

# How getting creative can help you in a crisis

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"Collaboration, community and creativity are our best hopes for the future." This is according to fine artist Duncan Stewart, who spoke about developing and enhancing your inherent creativity as a tool to future-proof yourself at Saica's *Leadership in a time of crisis* webinar series.



Fine artist Duncan Stewart

"I suspect it's a bit of a risk on Saica's part, to invite an artist on this platform," says the internationally trained and locally resident fine artist, Duncan Stewart. "It's a perfect example of how this coronavirus global crisis has forced us to take risks and to do things out of the ordinary," he adds.

As an artist, Stewart holds creativity very close to his heart, and he believes there are many avenues we can explore to develop our own creativity. "I would love to share what I have learned and unlearned in my journey to becoming an artist, and some studio habits that have become very helpful during this crisis," he says. "Hopefully, this information will give business owners and organisational leaders a different insight on how to manage a crisis."

## Crisis as a work of art

The situation we find ourselves in is chaotic, which for Stewart may not be the worst thing. "Chaos is a phenomenal raw material," he says. "Ordering the chaos takes creativity, but out of it we can discover beauty," he believes.

Stewart studied graphic design and worked in an advertising agency for many years before he realised it wasn't his life's purpose. He knew he needed to find his 'why', and that the only way of doing so would be to put himself in a radically different environment so he could unlearn everything he knew. "I packed my bag and travelled to Italy, where I couldn't speak the language, didn't know what was going to happen and where nobody knew me," he says. "Covid-19 has taken us all to a radically different environment, albeit involuntarily, and whether we're ready or not, it's going to force us to unlearn what we know, which can be an incredibly painful, yet valuable, process."

For Stewart, learning to think like an artist can be very helpful to all of us in situations such as this, no matter what industry

we work in. He believes there are four key skills that he learned as an artist, that can help you navigate your own way through this crisis.

## **1. Observing**

Observation is a far more complicated exercise than most people realise. “I have taught art to a lot of people, and I’ve noticed that they don’t draw what they see, but rather what they think they see. Our non-verbal, intuitive side has very little chance to develop at school and we, therefore, have a dominant verbal and analytical way of thinking. This means that our expectations often get in the way of perceiving reality. For example, when drawing eyes, invariably students will draw them two-thirds of the way up the face, whereas, in reality, they are halfway up. That is because they are drawing their ideas of ahead, and not what they are really seeing. Observing your reality is a very important skill, both in art and in life. Have you really examined your life? Who you are, and who you are becoming? Have you observed some of the key problems that are blocking you or the team that you lead? Once you begin to really observe, you will understand the relationships between things, how big certain situations are in relation to others, and what is really important.

## **2. Envisioning**

This creative habit involves making mental images internally and using those to guide your actions and solve problems. For example, Stewart will often ask a student how much white space they plan on leaving around an item, or what artwork would look like if they left out a certain element. These kinds of questions require imagination – which is something we all have. Imagination is the power to bring to mind things that aren’t present in your reality. Use this time to imagine, without judgement, different scenarios for yourself and for your business in the future. Have you developed a vision for yourself? Can you imagine different scenarios? Creativity is applying that imagination – taking those imagined ideas and making something meaningful out of them. It is an incredibly important tool and will help you find successful solutions for the future.

## **3. Innovation**

“Sometimes I can work on a piece using all of my skills, and it will just be dead. Once, I got so frustrated with a piece that I threw turpentine all over it, and discarded it,” says Stewart. “The next morning, magic had happened. The paints had mixed in ways I never could have imagined and the piece was perfect.” All art teachers place a high value on making a mess, taking a risk and playing around. If you come from a place of being willing to let things die, unlearning, deconstructing, breaking down and allowing for chaos to enter, you are opening up space for the magic to happen. Covid-19 has created chaos. But it has also brought opportunity. Look at that chaos and decide what to embrace and what to discard. It’s going to take an enormous amount of innovation to move through this.

## **4. Reflection.**

Art students are always invited to evaluate their work, to take a break, step back and analyse. It changes everything. “Sometimes I step back, look at my work for a while, and think: ‘Should I add orange?’, and then realise, no because then I will need to change everything else,” says Stewart. This is an incredibly valuable tool. Extracting yourself from a situation and taking time to reflect can give you all the insight you need.

As we enter this time of loss, of unlearning who we were, and relearning what we need to become, as we embrace these creative disciplines of observing, envisioning, innovating and reflecting, Stewart reminds us that the key is to be true to our authentic selves. “The journey of an artist is uncomfortable, but there’s a great amount of energy that comes from being creative,” he says. “Now is the time to embrace your true self, your inner artist and the creativity you have within.”

*To help address the challenges faced by many, Saica hosted a complimentary virtual leadership series called Leadership in a time of crisis. This series focused on various elements affecting individuals, businesses and the profession as a whole during the Covid-19 pandemic. Sessions in this series have been recorded and can be viewed for free on [Saica's events page](#).*

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The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (Saica), South Africa’s pre-eminent accountancy body, is widely

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