

## CREATIVITY IN GROUPS: WHY BRAINSTORMING DOESN'T WORK



I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but study after study has shown that when it comes to producing the best, most useful ideas, brainstorming *just*

*doesn't work*. People in brainstorming groups have been found by researchers to produce fewer and lower quality ideas than when working alone.

Here's why researchers believe this is the case...

1. **Social loafing:** Research in the area of "*social loafing*" shows that when people are in groups, they are less likely to fully commit themselves because others will pick up the slack (bystander effect anyone?)

2. **Production blocking:** When other people are talking, the rest of the brainstorming group has to wait. This causes some people to lose focus of their ideas, dissuade themselves from mentioning them, or just plain out forget some of the insights they just fleshed out.

3. **Evaluation apprehension:** Simply put, although many brainstorming groups try to leave evaluation out until later, contributors *know* that other people are judging their ideas when the state them. When you are by yourself, you have more time to build an idea before presenting it to anyone.

If that's the case, then why even bother with brainstorming?

There are 2 big reasons...

The **first** is that research (particularly from professor Ben Jones) has shown that *collaboration* is indeed an important part in coming up with brilliant ideas. Data on collaboration seems to point to scientists today doing more collaboration, and reveals that in many instances, two "so-so" ideas are made great by collaboration.

The **second** has to do with the way that groups work. When everyone feels like they've contributed, group projects tend to be more successful. In other words:

People who have participated in the creative stage are likely to be more motivated to carry out the group's decision.

Since not all creative work can be done alone, some sort of collaboration is necessary in order to make sure no ideas get passed up, and to ensure that the entire group feels involved in actually putting the ideas into action.

### So what is the answer to this dilemma?

Well, according to brand new research (2012), the internet may be the savior for brainstorming. Specifically, the use of *Electronic Brainstorming* was found to be more effective in coming up with the best non-redundant ideas in groups.

How does it work?

First, it follows the older rules of '*Brainwriting*,' which includes the following:

1. Don't criticize.
2. Focus on quantity.
3. Combine and improve ideas produced by others.
4. Write down any idea that comes to mind, no matter how wild.

The difference is that instead of using things like post-it notes (that '*Brainwriting*' suggests), things like internet chat rooms or instant messaging are utilized.

It seems to work well because it allows members to see ideas flowing all at once, but it solves some of the problems with face-to-face brainstorming. When it's done online, each person doesn't have to wait for the others to stop talking *and* they are less worried about being evaluated.

I prefer to use tools like Campfire for this, but any group chat software should do the trick.

### The Character Traits of Creative People

Since creativity seems to thrive with individuals and sometimes collaboration rather than group work, what sort of traits are often found in especially creative people?

As with all creativity research (since it is a very large and complex topic), the results are a bit muddy, but a collection of the research seems to point to a few traits that are found regularly in creative people.

Below we'll discuss a few that are *more common* in those people with creative skills (note that this does **not** mean that all creative people have these traits!)

#### 1. Creative people are eccentric

Breaking news: the sun is hot! Everyone saw this coming, but more interesting is looking at what ways creative people are more eccentric. One interesting finding from Harvard is that creative people tend to have lower "*latent inhibition*" defined as:

...an animal's unconscious capacity to ignore stimuli that experience has shown are irrelevant to its needs. Thus, creative people tend to be able (maybe through a combination of nature + nurture?) to take in more detail due to their ability to not block out "irrelevant" details.

Perhaps this is why most of us see a red wheelbarrow, and creative poets can visualize a Red Wheelbarrow.

## 2. Creative people often feel "isolated"

Despite the hollow cries of introverts everywhere, creativity is not necessarily associated with being an introvert *or* an extrovert. Creative people have personality traits of all types, and being outgoing is not limiting to creativity. One thing that recent research has looked into though, is if creative people have a feeling of "isolation" among peers, even when they can make friends and colleagues easily.

This may be caused by their inability to relate to regular conversation as easily, or that their conversational partners cannot follow their "more creative" train of thought (if that sounds arrogant, don't worry, I'll be taking them down a peg later on). There has also been some research on especially creative people and social rejection, indicating that a feeling of rejection of peers **and** a desire to feel different (thus, embracing the rejection) may spur on more creative activities.

Lastly, creative people seem to be less trustworthy of others (on average) than non-creatives, which may play a part in this feeling of isolation.

## 3. Creative people are both smart + responsible *and* irresponsible + immature

There are numerous studies that show creativity positively correlates with intelligence, but after a certain point, the correlation dips off. Conversely, some research conducted on creative geniuses has shown that immaturity often goes hand-in-hand with creativity (as you might be able to imagine).

The thing is, there is a very fine balance between this responsible + irresponsible nature in very creative people...

Without discipline, creative works cannot be achieved, and creative people are known for long extended blocks of work (being "wrapped up in" a project). Conversely, the immaturity shown in many creative people likely goes hand-in-hand with their ability to produce novel ideas.

## 4. Creative people are often arrogant

Is it easy to get along with creative people? Although research on "agreeableness" and creativity shows no strong correlation either way, newer research that examines subsets of agreeableness points to a new finding...

As it turns out, while not *all* creative people are this way, there is strong negative association with humility and creativity, meaning creative people tend to be braggarts. This could likely stem from reinforcement and the ego, with successful creative people constantly being told how creative they are.

## 5. Creative people are a bit... crazy

If this section felt too much like ego-stroking, well... it's time to take creative people down a peg! There has been a plethora of research that shows creative people are a tad crazy... and kind of mean. For instance, many studies show that creative people are better liars than their peers, and other research has shown that creative people were:

- More likely to cheat on a game in the lab
- Better at justifying their dishonesty afterwards

**...and get this:** Creativity was more closely associated with *dishonesty* than intelligence! (Remember how I said that creativity only coincides with intelligence up to a certain point?)

Other research has shown that creative thinking is unusually high in criminals and lawbreakers. Most troubling (and direct) of all, a few studies have found that creative people score higher on psychoticism, which includes traits like less empathy, being cold, and egocentricity. Worse yet, the advantage that creative people have (discussed above) in having lower levels of "latent inhibition" may open them up for a variety of mental illnesses. There, now creative people can hop off their high-horse.

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