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Machine**

Donald Roth

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Abstract

"I... see the potential to use this secular book as a demonstration of an important aspect of what it means to do business Christianly."

Posting about the book *The Imagination Machine* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/cultivating-organic-creativity-a-review-of-the-imagination-machine/>

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Cultivating Organic Creativity: A Review of *The Imagination Machine*

Donald Roth

July 21, 2022

Title: *The Imagination Machine: How to Spark New Ideas and Create Your Company's Future*

Author: Martin Reeves and Jack Fuller

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Creativity touches on something close to the heart of humanity. It's not what makes us human, but it is a distinctive human capacity. Animals have remarkable abilities that often outstrip our own, but when it comes to the human ability to categorize, abstract, imagine, and consequently intentionally engage with the world around us, the difference of degree is so large as to point to a difference in kind. Even artificial intelligence, which often betters human computational power, struggles to make the leap to the creativity of a kindergartener.¹

In short, creativity is something we're good at, but it's also something we think about in mystical terms. It is often imagined as the effervescence of a unique genius, and creative professionals like how musicians often spend their lives chasing the muse that once inspired them, typically with diminishing returns. Businesses follow a similar story arc. What was once a vibrant, creative startup often fades to the drab, mechanical bureaucracy of a larger operation. This trajectory of diminishing creativity (and reversing that trend) is what inspires Jack Fuller and Martin Reeves in their book *The Imagination Machine*.

While the book is interesting on its own terms, I'm going to embrace the spirit of creativity to take this review essay in a slightly different direction. There are great ideas in the book that will be worth reading for those interested in fostering a more entrepreneurial, creative culture at their organizations, but I also see the potential to use this secular book as a demonstration of an important aspect of what it means to do business Christianly, which will serve as my principle focus.

What the book says

As mentioned, this book is inspired by a dilemma: why do organizations struggle to maintain the spirit of creativity that often fueled their initial success? In approaching this, the authors

start with a definition of imagination as “the ability to create a mental model of something that doesn’t exist yet.”² They root the birth of imagination in the experience of surprise, and their method for seeking to foster repeatable innovation is therefore about cultivating an environment where surprise can flourish.

Following the definition, the book moves through chapters focused on the process of innovation, including a blend of practices that foster creativity and roadblocks to each step. It concludes with a series of exercises or games that an organization can use to cultivate each step along the path to innovation.

What caught my eye about this book is that it avoids fixating on creative individuals or processes. These are certainly entailed, but the book’s primary focus is on cultivating a creative *organization*. In the chapter entitled “The Epidemic,” the authors focus on imagination as a collective action. This involves (among other things) spending time together, learning to name things well, sharing autonomy, and being willing to adopt a spirit of play. It can be strangled by an environment of excessive silos and by depersonalizing ideas. To escape this environment requires recognizing one another as people and opening up a richer, more diverse inner life in an organization. In short, the author’s approach is about organizational theory as much as it is about process or technique, and I think this opens fascinating connections to a Christian perspective.

What the book can embody

In the Reformed tradition, both Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck borrowed and modified an idea about how we act together called *organicism*. As Kuyper described the concept in his political manifesto *Our Program*, institutions are “not an aggregate but a living whole. Families and...businesses...are not mechanically assembled but, like groups of cells in a human body, are organically formed by a natural urge that, even when degenerate or deviant, is generally obedient to a higher impulse.”³

This includes the classical concept that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, but it also goes further. The idea is that God calls all of Creation into acting in a way that is vibrant, dynamic, and purposive, and we don’t shed these characteristics when we act together. This purpose isn’t defeated by humanity’s spiritual blindness, but Christians have a particularly rich invitation to act collectively and intentionally to answer God’s specific calling for some arena of life.

Going further, this perspective invites us to think about the specifics of how we answer God’s calling when we act together in a business. While much more could be said here, the most basic approach to calling is to look for areas of life where God voices a specific desire for human activity. In doing this, I turn to what is often termed the cultural mandate, that Genesis 1:28’s call to be “fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.”⁴

In short, when we think of business as an organism, it invites in a rich set of intuitive comparisons to ecosystem, environment, and bodily health. It goes beyond individualistic notions of things like creativity to look to organizations, and it views organizations as more than flowcharts and reporting structures. It depicts businesses as organizations within a dynamic whole and gives them an organic vibrancy that must be tended and cultivated. In taking an approach keyed in to some of these themes, *The Imagination Machine* offers potent tools to managers seeking to do such cultivation.

What Christian business embodies

If this was as far as I planned to go, I could be justly accused of baptizing a secular book with some possibly flimsy connections to a couple of dead Dutch theologians and calling it good. However, a thoroughly Christian approach to business must aspire to more than that. Sure, a business owner can desire to innovate, and a Christian business owner could take up this book as inspiration for cultivating such changes in their business, but why?

I would argue that this goes beyond answering the cultural mandate to address what we do when we answer God's calling. Human beings were made in the image of God, and this image emerges in greater detail when we act not as the individuals of God, but as His *people*. It may be a controversial thesis, but I believe that institutions will reflect God's character just as each individual participating in them does. We see this in how the apostle Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ. Abraham Kuyper made a similar argument about the character of the university as a temple of knowledge.⁵ I think we can extend this to businesses as well.

When we create, we reflect the image of our Creator. When businesses innovate, they do the same. We all have a responsibility to help answer the call to cultivate flourishing throughout creation, but Christians in business have the ability to intentionally contextualize this activity within our calling to be image bearers.

Creativity is a distinctive human capacity. All humans reflect our Creator in this, knowingly or not. What this book offers (more in the unwitting way) is tools for Christians in business to intentionally cultivate the creativity that God has bestowed us with. I believe a Christian approach to business entails attending to just this sort of cultivation as a concrete means of reflecting God's glory.

1. To see what I mean, just compare the creative effort of an algorithm forced to watch over 1,000 hours of Batman movies to *Axe Cop*, a web comic created by a 5 year old partnered with his 29 year old brother. The non sequiturs and absurdity of both are hilarious, but the first is funny for the things it gets right (but still so wrong) in copying Batman, the other is funny for its creative improvisations that elevate the comic to become a new thing entirely.

2. p. 7
3. Abraham Kuyper, *Our Program: A Christian Political Manifesto*, trans. and ed., Harry Van Dyke (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 44.
4. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=genesis+1%3A28&version=ESV>
5. https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol49/iss4/2/