

# Championing creativity

Allan Snyder has a grand plan to unleash the full creative potential of society, writes **Low Shi Ping**

One would imagine that a person taking it upon himself to study the behaviour of champions would be a champion himself. And while this person might not necessarily see himself as a champion, one could almost instinctively be certain he is one.

The person in question is Allan Snyder, who has been called a scientist, researcher, thinker, creativity coach and CEO mentor. "Tell them I said I'm almost 40," he grinned when asked his age.

A most unconventional-looking academic, Snyder's signature cap is perched jauntily on his head, revealing a not-so-serious side. "A French girlfriend once told me I look good in it," he confessed. "It's more of an identity thing, I suppose."

Under that cap though, is a remarkable brain which has earned him the title of one of Australia's 10 most creative minds by *The Bulletin* and *Newsweek* magazines. It is easy to forgive him when he lapses into pensive silences for you can be sure his brilliant mind is crafting something pretty unforgettable.

Born in New York and currently residing in Australia, Snyder's list of awards and accolades is extensive. He holds the Peter Karmel Chair of Science and the Mind at The Australian National University as well as the 150th Anniversary Chair of Science and the Mind at the University of Sydney. He also received the world's "foremost prize in communication and information technology" — the Marconi Prize — in New York City in December 2001.

His career has been punctuated by conceptual advances in diverse fields, which in a number of instances paved the way for contemporary technologies that affect our lives. Snyder laid the theoretical foundation for optical fibre telecommunication and pioneered the understanding of photo receptor optics — in short, understanding how the eye takes in and processes information.

At the moment though, it is his work at the Centre for the Mind — of which he is founding director — that has him all fired up. Other Centre for the Mind Fellows include Nelson Mandela, Dr Oliver Sacks and Sir Richard Branson.

A joint venture of the Australian National University and University of Sydney, the Centre's aim is to "bring hard science to understand what it takes

to be uniquely human" by orchestrating intellectual events, investing in "research that changes mindsets" and generally acting as a global nexus for great minds. Its 'mind laboratories' focus on scientific ways to instil 'championship' and enhance creativity.

Snyder conceived the *What Makes a Champion?* project, which was led by Nelson Mandela on the eve of the 2000 Sydney Olympics at the University of Sydney's Great Hall. The initiative saw a motley gathering of people — all champions in their own right — working towards a common goal of discovering the formula for success.

"Most people who made profound breakthroughs didn't have much schooling — in fact, many, including Steve Jobs and Sir Richard Branson, were school dropouts," said Snyder. This fact spurred him to gather a sample of 'champions' from all walks of life and persuasions to analyse what they all had in common. In true academic style, he derived the answer.

"It's the 'Champion Mindset,'" he said. "There are three unique ingredients that separate champions from the rest of the pack. Firstly, they abhor being ordinary — they want to stamp their own unique brand on everything they do.

"Secondly, they have the courage to confront conventional wisdom. Sir Edmund Hillary once said: 'If you know you can do something, why bother starting?'

"Thirdly, it is their conviction that adversity — sometimes even failure — is integral to success. It is a learning experience to them."

Creativity drives Snyder's work, but "the execution of creativity demands the right mindset. You must be driven by the desire to link the dots in a unique way by taking on as many mindsets as possible," he said. "Creativity is also an act of rebellion — you have to be downright subversive to change the way people think about something. It's one thing to be creative and another to have the courage to broadcast this creativity to the community. And to do that takes the Champion Mindset."

But what this champion regards as most exciting and important in his life is his work in understanding how the mind functions. More specifically, he has gained insights into creativity. By studying autistic savants and the way their minds work, he theorised that their gifts are due to parts of their brain not functioning properly. Hence, other areas of their grey matter spike in activity.

Based on this premise, he wired up university students to a machine called the Medtronic Mag Pro, which is a transcranial magnetic stimulator (TMS). The machine enables him "to enhance the brain by shutting off parts of it". About forty percent of his test subjects exhibited extraordinary and newfound mental skills — for instance, a person who had seen, but could not draw, a life-like cat before part of his brain was 'shut off' could do so when wired to the TMS.

"I turned on savant-like skills in normal people by turning off parts of their brains," Snyder said.

Much of the daily information received by the brain is stored in the subconscious mind. Snyder's work proves that the brain deliberately shuts out access to the subconscious, which is reversible technologically by magnetic pulses. "We only see what we know — our brain is wired that way," he said. "How then can we do something creative with a situation if we're constantly imposing what we already 'know' on it?" Snyder now hopes to develop a portable thinking cap which will allow people to see a problem without prejudice, hence unleashing their creativity.

Radical ideas such as these that challenge convention are bound to be criticised, but Snyder takes it all in his stride. "My mother used to joke that if everyone loves you, you stand for nothing. If you're doing work that's not controversial, you're just executing your expertise," he said.

"My work is controversial — I'm on the frontline attempting to make breakthroughs," he added. "If my work is not controversial, I'm not breaking the mindset. If it were accepted, what am I doing that's new?"

It is this spirit Snyder will maintain as he looks to the future. He speaks of the immense personal satisfaction he will get when society is transformed into a creative, enriching world.

"We have to transcend our circumscribed boundaries and see the world for what it really is," he said. "My dream is to take a society, preserve what it has and inject a cultural change allowing it to make more creative breakthroughs. The great nations of the future will be the nations of creative minds."

To set this process on its way, he aims to bring the creative level of children around the world to a higher plane — to "make any kid a champion," he says.

Such dreams can only come to fruition if upheld by a true champion, and the champion that is Snyder should realise his ambition. ■