

FACULTY Q & A

# The Joy of Work

## Understanding Creativity in Organizations

After thirty years of research, I am still passionate about creativity," says Teresa M. Amabile, the Edsel Bryant Ford Professor of Business Administration, head of the Entrepreneurial Management Unit, and faculty chair of the Arthur Rock Center for Entrepreneurship at HBS. For the past several years, Amabile, who holds a Ph.D. in psychology from Stanford University, has been analyzing findings from her longitudinal research on creativity in teams involved in the development of new products, services, or business initiatives in the chemicals, technology, and consumer products industries.

Amabile is working on a book based on the data from the ten-year study, which includes questionnaires, interviews, independent creativity assessments, and 12,000 entries from electronic diaries. "I think we came as close as you can to being a fly on the wall in these companies," she reports, "and I believe we have enough detail to really help managers understand how creativity happens."

### What is creativity, in a business context?

The most basic definition of creativity is that it is something that's different, in a valuable way, from what's been done before. In the arts, creativity is an expression of an issue or problem the



**AMABILE:** A decade of research shows that to be creative, people need to feel good about their work.

artist was grappling with. In business, it is producing novel, workable solutions to problems or ideas that help organizations achieve their goals.

### Your research analyzes people's "real-time" experiences as they worked on creative projects. What were you looking for, specifically?

We wanted to get inside the hearts and minds of knowledge workers to better understand the conditions that support or impede creativity. The people we studied were involved in projects where creativity was supposed to take place, but our questions were not overtly focused on creativity. In fact, respondents were told just that we were interested in looking at the kinds of things that can help make complicated proj-

ects go better within organizations. We asked them to rate various aspects of their work each day on a numerical scale and to describe briefly one work-related event that stood out in some way.

### What have you discovered about the relationship between creativity and time pressure?

Most managers I've talked with are intuitively in one of two camps: Some believe that deadline pressure kills creativity, and others say that they do their most creative work when they are under serious time constraints. But our data indicates that the relationship is more nuanced. In the workplaces we studied, there were two distinct kinds of time pressure. The most common was what we call treadmill pressure, where people feel urgency to attend to a variety of unrelated tasks each day and are constantly forced to shift from one to another. That kind of time pressure definitely has a negative impact on creative thinking.

On the other hand, time pressure that is equally urgent but more focused, where people feel they are on a mission, actually inspires creativity. An example might be an impending project launch or a customer with a critical need. In these instances, the creative team is concentrating on a problem where the urgency is clear and meaningful, and their managers run interference so they are not distracted by other tasks.

### In addition to keeping distractions at bay, what are some other ways managers can boost creativity?

Obviously managers need to be concerned with big picture issues such as overall business strategy, markets, and the bottom line. But it is also important for company leaders to see themselves as facilitators of progress, as being there to serve the people who are

in the trenches. If they do a good job of planning and organizing projects, and keeping in touch with how things are going, it is much easier to minimize the treadmill pressures that can impede the progress of their creative teams.

One of our strongest findings is that to be creative, people need to feel good about their work. Pride in accomplishment and positive feelings about oneself and one's colleagues give a cognitive bump to the creative process. What makes people feel joyful at work? This may come as a surprise to some, but in analyzing our data, there was a strong correlation between the days when people reported experiencing joy and the days when they said they had made good progress on their work. It sounds so ordinary and prosaic, but more than anything else, people just want to get their work done. So any-

thing managers can do to lessen people's frustrations and eliminate organizational obstacles to progress will foster creativity.

### Can you talk about some of the most frequently mentioned obstacles to progress?

It was distressing to see how often people cited miscoordination, miscommunication, poor access to resources, and bad planning as barriers to accomplishment. These are management basics, but if they are ignored, they not only impede creativity, but also make life absolutely miserable for the professionals who are working in the trenches. Again, this is a symptom that indicates a need for top management to get more involved in facilitating the daily progress of their creative teams.

### Does your research shed light on how

### the composition of teams affects their creative potential?

When you boil down the essence of creativity, it begins with something in the mind of the individual. People perceive a problem or opportunity and have some thoughts on how to approach it. But when individuals come together as a team, ideas can be built on and modified to become something larger. There has been a notion in the creativity literature for some time that the most important creative breakthroughs happen through an intersection of ideas from people with different educational backgrounds and life experiences. One of my former HBS students has written a fascinating book called *The Medici Effect* that examines this topic in detail [see sidebar].

### Are people more creative when they are engaged in aspects of their work that they find intrinsically rewarding?

Yes, and that is probably the most fundamental and enduring discovery of my thirty-year career of studying creativity. But "enjoyment" shouldn't be interpreted necessarily as something that is fun or easy. It has more to do with the relationship between joy and accomplishment.

A number of years ago I interviewed the novelist John Irving, who reported that he often spent twelve hours a day writing. I asked him why he put in such long hours after he had already achieved a high level of success in his field. He seemed taken aback by the question at first, but after thinking for a minute, he said, "The unspoken factor is love. The reason I can work so hard at my writing is that it's not work for me."

I think that is the same force that drives creative successes in business. I especially see it in entrepreneurs whose main resource when they start an enterprise is their passion. Loving what you do doesn't guarantee success, but I believe it is the essence of creativity and of entrepreneurship.

— DEBORAH BLAGG

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## Former Student Success Stories

In addition to her field research on creativity, Teresa Amabile is a keen observer and enthusiastic supporter of the creative efforts of her HBS students. To illustrate her belief that entrepreneurial success is driven by passion for ideas, Amabile recounts the launch, by her former students Michelle Crammes and Jeff Norton (both MBA '03) of a company called Lean Forward Media. "Michelle and Jeff discovered they shared a childhood passion for a series of books called Choose Your Own Adventure, which allowed readers to select from a variety of possible plot twists as the stories progressed," Amabile explains. "They licensed the rights to the series and used DVD technology to update the concept and make it interactive by today's technological standards. The company they founded as HBS students is now up and running and doing quite well, and it all came about because of something they loved when they were kids."

Another former student, Frans Johansson (MBA '00), is now an entrepreneur and the author of *The Medici Effect*, a best-selling book that focuses on creativity at the intersection of different fields, cultures, and industries. "Frans interviewed people in a variety of professions — from physicists to cooks — to understand how creative breakthroughs happen," she notes. "He found that very often the most important creative breakthroughs happen where different perspectives come together, both among members of a team and in the minds of individuals.

"I think that last part is really intriguing," Amabile continues. "Frans found that highly creative individuals often have degrees in widely disparate disciplines, were raised in two or more cultures or countries, or have work experience in a couple of unrelated professions.

They are able to draw on these different ways of comprehending the world to come up with ideas that would never happen without such a rich intersection of experiences."