People tend to associate creative leaders with big breakthroughs and large-scale innovations. Although such outcomes can result in leaders being recognized as creative, it is argued here that creative leadership is defined in how leaders respond to the ill-defined and atypical situations of leadership. In this way, creative leadership refers to the ability to respond to the everyday challenges and opportunities of leadership in new and meaningful ways (see Beghetto & Kaufman, 2007; Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009; Plucker, Beghetto, & Dow, 2004 for an overview of conceptions of creativity). In what follows, three corollaries are highlighted that can be derived from the assertion that creative leaders distinguish themselves from other leaders in how they respond to the micromoments of everyday leadership.

Corollary 1: Creative Leaders Know When To Be Creative

There is a time and a place for creative leadership. Indeed, accomplished creators know how to read the environment and determine whether it is worth the risk to be creative (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2013). One favorite thought experiment illustrates this principle by asking participants to imagine oneself on a routine flight. The last thing one would want to hear is the pilot announcing that he or she wants to try out a creative, wheel-less landing maneuver in a nearby cornfield. If, on the other hand, the plane was in trouble and needed to perform an emergency landing, then you would be much more open to the pilot’s creative landing ideas.

As the above example illustrates, it is not always worth the risk to deviate from the routine and standard ways of doing things. The question for leaders, then, is not “should I be a creative leader?” but rather “when should I use my creativity as a leader?” Leaders should use their creativity when routine ways of doing things no longer work or are in need of improvement.

Corollary 2: Creative Leadership Is about Moments Not Monuments

Although it is true that monumental accomplishments can result in leaders being immortalized as creative legends, it is also true that creative leaders are forged in the day-to-day moments of leadership. All leaders face “creative micromoments” (Beghetto, 2013), which are ruptures in the habits, procedures, and routines of daily life. Such moments are marked by feelings of uncertainty and genuine doubt. In the context of leadership, they occur anytime leaders face ill-defined and atypical situations. These are defining moments for leaders.

Rather than ignore or attempt to quickly resolve an unexpected turn of events by force-fitting a prior way
of doing things, creative leaders view such moments as a sign that new thinking is needed (Beghetto, in press-a). The new kind of thinking is called an unshakeable sense of possibility thinking (UPT, Beghetto, in press-b). UPT refers to a willingness to move from “what is” or “what has been” to “what could or should be.” It involves the confidence to persist in the face of uncertainty and willingness to abandon ideas in pursuit of more viable ones. When leaders approach unscripted moments with UPT, they increase their chances of discovering and successfully implementing creative and innovative outcomes. They also model a more viable way of approaching complex problems and atypical situations (cf. Jaussi & Dionne, 2003).

Corollary 3: Creative Leaders Democratize Opportunities for Creative Leadership

Creative leaders recognize that creativity is not restricted to those in named leadership positions but rather is something all people in an organization have the capacity to use. Creative leaders establish conditions and expectations for everyone in an organization to consider, try out, and learn from the implementation of new possibilities. They lead the way by their actions and the creativity-supportive environments they establish (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002).

In the context of schools, for example, the fruits of creative leadership can be seen in the remarkable accomplishments of students and teachers (see, e.g., Beghetto, in press-a, in press-b). Such accomplishments are not the result of a few extraordinary people but rather the extraordinary results of ordinary people. What distinguishes creative schools (from less creative ones) is an environment that supports and encourages UPT in students and teachers. That is not to say that UPT will always result in extraordinary outcomes but rather that there will be little chance for such outcomes if people fail to view micromoments as opportunities to think and act in new ways.

Concluding Thoughts

The identity of the creative leader is defined in the uncertain moments of leadership. These moments serve as the crucible in which the creative leader is forged. Creative leaders are able to recognize and capitalize on the opportunities that such moments provide. Consequently, creative leaders understand that (a) creativity is not always needed, (b) their identity as a creative leader is less about monumental accomplishments and more about their approach to surprising turns of events, and (c) their success as creative leaders is demonstrated in their ability to democratize possibility thinking and creative action in their organizations.

References


Dr. Ronald A. Beghetto is an international expert on creativity in educational settings. He serves as a Professor of Educational Psychology in the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. Prior to joining...
the faculty at UConn, Dr. Beghetto served as the College of Education’s Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Education Studies at the University of Oregon. Dr. Beghetto is the Editor-in-Chief for the Journal of Creative Behavior and serves on the editorial board for several creativity and education journals. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association and the Society for the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts (Division 10, APA). Communications can be directed to Ronald.beghetto@uconn.edu.