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What Happens When Ordinary People Get Creative?

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Move over, creative geniuses. Teresa Amabile says the world needs to pay more attention to the creative processes of everyday people, especially in an age when big ideas often come from the crowdsourced masses.

by Carmen Nobel

Source: FangXiaNuo

The topic of creativity tends to conjure conversations about individual geniuses whose artistic or scientific contributions have rocked history—the Ludwig Van Beethovens, the Emily Dickinsons, or the George Washington Carvers of the world.

So it's not surprising that scholars of creativity have largely focused on the factors that fuel extraordinarily creative people.

But who studies the ordinary people, who may not be geniuses but nonetheless contribute creative solutions in their personal and work lives all the time? In the short article In Pursuit of Everyday Creativity (pdf), Teresa Amabile argues that average folks deserve careful investigation, especially in the age of user innovation and crowdsourced problem-solving, when big ideas routinely come from the masses. The article appears in a forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Creative Behavior*.

"We may see a sea change over the next decade or so, where more and more things that are considered creative breakthroughs will be made by people whose names are never going to be known as famous individuals," says Amabile, a Baker Foundation Professor and the Edsel Bryant Ford Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, Emerita, who has studied workplace creativity for more than 40 years. "Those breakthroughs will be made by collaborative groups of 'ordinary people,' by open innovation contests and other open innovation processes, by users of products and services who are engaging more and more in innovation, and just by ordinary people in their everyday work lives or their everyday lives in their communities and societies."

Amabile's paper cites research showing that innovative users are responsible for some 76 percent of scientific instruments and 60 percent of innovations in sports equipment. Amabile hastens to add that user innovation is nothing new; necessity has long been the mother of invention. (See, for example, economist Eric von Hippel's paper The Dominant Role of Users in the Scientific Instrument Innovation Process (pdf), published in 1975.)

But the internet-enabled sharing economy continues to make it easier for users to share new ideas with companies, society, and each other. Large firms routinely host open innovation contests to solve problems big and small, and forums like Quora encourage citizens to share knowledge, both personal and professional.

"In Pursuit of Everyday Creativity" is a call for managers and researchers to consider the following question: *When ordinary people undertake creative endeavors in their work or their non-work lives, what is the nature of their everyday psychological experiences, and how do those experiences affect creative outcomes?*

"Attacking this question is fundamentally important for both the science and the practice of creativity," she writes. "It seems increasingly likely that products and services resulting from the creative behavior of ordinary individuals may not only become more prevalent than those coming from experts or geniuses in particular domains, it may actually become the most important source of creative breakthroughs."

A deeper dive into the "inner work lives" of everyday people

Amabile and several colleagues started to dig into that question during a broad study in which they researched the everyday work lives of 238 white-collar workers at seven companies. Each worker kept a daily diary over the course of the study, answering a series of separate questions about their moods, their motivations, and events that stood out to them on any given day. The researchers analyzed the data, totaling more than 12,000 daily diaries, looking for commonalities that influenced the workers' "inner work lives," defined by the researchers as "the confluence of perceptions, emotions, and motivations that individuals experience as they react to and make sense of the events of their workday."

Amabile and her team found that a sense of making progress on meaningful work was the single most important factor in igniting creativity, satisfaction, and productivity among employees–far more than factors like monetary compensation, praise, or camaraderie. The stark finding, which received a great deal of mainstream press, led to the 2011 book *The Progress Principle*—a guide for managers who want to provide catalysts for progress among their employees.

But the research also revealed a more meta result: Amabile realized the extent to which people volunteer their inner emotions and thought processes when describing external events, even when answering questions that did not explicitly request information about the respondents' psychological states. The most open-ended question—"Briefly describe one event from today that stands out in your mind"—would often yield detailed descriptions of not only the event itself, but also the respondent's internal response to the event.
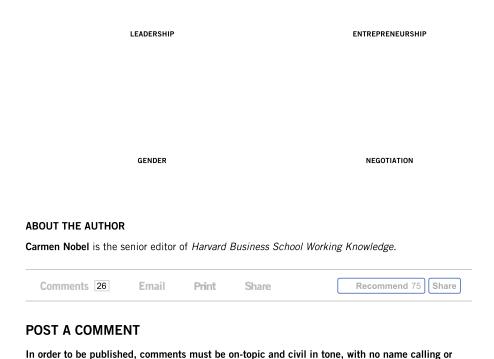
"It was like they often couldn't talk about the event without talking about how it made them feel and what it made them think," Amabile says. "We found that people were having rich experiences of trying to figure out these events: Why did this thing happen today? How do I interpret this memo that came out of upper management today? What does that mean about how they view us in this department or on this team? How did it make me feel when this person stopped by and showed interest in my ideas and bounced some ideas off of me? It was like their little news bulletin was incomplete without telling us about that psychological impact. And that suggests to me that there's something big here that needs to be investigated more."

Amabile is hopeful that other researchers will begin to study the psychological processes of everyday people as they tackle creative endeavors in the course of their work lives.

"In order to fully understand creativity and what influences it, and in order to confidently prescribe ways in which individuals, organizations, and societies can enhance it, we must undertake studies of creative behavior– and the accompanying psychological states and environmental contexts–in situ, as it is happening," she writes. "…this is only one of the many pathways that creativity studies should take in the coming years. But, I believe, it is one of the most important."

Readers, Professor Amabile would love to learn from you: What is your "inner work life" like when you're having your most creative days at work, and how does that contrast with what's going on in your head on your least creative days? What fuels your creativity and work, and what squelches it? Has past experience taught you anything about how you might facilitate your own creativity in the future? Please share your thoughts in the comment section below.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carmen Nobel is the senior editor of *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*.

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COMMENTS

cecildjx   142 days ago

Thank you for this article though I'm not really comfortable with the title and the reference to "ordinaty people". I tend to believe that everybody can be creative when put in the right context. I think the title should rather read "What happens when managers and leaders allow everybody to be creative."

Like   Reply   0

TeresaAmabile   144 days ago

What wonderful comments and ideas came in as responses to this story! I've replied to several, and only wish I could have responded to all. I've learned a lot from all that the readers shared. Thank you!

Like   Reply   0

Kristin (GSAS '66)   144 days ago

I don't think about creativity. For me it's always been a matter of playing: push the paint around, hold this idea next to that one, turn the stuff upside down, see what happens. Don't try; just play.

Like Reply   0

Meg N.   150 days ago

I would like to think that in my past job as a staff development person in a healthcare organization (I am now retired) I was a person who fostered others in their creative solutions. Often I would hear of someone struggling with an issue and I would connect them with another person who had figured out a way to handle it. Or I would develop a tool people could consult during a visit to a client. When several field staff complained about the difficulty of documenting on their laptops in a client's home and their cars were too cramped, one person said she had bought a rack that hooked on her steering wheel that held her laptop so she could document her visits in a timely fashion without killing her back. I was able to convince administration to order these racks for anyone who wanted one. I like to think I fostered creativity in my coworkers.

Like Reply 1 reply   0

> **TeresaAmabile**   144 days ago
>
> I agree that you were probably fostering creativity in your coworkers, Meg. Our diary study discovered that providing help to people, when their work becomes difficult, is a key factor is fostering creative progress.
>
> Like Reply   0

Culturology1   153 days ago

Doing something linear, like driving, showering, shaving, mowing the lawn, or pruning shrubs seems to hijack my left brain. My right brain then lights-up with the freedom to work abstractly with stunning new insights.

It has become so productive for me that I duct taped a small tablet and pen to my lawn mower handle bars. Before starting to mow, I consider what i want to solve, and then just let it go. I don't press for ideas, but let the notions drift into my consciousness when they are ready for primetime. Then I capture them!

Like Reply 1 reply   0

> **TeresaAmabile**   144 days ago
>
> Hello, Culturology! There's some research showing that doing "mindless," relatively menial tasks can give a helpful break to people working hard on creativity & innovation all day at work. Your methods seem to be in the same spirit. I love the idea of duct-taping a notebook to your lawn mower!
>
> Like Reply   0

Gil '76   153 days ago

We have made over 50 billion (with our successors adding another 40) in revolutionizing the North America rail industry in the last 29 years, in no small part by giving workers the opportunity to create around a new objective - Precision Railroading . One investment turned an 80 million investment into 2.4 billion. Another went from 8 billion to 40. Another went up 15 billion in 4 weeks. Another turned a company losing 150 million annually into a 250 million profit in 2 years. We told workers to give us new ideas, some of which required new cooperation between previously silo-ed functions . The important thing was that when an idea didn't work then we simply said give us your next good idea when you have it prepared and ready. We didn't punish the person who had the idea that didn't work. Instead we encouraged more from him. His co-workers saw this example and it gave them the confidence to put forth their own ideas without fear of punishment or loss of job or bonus. All had to be backed up by facts and analysis. But we found that our initial ideas of how well a railroad could perform were only the tip of the iceberg. We unleashed the workers and simply asked them to do what they already knew how to do, but now do it all in the new way we suggested. As I noted above: The new way is called Precision Railroading. It is a highly disciplined system but within it we created flexibility of thought and self accountability.

Now we are employing these principles on totally new, undiscovered areas of the rail industry with hopefully the same results wiith the new work force of Millenials joining the people in their late 40's and 50's replacing the retiring, highly experienced group. Stay tuned.

I almost forgot one other principle. We made sure executives and middle management and workers felt success through direct equity grants deeper and broader than were the norm, down to the worker level with new cash incentives tied to company performance (yes there was resistance from the union leadership who thought we were co-opting their people but results persuaded a lot of leaders to relook at this issue because the workers wanted them)

Like   Reply   1 reply   0

TeresaAmabile   144 days ago

What a great story! My HBS colleague, Amy Edmondson, has researched psychological safety, which is the understanding in a group or organization that people won't be punished for pointing out mistakes, offering far-out ideas, or trying something that ultimately doesn't work. Your story shows the power of the kind of psychological safety you created with your employees. In our research, we found that that's one of the most difficult things for managers to do - but potentially one of the most important for creativity.

Like   Reply   0

wkm   153 days ago

new ideas arrive with intense spontaneity .... many are actualized through discussions and refinement.... long runs or bike rides tend to be regular incubators.... but you never know when on is on its way

Like   Reply   0

Pat Sendelbach   153 days ago

My creativity occurs when doing an activity that becomes tedious because of too many steps or doesn't meet the desired outcome, I also know that many times it is the gap between the designer and the end user.

Like Reply   0

Chris Aiken   153 days ago

I have studied and taught creativity for many years through the medium of dance and choreography. In my experience one of the first things I try to impress upon students is the myth of Mozart, the idea that some people have a direct connection to the muse of creativity. It is often said that Mozart imagined his great works and simply wrote them down. This ignores the fact that Mozart came from a highly skilled musical family and he was living in an extremely creative environment.

My point is that creativity is available to everyone and rather than simply hunting for great ideas people should engage in two practices daily. The first is to develop their powers of perception. The question becomes how can I perceive my world and myself and others in new ways? What am I missing either because of my blind spots or my habitual ways of perceiving. This is the purpose, according to John Cage, of art ... to challenge people to re-perceive their world. This is difficult, but with daily practice you get better at it.

Perceptual acuity allows one to notice contexts and relationships. Creativity is largely a product of perceptual agency, the ability to notice and be in relation to specific things or people in your world. Choosing what to be in relationship to is a creative act.

The second practice that I encourage in myself and my students is to have a regular practice of making and designing. Creatively trying things out, putting things together, re-designing things, creating models and prototypes should be a regular practice.

Finally, and this returns to my emphasis on perception, when you make something the key is to notice what happens. The physicist David Bohm says that creativity is trying something out and then seeing what happens. Most don't take the time to notice what happens because they are perceiving what they thought or wanted to have happen.

Like   Reply   1 reply   0

TeresaAmabile   144 days ago

Chris, thanks for your work teaching creativity. I really like the two "daily disciplines" you recommend to your students. And I completely agree with your rejection of the view that lone geniuses are the creative engines of the world.

Like   Reply   0

Patricia Frederick   153 days ago

Has any attention been given to the process of creative thought taking place during sleep? More than once, I have come up with a new plan that solved a work-related problem, in the moments just before waking in the morning. I was struck by a guest speaker on the Public Radio program, "Science Friday" some 25 years ago, on the importance of creative "thinking" during sleep. Benedict Carey says something similar in his book, "How We Learn".

Like Reply 1 reply   0

> **TeresaAmabile**   144 days ago
>
> There really is something to this phenomenon. Using our diary data, we were able to show that, if people were in a better mood on one day, not only were they more likely to come up with a creative idea that day, they were also more likely to come up with a creative idea the next day - regardless of the next day's mood. Combined with other researchers' findings on mood and creativity, this suggests to us that positive mood sets up the conditions for new associations in the brain, which can result in a new idea rapidly, or can "incubate" overnight and result in a creative idea the next day.
>
> Like Reply   0

Altaf Qadeer   153 days ago

I experience that - Forming Cognitive-nets & Social-nets can also inspire creativity with the power of Cognitive Diversity.

In my teaching and research - It is interesting to see when young students are informed about the creativity of ordinary people (their stories are told), they try with more enthusiasm to create something unique for their own projects. I have observed when young students were inspired to make connections,among various things; they made creative models for science fair. Making connections between subjects, ideas, among the people, and connecting gadgets is a powerful way to inspire creativity (car + bike and car-bike invented; Math +electronics and computers, many more examples can be compared). While working with the idea of combining math and soccer—young students made a math soccer game. The connections we make in our mind and the connections we make in our outside world—working with the frames of multiple-nets is an intriguing way to inspire creativity. There is need to conduct more interdisciplinary research on how our ability to make connections in our inner and outer world (inside the brain and in our outside world of interactions) interplay for our creativity and learning. [A world of making connections, finding nets, exploring links].

Over a period of time, I observe- a common way to find a creative solution - keep thinking the solution, where you reach a feeling of no more ideas—leave the inner and outer powers to work on it in their fascinating silent modes. A wonder of innovative solution reaches our hearts, some unknown turns to be known in many cases.

Like Reply   0

Alexandria King-Close   153 days ago

Our notions of "extraordinarily creative people" in history is really more of a narrative than reality anyhow. Most great ideas are the result of a conglomeration of good ideas from a variety of people over a period of time, which come together to spark a new way of putting those various ideas together to solve a problem. Steven Johnson's "How We Got To Now" illustrates this terrifically, and I think we should show these kinds of stories to our kids more often--Instead of trying to be a famous person for having an amazing idea, we are better off to recognize that you can make contributions in a variety of ways, and even small ideas can make a difference.

Like Reply 1 reply   0

> **TeresaAmabile**   144 days ago
>
> Yes! In our diary study, we found that even "small wins" can give people a terrific sense of progress, boost motivation, and lead to enhanced levels of creativity. I like your addition that, when those small ideas are combined across many people, truly great things can happen.
>
> Like Reply   0

threadleaf   153 days ago

My least creative days are the ones most filled with interruptions and new input: email, meetings, interruptions, requests to re-direct my attention. Those days, most of my energy goes to digesting and organizing all the input, "just keeping my head above water." New ideas and creative solutions come on days with fewer distractions. But the new input is an essential ingredient, too, so there needs to be a balance.

Like Reply 1 reply   0

TeresaAmabile   144 days ago

You've hit on one of the primary creativity inhibitors that we discovered in our diary research: the distractions at work that can make you feel like you're running on a treadmill all day, getting nowhere on your most important work. We found that the moderate time pressure, combined with an environment that allowed for concentration, was optimal for creativity. - Teresa

Like Reply   0

rhhfla   153 days ago

As we all know, the second step in design thinking is to frame the problem properly. I find that imposing the discipline to always stop and reframe the problem is a powerful means to be creative. Given so many problems are framed poorly or wrong, reframing frequently leads to easy solutions that are creative.My experience is that identifying the problem is the hard part but the solutions are usually comparatively easy.

Like Reply   0

Shaiful   153 days ago

It's the boredom that pushes me to be creative. Bored by following the same old process and tedious makes me think different way to solve problem. The advent of technology also supports the creativity process.

Like Reply   0

El Magno   153 days ago

When my creativity is recreational I can be creative for creativity's sake, but within a work environment there needs to be a willing and able customer (internal or external) for the end product. It's not that I self-censor based on perceived practicality but rather that it is demotivating and counterproductive to work on something that will not be appreciated nor have a chance to be implemented. This is a learned behavior from past experiences when my creative efforts were essentially punished because they were not seen as useful and thus a waste of my time and the company's money. Hence I've tried to adopt a customer-centric design thinking approach to creativity in the workplace. However, this approach can still be very frustrating and risks being unsuccessful whenever customer input or feedback is inadequate in terms of timeliness, specificity, or comprehensiveness.

Like Reply 1 reply   0

TeresaAmabile   144 days ago

What you've identified is very important for creativity - a sense of progress that comes from knowing that your work will be implemented and, ultimately, useful to people who matter - in your case, customers or end users. But you're right about first needing a clear sense of what their needs are. - Teresa Amabile

Like Reply   0

DinosaurJournalist   154 days ago

I am a 47-year-old writer and journalist. I confess that "showing off" is a creative driver for me on any given day; the degree to which I'm creative seems to be correlated with how much I admire the likely audience, and how much I'd like to impress them. By contrast, I think I'm least creative when I have no sense of the future audience for my work at all. Surprisingly, I've found that a story with high potential impact does not stimulate extra inspiration in the writing process (unless I can imagine a journalism judging panel reading the piece, in which case those juices flow. This is all painful to admit!)

Like Reply   0

JLC   154 days ago

Most creative times tend to occur initially just myself and then later bringing ideas forward to the team. If it's a big/complicated problem this definitely is the right circumstances to get my creative juices going. The team environment helps to be open and listening with

reflective useful feedback and spur on additional creativity among team members to grow the idea and make it real.

Like Reply

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