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It calls for concepts in systems, design, affective response and human factors: the domain of creative thinking, a field developed during the past seven decades. The *Harvard Business Review's* Breakthrough Ideas for 2004 February issue presents the Creativity Index, an indicator of a country's ability to achieve growth through the use of technology, talent and tolerance. The index did not place Australia even among the top 15.

The prevailing view among Australian business leaders is an old one — that creativity is the domain of the artist. Robyn Nevin, artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company, captured this attitude in her Australia Day speech this year when she reflected on the "unease of Australians towards a softer appreciation of things. Australians have traditionally been uneasy around overt expression of emotion, around sensitive people expressing that sensitivity".

US corporations have realised that those best trained to express their emotions are practising artists because they provide a rich design resource for product or service differentiation. By contrast, Australian companies' only real association with the arts has been through sponsorship. Sponsorship of the arts in Australia allows corporations to network with art elites and offer clients access to first-night openings or celebrations. But neither arts theory nor the skills and knowledge base are pursued for their relevance to industry.

Rather than use arts as their inspirational models for creativity, corporate leaders exhort their senior managers to find new heights in performance by learning from the peak-performance examples of our great Australian sporting heroes. For the corporate conservative, a sporting champion's mind-set, represents the most popular and least threatening metaphor for commercial innovation and creativity.

The problem is the metaphor. Sporting heroes are a unique minority, with a short lifespan normally based on youth and physical attributes no longer within grasp of 95 per cent of the population or to

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senior managers in their mid-40s to 50s. The motivational speaker industry is littered with sporting heroes who relate nothing more than anecdotal accounts of their days of glory — and suggest that any one of us can learn to become a champion. All we need, as Nike has it, is to "just do it".

Both artists and sporting champions share a mental discipline but, contrary to popular opinion, the artistic path is the far more knowable and attainable route. In the US, if you express a worthy creative idea, the cultural value system dictates that it be embraced with enthusiasm, explored openly and confidently and, if it shows merit, given an airing in appropriate forums. The theory is that the world is full of good ideas; the modus operandi is to find good ones and implement them for the prosperity and health of the nation.

In Australia, by contrast, a good idea is initially greeted with total scepticism. "It's been done before" is almost without exception the opening response. Under these prevailing norms, a genuine and informed debate about creativity and innovation — considered soft topics at best in corporate Australia — is difficult to move on to the public agenda.

Research carried out by IBM with 456 chief executive officers revealed that during the next five years revenue raising rather than cost cutting will be the main goal of business. Asked how they intended

to accomplish this, two-thirds said through innovation.

During the past 12 months, creativity and innovation within Australian business has become a hot topic. As a result, Australian corporations are rushing to employ people with the word "innovation" in their titles. What is important here is that innovation is recognised as a new necessity for business. Yet few leaders have the background to recognise or support it as an operational goal.

There is, on the other hand, eagerness by senior management to embrace, explore and experience the opportunities and processes that a formal arts and applied creative education might offer. As an early solution, the Singapore Government during the past couple of years has spent substantial sums on developing and introducing creativity courses into the high school and tertiary level curriculum.

Australia has a history of being inventive but failing to capitalise on the invention. The black box flight recorder, the orbital engine, gene shears technology and most recently cyber technology are all inventions Australians can justly be proud of. The old argument that capital is scarce and the market small is no longer an acceptable excuse.

Australian business management is imbued with a sense of research and development but it lacks the skills, knowl-

edge and confidence to work commercially, creatively and innovatively. To change this mind-set, senior corporate executives need to put marketplace demands on tertiary institutions to provide many more formal courses in creativity and innovation.

Once universities oblige, business will then be able to engage in informed exchanges with the arts industry; employ arts graduates at senior management levels, and through this process actually begin to perceive creativity not as an aesthetic proposition alone but as a complete design system. This way, the creative advantage can be trained and deployed as a national resource to keep competitive pace in the globalisation of business and as a carrier of civilisation.

Robert Lutz, chairman of General Motors, summed up the case for creativity when he said, "I see us being in the art business. Art, entertainment, and mobile sculpture, which coincidentally also happens to provide transportation."

Ralph Kerle is a drama graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts and the founder of Ventures Australia, a design and production company. He was a speaker at a recent conference to mark the 50th anniversary of the Creative Problem Solving Institute, part of the US Creative Education Foundation.

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Power of artistic thinking

Business should be demanding tertiary courses on innovation, writes **Ralph Kerle**

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