

# *Tapping into courageous creativity: finding your inner Danny*

**Liz Nottingham**



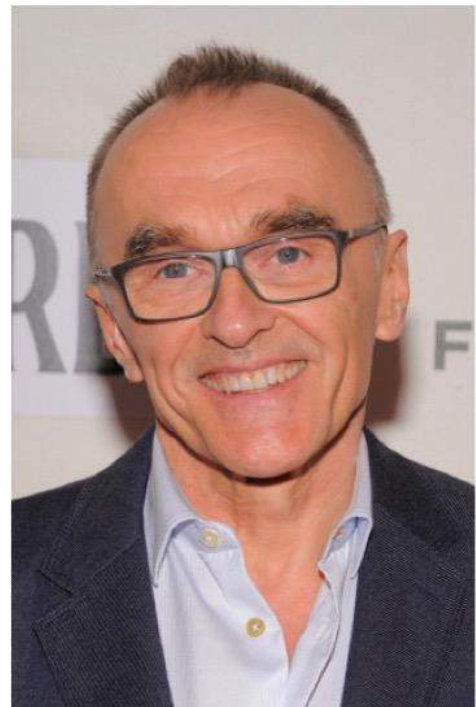
**Keywords:**

group psychology, change,  
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## **An inspiration for creative disruption: finding my inner Danny Boyle**

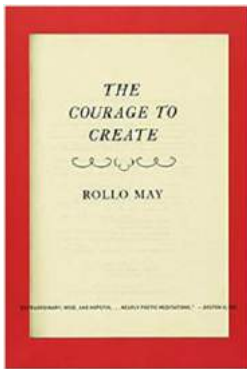
As I set about writing this piece, I was asked, “What is your example of creative collaboration?” I immediately visualized the summer of 2012. I would love to know what happened at the London Olympic Games Committee planning meeting, when Danny Boyle pitched his idea of dropping the Queen from a helicopter into the central stadium, to the delight of the waiting world. (See this short [video #1](#)).

I have often wondered how that conversation played out; who presented the idea, how was it received, who offered to contact the palace and what was the initial response to this highly creative - and daring - concept when it was put to Her Majesty? This was a summer that the UK never wanted to end. (Watch another short [video #2](#) of the opening ceremony).





The London Games created new communities, ignited new collaborations, generated an unprecedented global interest in the Paralympic Games and London felt that every day was sports day. We *inhaled* it. Yet in the build up to the Games, there was a UK element of anxiety and doubt. Some believed that we would be unable to pull it off, terrified that the transport system would not cope and that GB would look ridiculous on a global stage.



This is a great metaphor of creative disruption for me. Perhaps Danny Boyle had already discovered the humanistic psychologist and existentialist philosopher Rollo May:

“To live into the future means to leap into the unknown, and this requires a deep degree of courage for which there is no immediate precedent and which few people realise.”

(May, R. The Courage to Create, 1994.)

### What does this have to do with business?

Well, looking at the Olympic balance sheet, quite a bit! Lots of £000000's are on there, [financially](#) and otherwise (Goldhill 2014).

So, where does this leave me? I find myself increasingly curious about the creative opportunity within the global workplace. As a coach, facilitator, creative and HR bod, I have led organisational change programmes and know that nothing much changes as a result of a new organisation chart. I remain perplexed about the curious relationship of organisations and people. A quote that has stayed with me over the years is, “organisations are great, just don't put any people in them.” As a young HR manager at the time, I remember thinking, “how ridiculous!” I eventually got the message. People do not flourish in standard organisational structures and charts as your location in a box does not affect your behaviour, other than to create envy and annoyance when your box is disproportionate to that of your rival's. How many times have I heard leaders say that because someone is sitting next to someone that they will “naturally” engage with other people's work? I've got enough of my own work to do without getting involved in yours!

You can put me in a leadership box, but without support, clarity and training I may well carry on doing only the things I know how to do. But the charts look great along with the all-encompassing circle around them with **COLLABORATION** writ large. Sitting in yet another dull meeting room staring at a white board to solve unprecedented issues does not work, yet still we keep doing it - and foolishly expecting things to change. Margaret Heffernan ([www.mheffernan.com](http://www.mheffernan.com)) at the HR Changeboard conference in 2016 advocated that businesses need to recruit more designers to help business shape solutions to the questions that have never been asked before. Designers can't stop designing the unknown and the unseen. It is in their DNA.

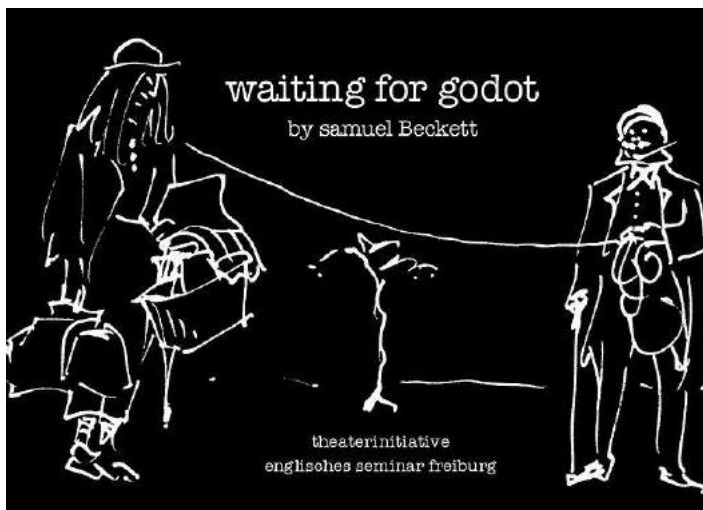
So, I wonder that *if* the only person who likes change truly is a baby with a wet nappy, never before has there been a need for the emergence of new brave, vulnerable and creative leadership.

### Starting a new movement to change the conversation

If we can't afford a designer or a creative director in our business, how do we start to change the conversation? The time has come to start a new movement. Just take a look at the basics of where we are in the workplace. Our core working hours framework for most UK offices runs on a 9am - 5pm contract as a remnant of post war Britain. We can surely do better than that!

My premise is that we have worked our way through many iterations of leadership from command and control, to charismatic, authentic and transformational. Recently, in Cannes, the advertising community was talking of "matriarchal leadership." My sense is that we need a creative, human and inclusive leadership style and practice. As May says, we need courage. And to respond to the unknown, we need creativity. I don't see this on most leadership development curricula, and if I do, it seems to be a bedfellow with strategy, and married to the world of digital. Hardly very human.

### My own Danny moment



'Waiting for Godot', [theatre poster](#) by [fewskulchor](#), Wikimedia Commons

My intention is to support our current and emerging leaders to find their courageous creativity. In doing so, I explain how I have learned to walk my own walk.

As a newly appointed Human Resources Director, I was once tasked with reducing an eye-watering 60% staff turnover figure.

Feedback from a leadership workshop one day revealed a group of leaders complaining about the shortcomings of the next layer of leadership above them and them bemoaning how the mythical 'they' should do 'x, y and z.'

Their workshop was a disturbing scene from *Waiting for Godot*; a belief that 'someone' would turn up and sort it all out for them. They were the transactional analysis victims. 'Victim' writ large.

If our leaders are waiting, then who was leading? A radical response was required without a flip chart, standard meeting rooms and a dull diet of leadership theory and content. Urgent disruption with a dose of personal responsibility was needed! This was my moment of transformational learning as I faced a disorienting dilemma as described by Jack Mezirow. Jack states that "disorienting dilemmas are experiences that don't fit into a person's current beliefs about the world. When faced with a disorienting dilemma, people are forced to reconsider their beliefs in a way that will fit this new experience into the rest of their worldview. This often happens through 'critical reflection' in the context of dialogue with other people." Jack Mezirow (1923-2014)

### **My moment of critical reflection - introducing some creative disruption**

In 2008, I partnered with a facilitator and ran a proto type two-day residential at a yoga retreat people. We immersed participants in new concepts; silent walks, journaling, exploring who they are and their impact on others. We introduced -allegedly-challenging vegetarian food, candles, cushions and self-reflection. It nearly blew their minds! A few of them demanded to go home, whilst others said that it was the best thing that they had ever experienced! After much inquisition and challenge of my design and methods, and listening to group members' learning upon their return to the office, I ran this workshop a subsequent 17 times, and participants continue to reference it today.

This first, experimental week was the white knuckle ride of my career! My concept for self-development was so radically different, so brave compared to anything anyone had experienced previously. I was almost throwing myself out of my own helicopter – long before Danny did the same with the Queen!

### **Changing the status quo isn't easy**

My learning was that, when we disrupt people, they aren't necessarily happy about that moment of disruption. How do we evaluate this in an organisation? I also notice that those in leadership positions do not always want their people to be transformed beyond the current ways of working, because the current ways of working, at some level, serve those who set the prevailing rules. How often have we heard managers say to the enthusiastic workshop returner; "well that's all very well, but we don't do that around here"? For the bold facilitator, the shoots of the results may appear long after the even - after necessary time for reflection, processing, percolating and experimenting. Trust in the process is key and the facilitator needs to hold this space with the anxious client.

Changing one aspect of the system ([Foster 2012](#)), changes everything, in time. And that takes bravery. Relationships are in a state of constant motion on many simultaneous levels. We are in relationship with ourselves, in teams, in groups at work and other situations. We all carry our past with us and any situation or relationship can trigger us at any time. As facilitators, we affect many aspects of the whole system when we work with members of a part of the system. It is inevitable that these interventions create movement in other places and spaces.

## Finding Your Inner Danny within The Wheel of Creativity

I have drawn upon my own experiences and reflections, and created a wheel of courageous creativity as an eight-stage conceptual framework, to suggest a way for you to express your own creative leadership.

Having read an ArtGym article on the traits of creative leadership, I decided to create my own visual tool. Creative leadership may be an overwhelming subject for some, with confusion about where to start. This wheel invites the reader to reflect, to listen to their inner wisdom and self-assess how they are in relationship with themselves and others. It can also be used as coaching tool in pairs or as a group.

The plotting of the wheel highlights the areas for potential consideration for your focus and growth; When working 1:1, or facilitating workshops, I am noticing my increased use of this approach. The image helps us to connect and reflect at a deeper level and when complete, reveals interconnections which we may not previously noticed. To be human we need to listen to ourselves, to others, encourage others and make space for their growth. If we enter meetings with a pre-conceived view of the outcome, we have denied other voices being heard and alternative outcomes being explored.

“Innovation is blocked when one (or more) of the participants already has a preconceived idea of how to reach the goal; improvisers frown on this practice, pejoratively calling it ‘writing the script in your head.’ People who listen closely are energising, and people who energise others are proven to be higher performers.”

(Sawyer 2017: 46)

## Who you are is how you lead

I offer this wheel of courageous creativity (see Figure 1 below) as the start of a new conversation with ourselves, as we consider that;

“By bringing our whole selves to work, we will be igniting creativity not only in ourselves but also in others.”

(Whitaker 2016)

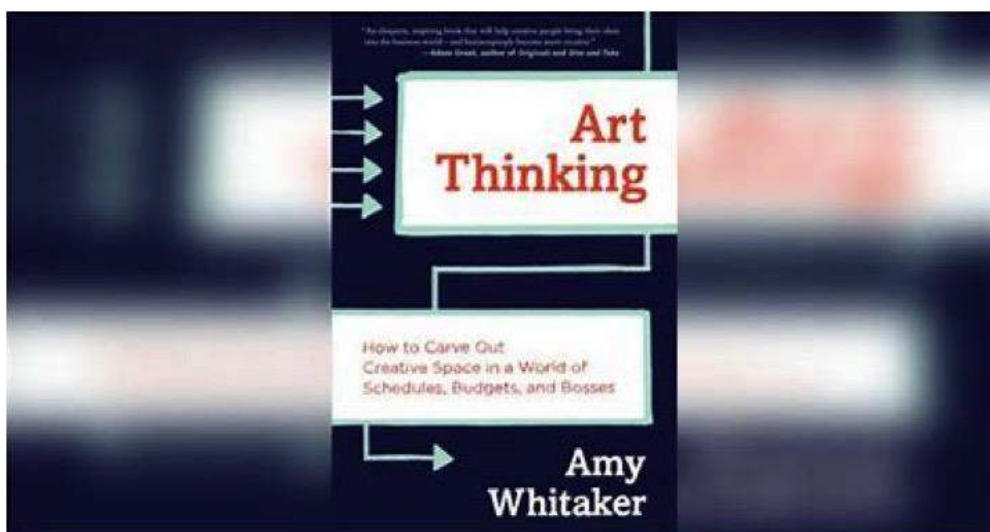
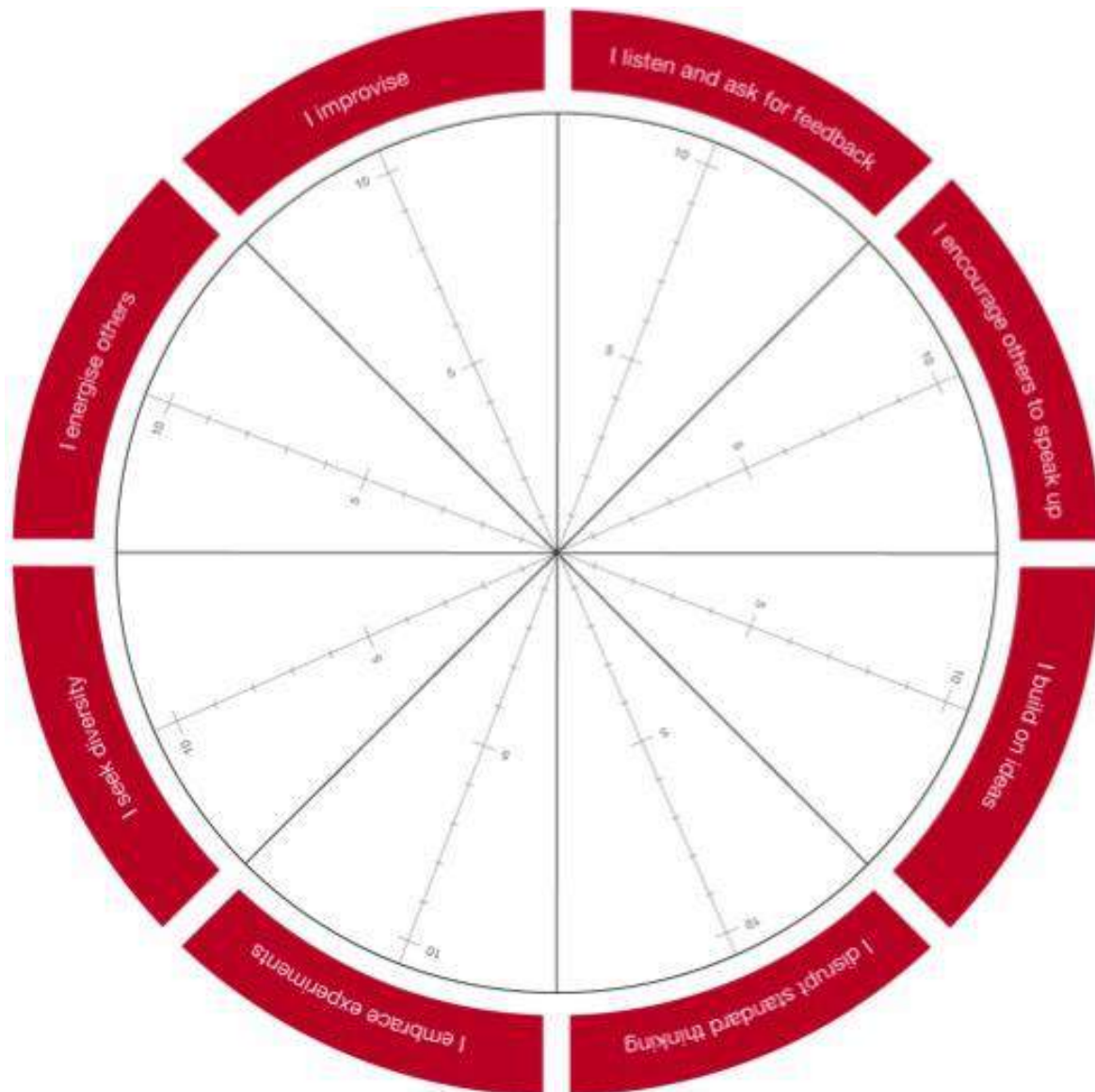


Figure 1: The wheel of courageous creativity



Inspired by ArtGym, and developed by me, Liz Nottingham

### How to find *your* Inner Danny

As you explore the wheel, either alone, or in pairs, or groups, reflect on each of the following aspects of the wheel:

#### 1. I encourage others to speak up

Check in how much safety is in the room for people to feel comfortable to speak. A creative leader listens to others and gives space and attention for others to be both heard and be seen. Notice who closes others down in meetings and what happens to them when people are not heard.

**Ask** lots of open questions; who? what? when? where? how? If you like to talk a lot, count to ten before you speak. If you tend to be quiet, speak by the count of ten.

## 2. I build on ideas

With creating a safe space comes the golden opportunity to be curious, to grow and develop the shared ideas. In this space there is no ego and no ridicule. Together, we start to co-create and cultivate the greatest possibilities. As the leader, you drop your ego and noise and truly build on these ideas, no matter where they come from.

**Respond** with “yes ... and” and delete the “no ... but” from your language. Notice how often you say no.

## 3. I disrupt standard thinking

As creative leaders, we have to go for the bold, the unseen, the unknown and disrupt ourselves and others.

**Ask** “what is the greatest possible outcome here and who cares?” Check in with yourself about a time when you really pushed the impossible, or did you choose to stay safe? Are you playing big enough?

## 4. I embrace experiments

You can learn from design thinking and test and learn. Create prototypes, try things out and build out your ideas. Create a group of supporters and dissenters and explore your ideas and approach with them. The worst thing that can happen is you end up with a better outcome! I introduced Mindfulness in the work place 10 years ago by taking this approach.

**Ask:** “I don’t have all the answers here; let’s try it for a road test and see what happens.” Be curious about others’ experience.

## 5. I seek diversity

When we pay attention to seeking diversity, we start to actively explore the juicy part in the points of difference. Curiosity and an open heart and mind are key here, as we all like people who are just that little bit like us. Employ a team of people who look nothing like you, walk nothing like you and have experiences that are nothing like yours. Actively invite people from other departments and teams to add another layer of richness to your thinking.

**Ask** “am I playing safe, again?” and “what am I afraid of?”

## 6. I energise others

Who we are is how we lead. How much of ourselves we bring to work impacts those around us.

**Ask:** “How am I showing up as a leader today, do I add to the relationship?” Check in with yourself throughout the day. “How was I in my last meeting? “How is my energy right now?”

## 7. I improvise

As creative leaders we are co-creating the conditions for group flow. Keith Sawyer says:

“In Group flow, each person’s idea builds on those just contributed by his or her colleagues. The improvisation appears to be guided by an invisible hand towards a peak but small idea build and an innovation emerges.” (Group Genius p.50)

As leaders, we stand on shaky ground. To prepare us to respond to uncertainty in the best way, we can turn to the drama skills of improvisation as we respond in the moment, to the moment.

## 8. I listen and ask for feedback.

“*There is no failure, only feedback*” is an NLP pre-supposition. When did you last seek out feedback? How might it be a gift for you? What is your relationship with feedback? Check out Liz Lerman and her creative [Critical Review Process](#) for a new approach

Now is the time for a new lens on leadership that extends beyond the company mechanics of finance, as reporting on the past is no longer an accurate barometer of the future. If we choose not to explore our inner Danny, we all run the risk of failure.

Even if we dialled up just one of these areas on the wheel, it would most likely lead to a different result and we may learn something about ourselves on the way. My business experience tells me that in most organisations, there is a great deal of telling going on and not much listening. So next time you are heading into one of many meetings this week, remember the supreme creative power of listening;

“At work, conversation with colleagues is one of the most flow inducing activities; managers, in particular, are most likely to be in flow when they are engaged in conversation. Conversation leads to flow, and flow leads to creativity.”

(Group Genius p.43)

## What can group psychology offer organisations?

Developing our creative leadership style also requires us to look at the teams of people in our organisations and respond to them in a new way. My recent creative facilitation studies with the Artgym introduced me to the work of T Martin Ringer and his insightful group work in [Group Action](#).

As a leader, it strikes me that there has been a missing link in the evolution of our business leaders, as the obvious parallel - that has been drawn by very few - is that *organisations are in fact groups*. This is an obvious thing to say when I think about it, yet no one in the businesses I have experienced has paid attention to the unconscious world in the workplace, or attended to this as a strong presence in the office. Group work requires expertise, time and attention.

The following Ringer paragraph changes the organisational dynamic for me and thus confirms the case for a new leadership dialogue:

“Most people prefer to act as if groups are just collections of individuals and the same principles can be applied to managing groups, teams and meetings as can be applied to managing one-to-one conversations. I’m still regularly in contact with otherwise competent professionals who just



do not seem to know how much more effective they could be if they were more effective group leaders.”

(Group Action p. 27)

## Being human

In a technological world with reward and recognition for cognitive skills, we need to be human and humane. We need to bring our whole selves when being in relationship with others. We need to know ourselves to be flexible with others. Only when we are in a relationship with ourselves can we better respond to the needs of others with courageous creativity.

As you reflect on your own creative leadership, I close with a final reflection on Danny Boyle;

“Danny Boyle (and all those who helped him) managed to do the impossible. He banished thoughts of cynicism and gave Britain something to be proud of, putting their sports, their music, their film, their literature, and even their healthcare system, front and center. But he also created a vision both personal and deeply weird, yet also universal.”

(Oliver Lyttelton 28 July 2012, IndieWire)

Imagine for a moment the greatest possible outcome for your creative leadership for yourself, your team and the wider system. I wish you well in finding your inner Danny.

## Envoi

I would like to point out that I have never met Danny Boyle and am only referencing my experience of his creative output as a source of inspiration for my own.

## Acknowledgements

[www.artgym.com](http://www.artgym.com)

[www.lizlerman.com](http://www.lizlerman.com)

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2012 London Olympic Games opening ceremony 2: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QL\\_uG2GSZo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QL_uG2GSZo)

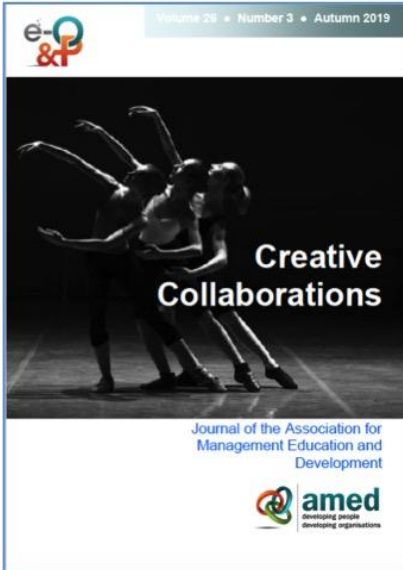
## About the author

**Liz** is passionate and relentless about exploring creative ways to develop people to be the best they can be. Founder of one of the early initiatives to support returning mums with her Back2BusinessShip programme, Liz is also a campaigner for diversity on the advisory board of Creative Equals, a Trustee for Art Against Knives and the Darjeeling Children's Trust, a coach supervisor and advanced facilitator in creative collaboration.

Liz is recognized for her bold and inspirational approach to the people agenda, shaping culture and disrupting learning and development. She has won many awards for her talent development work and led a business into the Sunday Times Top 100 listing three times.

Regarded as a pioneer in the advertising industry with the introduction of mindfulness 9 years ago before it was corporately acceptable, Liz has initiated wellbeing weeks and introduced both GPs and sleep doctors into the agency world, and contributed to Margaret Chapman's book, *Mindfulness in the Workplace*.

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