FAST COMPANY

The 6 Myths Of Creativity

A new study will change how you generate ideas and decide who's really creative in your company.

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Creativity.

These days, there's hardly a mission statement that doesn't herald it, or a CEO who doesn't laud it. And yet despite all of the attention that business creativity has won over the past few years, maddeningly little is known about day-to-day innovation in the workplace. Where do breakthrough ideas come from? What kind of work environment allows them to flourish? What can leaders do to sustain the stimulants to creativity -- and break through the barriers?

Teresa Amabile has been grappling with those questions for nearly 30 years. Amabile, who heads the Entrepreneurial Management Unit at Harvard Business School and is the only tenured professor at a top B-school to devote her entire research program to the study of creativity, is one of the country's foremost explorers of business innovation.

Eight years ago, Amabile took her research to a daring new level. Working with a team of PhDs, graduate students, and managers from various companies, she collected nearly 12,000 daily journal entries from 238 people working on creative projects in seven companies in the consumer products, high-tech, and chemical industries. She didn't tell the study participants that she was focusing on creativity. She simply asked them, in a daily email, about their work and their work environment as they experienced it that day. She then coded the emails for creativity by looking for moments when people struggled with a problem or came up with a new idea.

"The diary study was designed to look at creativity in the wild," she says. "We wanted to crawl inside people's heads and understand the features of their work environment as well as the experiences and thought processes that lead to creative breakthroughs."

Amabile and her team are still combing through the results. But this groundbreaking study is already overturning some long-held beliefs about innovation in the workplace. In an interview with *Fast Company*, she busted six cherished myths about creativity. (If you want to quash creativity in your organization, just continue to embrace them.) Here they are, in her own words.

1. Creativity Comes From Creative Types

When I give talks to managers, I often start by asking, Where in your organization do you most want creativity? Typically, they'll say R&D, marketing, and advertising. When I ask, Where do you *not* want creativity? someone will inevitably answer, "accounting." That always gets a laugh because of the negative connotations of creative accounting. But there's this common perception among managers that some people are creative, and most aren't. That's just not true. As a leader, you don't want to ghettoize creativity; you want everyone in your organization producing novel and useful ideas, including your financial people. Over the past couple of decades, there have been innovations in financial accounting that are extremely profound and entirely ethical, such as activity-based costing.

The fact is, almost all of the research in this field shows that anyone with normal intelligence is capable of doing some degree of creative work. Creativity depends on a number of things: experience, including knowledge and technical skills; talent; an ability to think in new ways; and the capacity to push through uncreative dry spells. Intrinsic motivation -- people who are turned on by their work often work creatively -- is especially critical. Over the past five years, organizations have paid more attention to creativity and innovation than at any other time in my career. But I believe most people aren't anywhere near to realizing their creative potential, in part because they're laboring in environments that impede intrinsic motivation. The anecdotal evidence suggests many companies still have a long way to go to remove the barriers to creativity.

2. Money Is a Creativity Motivator

The experimental research that has been done on creativity suggests that money isn't everything. In the diary study, we asked people, "To what extent were you motivated by rewards today?" Quite often they'd say that the question isn't relevant -- that they don't think about pay on a day-to-day basis. And the handful of people who were spending a lot of time wondering about their bonuses were doing very little creative thinking.

Bonuses and pay-for-performance plans can even be problematic when people believe that every move they make is going to affect their compensation. In those situations, people tend to get risk averse. Of course, people need to feel that they're being compensated fairly. But our research shows that people put far more value on a work environment where creativity is supported, valued, and recognized. People want the opportunity to deeply engage in their work and make real progress. So it's critical for leaders to match people to projects not only on the basis of their experience but also in terms of where their interests lie. People are most creative when they care about their work and they're stretching their skills. If the challenge is far beyond their skill level, they tend to get frustrated; if it's far below their skill level, they tend to get bored. Leaders need to strike the right balance.

3. Time Pressure Fuels Creativity

In our diary study, people often thought they were most creative when they were working under severe deadline pressure. But the 12,000 aggregate days that we studied showed just the opposite: People were the least creative when they were fighting the clock. In fact, we found a kind of time-pressure hangover -- when people were working under great pressure, their

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creativity went down not only on that day but the next two days as well. Time pressure stifles creativity because people can't deeply engage with the problem. Creativity requires an incubation period; people need time to soak in a problem and let the ideas bubble up.

In fact, it's not so much the deadline that's the problem; it's the distractions that rob people of the time to make that creative breakthrough. People can certainly be creative when they're under the gun, but only when they're able to focus on the work. They must be protected from distractions, and they must know that the work is important and that everyone is committed to it. In too many organizations, people don't understand the reason for the urgency, other than the fact that somebody somewhere needs it done today.

4. Fear Forces Breakthroughs

There's this widespread notion that fear and sadness somehow spur creativity. There's even some psychological literature suggesting that the incidence of depression is higher in creative writers and artists -- the de-pressed geniuses who are incredibly original in their thinking. But we don't see it in the population that we studied.

We coded all 12,000 journal entries for the degree of fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, joy, and love that people were experiencing on a given day. And we found that creativity is positively associated with joy and love and negatively associated with anger, fear, and anxiety. The entries show that people are happiest when they come up with a creative idea, but they're more likely to have a breakthrough if they were happy the day before. There's a kind of virtuous cycle. When people are excited about their work, there's a better chance that they'll make a cognitive association that incubates overnight and shows up as a creative idea the next day. One day's happiness often predicts the next day's creativity.

5. Competition Beats Collaboration

There's a widespread belief, particularly in the finance and high-tech industries, that internal competition fosters innovation. In our surveys, we found that creativity takes a hit when people in a work group compete instead of collaborate. The most creative teams are those that have the confidence to share and debate ideas. But when people compete for recognition, they stop sharing information. And that's destructive because nobody in an organization has all of the information required to put all the pieces of the puzzle together.

6. A Streamlined Organization Is a Creative Organization

Maybe it's only the public-relations departments that believe downsizing and restructuring actually foster creativity. Unfortunately, I've seen too many examples of this kind of spin. One of my favorites is a 1994 letter to shareholders from a major U.S. software company: "A downsizing such as this one is always difficult for employees, but out of tough times can come strength, creativity, and teamwork."

Of course, the opposite is true: Creativity suffers greatly during a downsizing. But it's even worse than many of us realized. We studied a 6,000-person division in a global electronics

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company during the entire course of a 25% downsizing, which took an incredibly agonizing 18 months. Every single one of the stimulants to creativity in the work environment went down significantly. Anticipation of the downsizing was even worse than the downsizing itself -- people's fear of the unknown led them to basically disengage from the work. More troubling was the fact that even five months after the downsizing, creativity was still down significantly.

Unfortunately, downsizing will remain a fact of life, which means that leaders need to focus on the things that get hit. Communication and collaboration decline significantly. So too does people's sense of freedom and autonomy. Leaders will have to work hard and fast to stabilize the work environment so ideas can flourish.

Taken together, these operating principles for fostering creativity in the workplace might lead you to think that I'm advocating a soft management style. Not true. I'm pushing for a smart management style. My 30 years of research and these 12,000 journal entries suggest that when people are doing work that they love and they're allowed to deeply engage in it -- and when the work itself is valued and recognized -- then creativity will flourish. Even in tough times.

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