Creativity is Social: The Interpersonal Dynamics of Innovation in the Workplace

Dale Carnegie

Innovate or Die: Creativity is the Key to Survival

Talk of creativity used to be relegated to fields such as the arts, fashion, and architecture, but today it is on the minds of all kinds of business leaders. Market-leading products are rapidly replaced. Customers quickly abandon popular services for faster, easier options. Companies that never considered themselves as being in a business requiring creativity are suddenly highly attuned to the threat of disruption from a competitor whose innovative new idea might change the industry completely.

With the accelerated lifecycles of products and services, companies have to think about problems and business issues in new ways. Maximizing efficiencies is no longer enough for continued growth. Businesses must get creative.

Creativity vs. Innovation

Creativity and innovation are sometimes used interchangeably. Although they are closely related, they are different from each other:

- **Creativity** is the generation of novel and useful ideas, often by connecting knowledge in new ways.
- **Innovation** is the realization of those ideas (as products, services, practices, etc.) and their implementation to create value.

Once defined, it becomes clear that innovation is impossible without creativity. Fortunately, humans inherently have a great deal of creative intelligence, but turning it into innovation requires that organizations support an environment that encourages people to express and develop it and then to bring that creativity together with data, expertise, networks of relationships, and resources to realize its full potential.

In this paper, we lay out a model for doing that based on secondary research as well as related insights from our own work, including our global study of creativity in the workplace.

Creativity Is In Demand

As evidenced by the long-running upward trend of patent, copyright, and trademark filings around the world, the race to innovate is in full stride.[1] In their attempts to fuel this innovation, many employers now seek to strengthen the creativity of their workforces. From fintech companies tapping into the imaginative gifts of neurodiverse people on the autism spectrum to dancers and choreographers being hired to help engineers program the movements of robots, creativity is receiving a new level of attention in business.

According to LinkedIn's *Workplace Learning Reports* in 2019 and 2020, creativity topped the list of the most in-demand soft skills. Hiring managers now commonly ask candidates to share examples of their

Top 15 Skills Sets for 2025

1 Analytical thinking and innovation	2 Active learning and learning strategies	3 Complex problem-solving	4 Critical thinking and analysis	5 Creativity, originality and initiative
6 Leadership and social influence	7 Technology use, monitoring and control	8 Technology design and programming	9 Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility	10 Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation
11 Emotional intelligence	12 Troubleshooting and user experience	13 Service orientation	14 Systems analysis and evaluation	15 Persuasion and negotiation

Source: Future of Jobs Survey 2020, World Economic Forum

---

[1] WIPO Statistics Database. https://www.wipo.int/about-wipo/en/.

creativity in interviews, and creativity ranks high among skill groups that employers expect to have increasing importance in the lead up to 2025, according to the *Future of Jobs Survey 2020* by the World Economic Forum.[2]

The Covid-19 pandemic further emphasized the need for creativity as many companies suddenly had to reinvent ways of doing business. It will continue to be a critical component of organizations' quests to become more agile in response to the world's increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

Given creativity's importance, Dale Carnegie Training conducted a survey of more than 6,500 employees across twenty-one countries and territories around the world to better understand what influences creativity and how well organizations are doing in cultivating an environment that encourages it.[3]

Where Does Creativity Come From?

Our collective creativity is credited with having enabled humans to thrive in a range of climates, geographies, and conditions far broader than other species.

While scientists are still at the beginning stages of understanding the neuroscience of creativity, the myth of the "creative right brain" has been disproven. It is now generally accepted that the capacity for creativity—at least to some extent—is common to all of us.

> *"Creativity is just connecting things."*
>
> *–Steve Jobs*

In our survey, 82% of respondents said there are creative people on their own team, but creativity is the result of more than just individual traits and skills. It also depends on the situation or environment, and the transformation of creativity into innovation is the result of a process.

Despite the ongoing mystery as to exactly how the structures of our brain work in relation to creativity, research in the field *has* produced clues to enhancing it.

Enhancing Creativity Involves Dealing with Paradoxes

At first glance, a review of the creativity literature reveals apparent paradoxes for those who want to enhance creativity in their teams and organizations. For instance:

- It is widely held that increased diversity promotes creativity, but some research finds that when diversity comes at the cost of adequate team cohesion, it can hinder creative performance.[4]
- Scientists studying interpersonal relationships called "weak ties" know they facilitate the generation of new ideas, but they also note that in the absence of "strong ties" those ideas are unlikely to be shared due to fear of rejection.[5]
- Creative concepts improve with constructive feedback and healthy conflict, yet too much criticism can shut down idea generation.[6]
- While history books feature solo geniuses and their creative moments of insight, creative invention inevitably builds on prior work, with "human society function[ing] like a collective brain."[7]

---

[2] WEF, 2020. *The Future of Jobs Report 2020.* http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf.
[3] Dale Carnegie & Associates online survey of 6,508 respondents completed March-June 2021 in 21 countries and territories including: the U.S., Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Mainland China, Hong Kong SAR, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, India, Indonesia, the U.K., Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, Singapore, South Korea, Sweden, Thailand, and Turkey.
[4] Chamorro-Premuzic, Tomas. "Does Diversity Actually Increase Creativity?" *Harvard Business Review.* June 28, 2017.
[5] As Stanford sociology professor Mark Granovetter explained in his 1973 landmark paper, "The Strength of Weak Ties", *weak ties* refer to relationships at the periphery of a person's social network and are characterized by relatively infrequent interactions and comparatively low emotional closeness. They are more likely than *strong ties* to connect people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, varying interests, and with different sources of information.
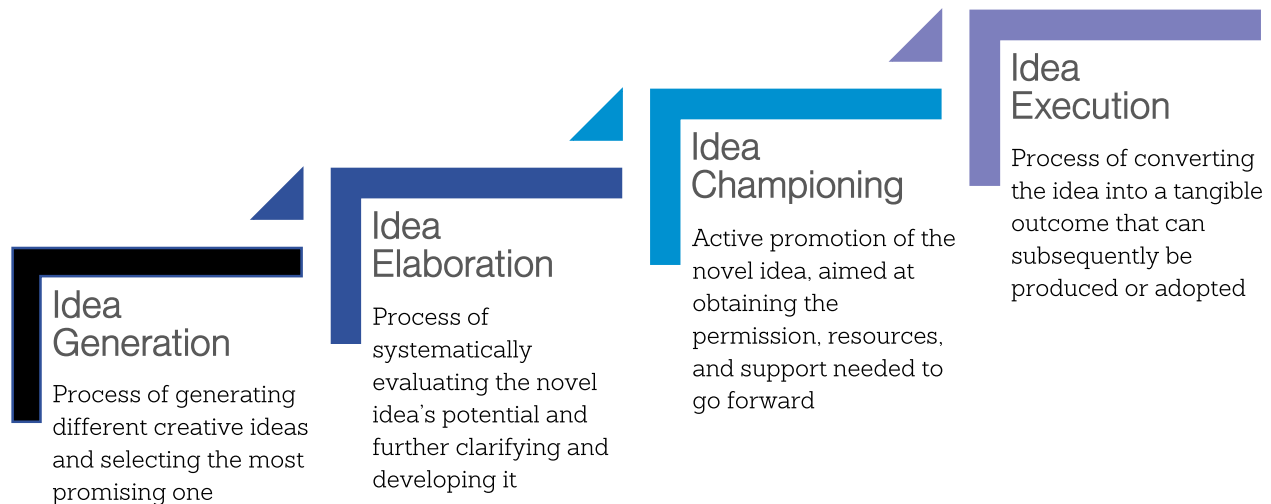[6] Jill E. Perry-Smith and Pier Vittorio Mannucci. "From Creativity to Innovation: The Social Network Drivers of the Four Phases of the Idea Journey." *Academy of Management Review* 2017, Vol. 42, No. 1, pp. 53–79.
[7] Vernimmen, Tim. "Where Creativity Comes From." Scientific American, *Scientific American*, September 16, 2016,

Understanding these apparent paradoxes (creativity as an individual vs. social process, the value of conflict vs. cooperation, strong ties vs. weak ties, and diversity vs. homogeneity) requires a deeper look at the journey of creative ideas as they are turned into useful innovation.

The Journey from Creativity to Innovation

A helpful way to think about the journey that successful ideas take was proposed by researchers Perry-Smith and Mannucci in their paper *"From Creativity to Innovation."* The figure that follows describes the four phases, each of which has a distinct purpose and unique requirements for optimal functioning.

Idea Generation

Process of generating different creative ideas and selecting the most promising one

Idea Elaboration

Process of systematically evaluating the novel idea's potential and further clarifying and developing it

Idea Championing

Active promotion of the novel idea, aimed at obtaining the permission, resources, and support needed to go forward

Idea Execution

Process of converting the idea into a tangible outcome that can subsequently be produced or adopted

Source: Jill E. Perry-Smith and Pier Vittorio Mannucci. "From Creativity to Innovation: The Social Network Drivers of the Four Phases of the Idea Journey." Academy of Management Review 2017

An animated movie is an obvious example of a creative idea that moves through the journey to become a tangible product: a new feature film. Typically, an individual writer, making new connections between personal experience, imagination, and perhaps the prior work of other artists, generates the concept and then creates a synopsis that outlines the plot and characters. Incorporating feedback from mentors or trusted colleagues, they clarify and develop the story further. It is pitched more widely to gain support and additional resources for development. With final approval from executives, the entire studio then works together to produce the movie. The same kind of process applies to creative ideas for new or improved products, processes, user experiences, solutions to problems, and more.

The network model of creativity describes it as a social process.[8] The success of the creative idea is a result of the interplay between individual efforts, that of teams, interpersonal networks, and the organization as a whole. Individuals generate the core ideas, elaborate on those ideas with others, leverage networks and relationships to win support, and work within the organization's processes and structures to execute. At each phase of the journey, a different type of interpersonal relationship becomes important for success.

The success of the creative idea is a result of the interplay between individual efforts, that of teams, interpersonal networks, and the organization as a whole.

In the first phase of **Idea Generation**, the individual combines their knowledge and experiences with insight gathered from others (often "weak ties") to come up with the core concept of the new idea. This phase is primarily a solo effort, driven by intrinsic

---

[8] Bilton, Chris "Manageable Creativity." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 2010, Vol. 16(3), pp. 255-269.

motivation, guided by purpose, and helped along when the individual either innately has or has been trained in creative competencies.

During **Idea Elaboration**, the individual typically shares the idea with others, who may ask questions or provide feedback that develop it further. New or better ideas can emerge from the collaborative synthesis. At this stage, a high level of trust and psychological safety is beneficial. This is because the individual must feel safe sharing the new idea without fear of criticism or rejection. Homogenous groups (where "strong ties" are the norm and members share similar backgrounds, interests, outlooks, and sources of information) often have higher levels of cohesiveness and trust. Yet this type of homogeneity often leads to convergent thinking. Instead, sharing the idea with people who have diverse experiences and perspectives at this stage often yields greater creativity and more viable solutions. It is divergent thinking that is needed at this stage.

> *"When all think alike, then no one is thinking."*
>
> *–Walter Lippman*

When the idea is ready to promote to a wider audience, including those who have the power to assign resources for implementation and grant approval, the phase involved is **Idea Championing**. Because influence, perceived legitimacy, and persuasion are critical in this phase, having social capital outside of the team and a network of contacts in key positions who are willing to lend the idea credibility can make it easier for the owner of the creative idea to win approval from decision-makers.
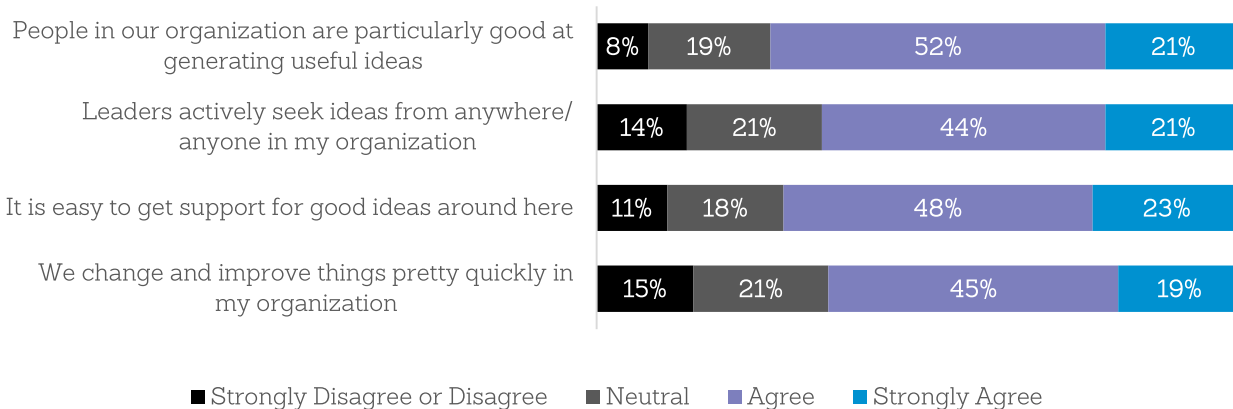
For **Idea Implementation**, a clear, shared understanding and vision is essential to turn the creative idea into useful innovation, requiring strong communication and collaboration across the implementation team.

Roadblocks, Bumps, and Detours on the Journey from Creativity to Innovation

Unfortunately, in such a complex journey, there are inevitable roadblocks, bumps, and detours along the way in any organization. These may be processes, mindsets, or behaviors that make it more difficult for creative ideas to succeed.

Unlike film studios, many organizations are not in the habit of seeking out and developing creative new ideas. While nearly three-quarters of the respondents in our study agreed that their colleagues are good at generating useful ideas, far fewer agreed that leaders actively seek ideas from anywhere and anyone in the organization. Many good ideas seem destined for nowhere, with nearly 3 in 10 respondents unable to agree that it is easy to get support for them. To sum up, as the following chart suggests, most respondents feel their organizations could do more to make the journey for creative ideas easier.

Creative Ideas at Work

	Strongly Disagree or Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
People in our organization are particularly good at generating useful ideas	8%	19%	52%	21%
Leaders actively seek ideas from anywhere/anyone in my organization	14%	21%	44%	21%
It is easy to get support for good ideas around here	11%	18%	48%	23%
We change and improve things pretty quickly in my organization	15%	21%	45%	19%

■ Strongly Disagree or Disagree   ■ Neutral   ■ Agree   ■ Strongly Agree

The question is, what can organizations that value creativity do to enhance it and increase the chances of creative ideas becoming useful innovation?

The answer lies in supporting creativity at the individual, team, and organization levels and doing so with an awareness of the differing needs at each point in the transformation of creative ideas into innovation.

82% of respondents say there are creative people on their team…but only 70% say their team regularly uses techniques to bring out creative ideas when problem-solving.

Creative Intelligence: An Often-Untapped Resource

Since creative intelligence already exists in each of us, we might start by asking ourselves, "How can organizations avoid getting in the way of people's innate creativity and their willingness to apply it toward achieving the organization's purpose in better, faster, or more efficient ways?"

The first step should be protecting people's intrinsic motivation: Keep them engaged. This is an ongoing challenge for leaders and one that organizations have devoted considerable time and effort to in recent years. Our research at Dale Carnegie Training suggests that a focus on making people feel valued, confident, empowered, and connected translates to higher engagement, yet in the survey, only 24% strongly agree that they feel empowered to make decisions at work. Only 38% strongly agree that they feel confident in their skills and abilities at work, and just 27% strongly agree that their managers make them feel valued and appreciated. To get people people's best efforts—including their creativity—many leaders could improve in these areas.

Helping employees broaden their expertise, deepen their knowledge, and learn new skills has also been shown to support greater creativity.[9] This strategy has the added benefit of making people feel more valued and more confident at the same time, and it strengthens the case for making upskilling and reskilling a business priority.[10]

As is clear from the Idea Journey, ensuring employees feel connected is another critical factor for creativity. *Encouraging them to broaden their professional networks promotes the "weak ties" that help spark it.* Of respondents who transitioned to remote work during the Covid-19 emergency, nearly 3 in 10 are aware they speak with a smaller, core group of co-workers now compared with when they worked in the physical office. This finding has been confirmed by Microsoft: "Anonymized collaboration trends between billions of Outlook emails and Microsoft Teams meetings reveal a clear trend: The shift to remote shrunk our networks. At the onset of the pandemic, our analysis shows that interactions with our close networks at work increased, while interactions with our distant networks diminished."[11] While a high level of within-team bonding is certainly

Nearly 3 in 10 who began working remotely due to Covid-19 are aware they speak with fewer co-workers now than when they worked in the office.

---

[9] Epstein, Robert. "Do You Have What It Takes to Help Your Team Be Creative?" *Harvard Business Review*, 8 Dec. 2015, hbr.org/2015/12/do-you-have-what-it-takes-to-help-your-team-be-creative.
[10] "Upskilling the Global Workforce Is Key to Stimulating the Economic Recovery from COVID-19, Says New Report from PwC and the World Economic Forum." *PwC*, PwC and the World Economic Forum, 25 Jan. 2021, www.pwc.com/gx/en/news-room/press-releases/2021/upskilling-for-shared-prosperity.html.
[11] "The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work-Are We Ready?" *2021 Work Trend Index: Annual Report*, Microsoft, 22 Mar. 2021, www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work.

important, people must also maintain the peripheral relationships that provide access to broad networks to get support for creative ideas.

Finally, research has found that there is limited capacity for invention when people's "minds are constantly occupied with urgent problems."[12] While providing dedicated time to pursue innovative ideas (as Google famously tried) may be unrealistic in most organizations, *addressing employee well-being and the burnout, stress, and exhausting workloads many employees are currently enduring could be a more practical next step toward greater creativity.*

All of this has implications for creativity at the individual level, especially for the Idea Generation phase. But the Idea Journey tells us that beyond Idea Generation, the path from Creativity to Innovation becomes more social. This suggests additional strategies to enhance the rest of the journey, ones that balance the needs for diversity vs. homogeneity and cooperation vs. conflict.

Non-Management Employees Who Agree or Strongly Agree:

58%

Employees here are not afraid to bring up tough issues and problems to their leaders.

61%

Management supports people spending time coming up with better ways of doing things.

57%

Leaders here make it safe for employees to experiment and learn from mistakes.

Team Leaders Can Help Creativity Flourish

Teams are at the heart of innovation. It is within these smaller work units that problems first surface and possible solutions are vetted. Teams are where one person's good idea is further developed, finds early support, and (hopefully) a path to the resources and approval that might turn it into real innovation. Team leaders set the tone as to whether the team actively looks for problems worth solving or is content to conduct business as usual. Research suggests these three areas of focus for Team Leaders to help them enhance creative performance:

First, actively promote an emotional connection to the team's work. Team leaders should seize every opportunity to emphasize the connection between team tasks and the organization's purpose, something that has steadily declined since the pandemic hit in 2020.[13] Empathy for the end user of the product or process often reveals opportunities for improvement, and a focus on emotions and emotional intelligence has been shown to encourage people to identify problems worth solving and encourage them to generate more original ideas.[14]

Second, team leaders should be skilled at creating, coaching, and maintaining psychological safety. The level of psychological safety on a team has been demonstrated to predict its effectiveness and has implications for whether members can work through conflict without damaging trusting relationships. A high level increases people's willingness to take a risk such as sharing a "wild idea" or providing honest feedback. It supports an environment of genuine inclusiveness conducive to sustaining diversity on the team. A low level of psychological safety discourages diversity in favor of conformity.

Everyone on a team needs strong interpersonal skills if they are going to be able to contribute their technical expertise and

---

[12] Vernimmen, Tim. "Where Creativity Comes From." *Scientific American*, 16 Sept. 2016, www.scientificamerican.com/article/where-creativity-comes-from/.

[13] Klinghoffer, Dawn. "In Hybrid Work, Managers Keep Teams Connected." *2021 Pulse Report*, Microsoft, Mar. 2021, www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/managers-keep-teams-connected.

[14] Pringle, Zorana Ivcevic. "Creativity Can Be Taught." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 9 June 2020, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/creativity-the-art-and-science/202006/creativity-can-be-taught.

knowledge to the creative process in a productive way. Psychological safety is built relationship by relationship, team by team, throughout the organization. Respectful engagement is essential; every interaction has the chance to create it, maintain it, or break it down.

While 79% of our survey respondents agree that they have strong relationships with people at work, just 68% agreed that their team is comfortable with constructive controversy and disagreement about ideas. Perhaps worse, only 65% of all respondents say employees are not afraid to bring up tough issues and problems to their leaders. These data together suggest that many professional relationships may lack the level of trust needed to facilitate the Idea Elaboration phase.

Finally, it is worth teaching teams essential creative competencies and processes. While most organizations say they value creativity, only 61% of non-manager respondents said that management supports people spending time coming up with better ways of doing things. By sharing the basics, Team Leaders can send a strong, positive signal that they value creativity. This might include simply creating awareness of the Idea Journey to help employees better understand how to leverage their interpersonal relationships at each stage. It could also involve practicing new ways of making connections or devoting time in problem-solving meetings to dig into the root causes of challenges before using techniques—such as managing the interplay of brainstorming, convergent, and divergent thinking—to elicit creative alternatives that go beyond the more obvious, superficial fixes that tend to surface first.

Senior Leaders Can Make or Break It

As is so often the case, success hinges on a commitment from top leaders. They alone have the power to establish a norm where people accept that actively identifying challenges and finding solutions is everyone's business. Three areas of focus should stand out for leaders, because without them, efforts of individuals and team leaders can't succeed:

Begin by communicating the organizational purpose effectively to provide a focus for creativity. As the definitions we used earlier make clear, creativity and innovation must be focused—ideas must be "useful" and "create value"—but for whom? A customer-centered purpose gives direction to creativity. In other words, novel ideas that fulfill the purpose more fully by meeting customer needs more efficiently and/or effectively are potentially useful in providing value for customers. No manager can help employees see how their work connects to the organization's purpose when it is not clearly defined. Employees will struggle to feel an emotional connection to work that exists only to turn a profit.

Second, consciously encourage a climate for creative initiative characterized by true empowerment and support for risk-taking. Just 1 in 4 of respondents in our survey strongly agree that people in their organization are generally open to new ways of doing things. The reason for that may lie in people's perception of whether risk-taking is truly acceptable. Fewer than 6 in 10 non-management employees agree or strongly agree that "Leaders here make it safe for employees to experiment and learn from mistakes" or that "Employees here are not afraid to bring up tough issues and problems to their leaders." Employees will recognize the empty words of leaders who ask for innovation but are quick to lay blame when creative ideas do not pan out. Instead, leaders should express sincere appreciation for innovative efforts—whether they're successful or not—and focus on the value of what has been learned, making sure the organization integrates those lessons into future initiatives.
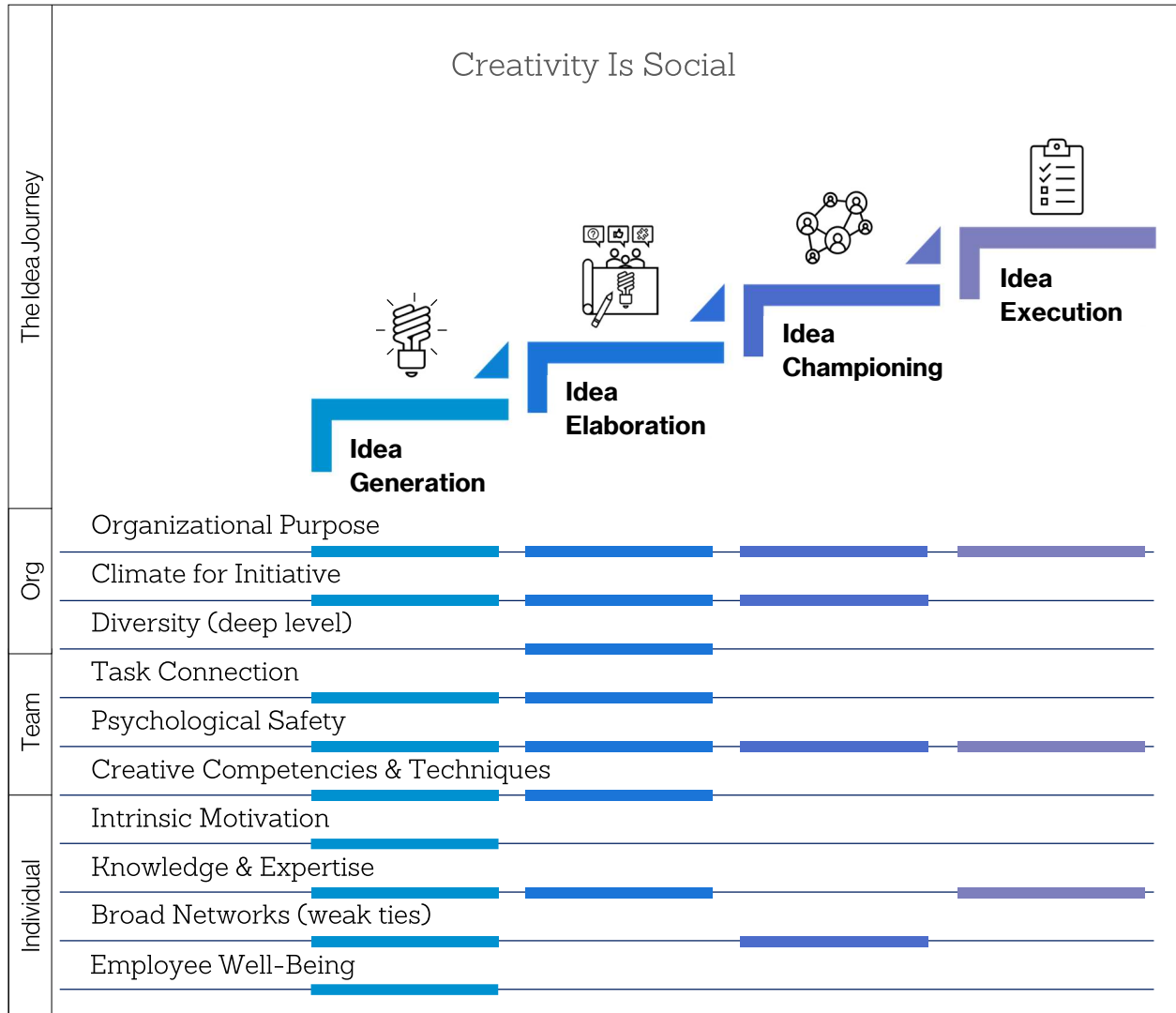
Finally, foster diversity. Access to the diverse perspectives, training, backgrounds, skills, ideas, and experiences that teams need for creative performance and imaginative problem-solving begins with recruiting, hiring, and efforts to create genuine inclusiveness. Diversity is most valuable when it adds new information to the process, and this generally

Fewer than 1 in 4 survey respondents strongly agreed that "people in our company value each other's unique skills, perspectives, and talents."

comes from cognitive (or deep) diversity rather than demographic (or surface level) diversity alone. While Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion has been receiving greater emphasis in recent years, just 1 in 4 survey respondents strongly agreed that "people in our company value each other's unique skills, perspectives, and talents," suggesting most organizations still have a long way to go.

The Bottom Line

Innovation is social. The fate of creative ideas depends in large part on the communication and interpersonal skills of an organization's people. The model that follows summarizes some of these key interpersonal elements and suggests where they are especially important along the Ideal Journey.

Creativity Is Social

The Idea Journey: Idea Generation → Idea Elaboration → Idea Championing → Idea Execution

	Idea Generation	Idea Elaboration	Idea Championing	Idea Execution
Org				
Organizational Purpose	■	■	■	■
Climate for Initiative	■	■	■	
Diversity (deep level)		■		
Team				
Task Connection	■	■		
Psychological Safety	■	■	■	■
Creative Competencies & Techniques	■	■		
Individual				
Intrinsic Motivation	■			
Knowledge & Expertise	■	■		■
Broad Networks (weak ties)	■		■	
Employee Well-Being	■			

All of the drivers are arguably important across all phases, however those indicated are phases in which each is especially relevant.

Leaders provide a focus for the expression of creativity when their efforts to communicate the organization's purpose resonate. When they achieve an environment of genuine inclusiveness, their organization can sustain the diversity of thought, experiences, and perspectives that support connecting knowledge in new ways. Through sincerely empowering people and supporting risk-taking, leaders can create a climate for creative initiative where everyone feels they have a part in advancing creative ideas and innovation.

Team leaders reinforce that climate within their work units by strengthening people's feeling of connection between their own work and the organization's purpose. Their ability to manage the level of psychological safety on their team influences people's willingness to take the risk of sharing their own ideas and to engage in the productive conflict needed to help others develop theirs more fully. And while creativity itself is innate, it can also be enhanced by teaching teams basic creative competencies and techniques.

Protecting people's intrinsic motivation, freeing their minds from undue stress, and encouraging people to broaden their knowledge and professional networks are all beneficial to creativity at the individual level.

Recognizing and embracing the social aspects of enhancing productive creativity may offer an edge in the race to innovate. To learn more about how Dale Carnegie Training can help you develop creativity in your people, teams, and organization, contact your local Dale Carnegie office today. Please go to: dalecarnegie.com/office

About the Author:

Mark Marone, PhD., is the director of research and thought leadership for Dale Carnegie and Associates, where he is responsible for ongoing research into current issues facing leaders, employees and organizations worldwide. He has written frequently on various topics, including leadership, the employee/customer experience, and sales. Mark can be reached at mark.marone@dalecarnegie.com

About Dale Carnegie:

Dale Carnegie is a global training and development organization specializing in leadership, communication, human relations, and sales training solutions. More than 9 million people around the world have graduated from Dale Carnegie training since it was founded in 1912. Through franchises in over 90 countries and in all 50 states, Dale Carnegie's mission is to empower organizations to create enthusiastic and engaged workforces by fostering confidence, positivity, and productive, trust-based relationships.