, amplifying impact, and overcoming unforeseen obstacles, and inventing solutions that will surprise opponents.⁵ Fortunately for ACPs, it is a skill that can be demonstrably improved through practice.⁶

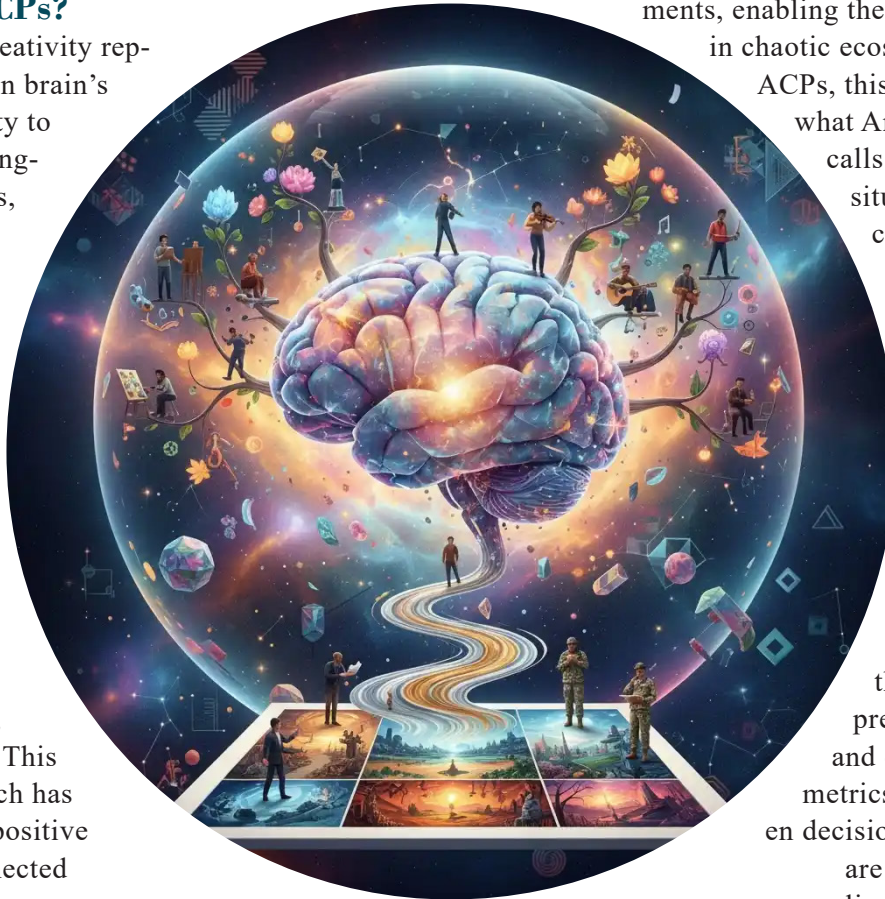
This view of innovation expands further to highlight creativity as the human brain’s power to adapt to fast-changing, life-and-death environments, enabling the species to thrive in chaotic ecosystems. For

ACPs, this means being what Angus Fletcher calls “antifragile” in situations where computer AI turns “brittle,” allowing them to out-compete and win in volatile, unstable domains.⁷

While modern advancements have led to computer artificial intelligence that claims to predict the future and offers endless metrics for data-driven decisions, computers are fundamentally limited to logic and cannot perform true invention or causal

discovery.⁸ This critical distinction underscores human creativity as an irreplaceable asset, providing a cognitive advantage, especially when facing competitors from totalitarian regimes that may not foster imaginative creativity.

Moreover, true professional excellence for ACPs demands initiative—the ability to act proactively and decisively, even when detailed guidance is absent or unforeseen circumstances arise.⁹ This proactive mindset involves actively creating solutions and developing the imagination to align



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with broader organizational intent when unexpected challenges emerge outside typical responsibilities. Creative thinking has been associated with adaptability and systemic problem-solving, which can support resilience by enabling professionals to reframe setbacks and identify alternative pathways forward.¹⁰ While the relationship among creativity, resilience, and optimism is complex and not strictly linear, cultivating these capacities together can create reinforcing benefits for ACPs. Resilience allows ACPs to rebound from defeat and maintain perspective, reducing the risk of pessimism or fatalism undermining imagination. (Note: CGSC

Finally, creativity is not an innate gift possessed by a select few geniuses, but rather a learned skill that can be consistently improved through deliberate practice and exercises, much like physical training strengthens muscles.¹⁴ The key to developing this skill is the desire to be creative, actively pushing oneself to think and act differently. The “new science of creativity,” rooted in psychology, emphasizes three interrelated practices: perspective-taking, situational openness, and cooperative teamwork. Perspective-taking enables ACPs to step outside their own assumptions, consider diverse viewpoints, and

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recently developed curriculum that emphasized teaming critical, creative, and resilient thinking.)¹¹

It is important to understand that creativity is not the enemy of compliance, but rather its fundamental source. The very regulations and procedures ACPs rely upon were themselves born of creative problem-solving, designed to make complex missions effective. Yet in today’s rapidly evolving professional landscape, unforeseen pressures can cause even well-crafted rules to falter. When this happens, creativity must activate to preserve the institution’s deeper intent through the invention of new procedures that respond to exceptional information. Logic remains indispensable in stable and predictable environments, but creativity becomes paramount in unstable and uncertain ones—the very conditions described in the introduction.¹² ACPs must therefore cultivate the discernment to know when to rely on logic and when to “toggle on” creativity, enabling them to plan fast and re-plan faster as adjustment decisions arise.¹³

anticipate how others may interpret emerging information. Situational openness cultivates the flexibility to adapt when conditions shift, encouraging professionals to embrace uncertainty rather than resist it. Cooperative teamwork ensures that creative insights are not isolated but integrated across groups, harnessing diversity for collective problem-solving. Together, these practices align perfectly with the military’s need to balance individual freedom and diversity with the public good by combining logic and narrative.¹⁵ By engaging in training that develops these capacities, ACPs become adaptive, resilient, and unpredictable—traits that are crucial for success in any operational domain and that directly support the case for adding creativity-focused lessons to the curriculum.¹⁶

The Science Behind Creative Power

Recent groundbreaking research, rooted in psychology and pioneered by institutions like The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), Ohio State’s Project Narrative, and the University of Pennsylvania Psychology

Department, has shed new light on how creativity can be systematically developed.¹⁷ Two videos that explain the study conducted at CGSC reside on the CGSC YouTube channel—links provided in references.¹⁸

At the heart of this “new science of creativity” lies the distinction between two fundamental types of human intelligence: logic and narrative, also known as perspective shifting and plot twisting.¹⁹ Logic excels in stable, certain environments, characterized by predictable rules and abundant data, enabling evidence-based reasoning, critical thinking, and mathematical computations. Conversely, narrative intelligence thrives in unstable and uncertain domains, where information may be scarce or contradictory.²⁰ Crucially, modern neuroscience demonstrates that computer artificial intelligence is fundamentally limited to logic, unable to perform true invention or causal discovery. This means that while computers can process vast amounts of data, they become “brittle” in unforeseen situations, making human narrative creativity an irreplaceable asset for anticipating the future and outcompeting adversaries who may rely solely on data-driven approaches.²¹

Narrative creativity operates through specific mental mechanisms, including causal thinking (speculating “why” things happen) and counterfactual thinking (imagining “what if” scenarios).²² These are the brain’s engines for generating original plans and strategies, allowing us to proactively anticipate future events and the actions of others. A key aspect of this process involves actively seeking out “anomalies”—events that do not conform to existing mental rules or expectations. While logic tends to dismiss these as random blips, narrative intelligence leverages anomalies as prompts to hypothesize new causal mechanisms, expanding our understanding and adaptive capacity.²³ This mental flexibility is further enhanced by perspective-taking, situational openness, and cooperative teamwork, which allow ACPs to harness individual freedom and diverse viewpoints for the public good.

Developing and harnessing this creative potential involves a multifaceted approach. It requires

cultivating a strong desire to be creative, which is identified as the source of innovation itself. Scientifically, creativity is mutually reinforced with resilience, forming a virtuous cycle where resilience breeds confidence and optimism, fueling creative thinking, which in turn leads to positive outcomes that further strengthen resilience.²⁴ Training involves learning to “shut off” logic when appropriate, allowing the brain’s imaginative plotting centers to engage. Furthermore, practices like “active rest”—engaging in physical activities and positive emotional experiences—are crucial for recharging the brain’s creative regions. Finally, embracing “good strife,” or productive conflict, is a proven method to foster innovation, as it mirrors the very process of biological evolution and encourages novel solutions through dynamic tension and diverse perspectives.²⁵

Practical Application and Demonstrated Results

The practical application of creativity for ACPs is not merely a theoretical concept but has demonstrated tangible results in enhancing performance and problem-solving (see endnotes 9, 12, 17, and 23). During the study conducted in the summer of 2022, participants who engaged in a specific two-hour lesson designed to stimulate brain creativity significantly outperformed a control group in improving their creative abilities when faced with complex, open-ended problems under time pressure. This “test group” also exhibited a notable seventeen-point increase in executed IQ, with one group of seventeen students showing nearly a 50 percent increase in creativity.²⁶ These findings, initially focused on military personnel, are highly transferable to ACPs, demonstrating that the “new science” principles of creativity, delivered through simple, targeted drills of ten to thirty minutes, can be easily integrated into professional development or “hip pocket” training sessions to cultivate improved creative capacity.²⁷

While the initial studies focused on military personnel, the findings are highly transferable. The “new science” principles and simple, targeted drills, which can take as little as ten to thirty

minutes, can be easily integrated into professional development or “hip pocket” training sessions for ACPs. These methods demand an open mind and a little effort, promising a clear path to improved creative capacity.²⁸ Below is a list of drills from the cited creativity field guide and how they might be helpful to ACPs:

Drill: Rebounding from Failed Plans (Module 2, Exercise 2): This drill enables ACPs to develop agile contingency plans and maintain mission continuity in the face of unexpected setbacks.

Drill: Adapting Operational Rules (Module 3, Exercise 2): By intentionally introducing novelty and uncertainty into their personal routines, ACPs can increase their spontaneous inventiveness and comfort with the unknown.

Drill: Imagining Future Stories (Module 7, Exercise 2): This exercise strengthens “plotting” or “storythinking” capabilities, enabling ACPs to develop diverse strategic narratives and long-term visions.

Drill: Identifying Potential Uses (Module 8, Exercise 2): This drill cultivates a “potential” mindset, helping ACPs to repurpose existing resources or technologies in novel ways.

Drill: Seeking Exceptional Information (Module 14, Exercise 1): This practice trains ACPs in the early identification of emergent threats and opportunities by actively seeking out “anomalies” or “outlying datapoints” that signal potential shifts in the environment.

Harnessing Productive Conflict (Module 18, Exercise 2): This drill enables ACPs to foster

innovative solutions through “good strife” and diverse perspectives within teams.

Perspective-Taking for Problem-Solving (Module 22, Exercise 2): This exercise enhances an ACP’s ability to develop comprehensive solutions by integrating multiple viewpoints, essentially building an “inner library of characters.”

Drill: Breaking Inertia (Module 29, Exercise 1): This drill helps ACPs overcome organizational inertia and cynicism by leveraging peer interaction and pride to motivate the generation and implementation of better solutions

Conclusion

So why is creativity so crucial for achieving our organizational goals and enhancing our effectiveness as Army civilian professionals? Just as a smaller, more agile force can outperform a larger one through creative tactics (see the Russia/Ukraine War, or the intro and conclusion to the article “From Research to Reality”), a more creative civilian workforce can significantly amplify its impact and contribute to greater organizational success.²⁹ When ACPs cultivate their creativity, they are better equipped to provide novel, innovative, and surprising solutions that can help anticipate future challenges, seize opportunities, and maintain a strategic advantage. The insights from this new science of creativity offer practical approaches applicable to your professional life to foster this vital skill and ultimately make a greater contribution to the Army’s mission while improving innovation and resilience. All it takes is an open mind and a little effort. ■

Notes

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