



Collaborative Imagining: How to Make Creativity Work

By [Nancy Pekala](#)

Think there's such a thing as a creative "type," that brainstorming is the best method of delivering big ideas or that creativity is best served up in isolation?

Then think again and think differently. Author Jonah Lehrer smashes these myths and proposes unique theories about creativity and innovation in his newly-released book, "[Imagine: How Creativity Works](#)" ([Watch the trailer.](#))

Marketing is a discipline that prides itself on being creative and innovative. However, Lehrer suggests that everyone possesses the creative gene and that to uncover it, organizations need to take steps to develop environments conducive to unleashing it.



Lehrer, a Contributing Editor at Wired and the author of [Proust Was Neuroscientist](#) and [How We Decide](#), stresses that "Creativity shouldn't be seen as something otherworldly. It shouldn't be thought of as a process reserved for artists and inventors and other 'creative types.' The human mind, after all, has the creative impulse built into its operating system, hard-wired into its most essential programming code. At any given moment, the brain is automatically forming new associations, continually connecting an everyday x to an unexpected y."

He explores the workings of creativity through subjects as diverse as Bob Dylan's writing methods, the birth of Swiffer, the emergence of collaborative culture and secrets to innovation in such brands as 3M and Pixar.

In an exclusive interview with [Marketing Researchers](#), Lehrer shares his insights on how organizations to cultivate a culture of innovation and creativity and how to increase true "moments of insight". Following is an excerpt of the interview.

Marketing Researchers. Creativity is a concept that has been inherently critical to the marketing function. How do you define creativity?

John Lehrer: I define it very simply. Creativity is coming up with a new idea that is useful. I don't think we need to get all fancy schmancy with a definition of creativity. Creativity is one of those things we know it when we see it.



MR: *In your book, you seem to be shattering the myth that only certain types of individuals have the creative gene. If that's the case, what drives certain people to be more creative than others?*

Lehrer: One of the big myths I wanted to explore in this book was an obsession with individual creativity. I think one of the reasons some people are much more creative than others is that they're in more creative environments. Creativity is much more social than we often give it credit for. Creativity, just like about every human talent, is distributed on a bell curve. Some people are going to have a little bit more of it than others. It doesn't mean, though, that creativity is an all or nothing phenomenon.

The big myth that we've gotten wrong about creativity is we assume there are creative types, and some people have it and the rest of us don't. The myth is that you either are blessed with the creative gene or you're forced to just recycle the work of others. That's not the case. Creativity and imagination is embedded very deep in our software. It's an essential part of the way we think; we're connection machines. Even if we're not the most creative people in the world, we still have some creativity inside of us that we can unleash. We can all get creative. Study after study has proven this to be true. One of my favorites showed that you can double performance on a classic test of creativity by simply putting people in a blue room. This suggests that we're much more creative than we typically give ourselves credit for. We just need to learn how to think and how to unleash our imagination.

MR: *As brands struggle to engage customers today, organizations are charged with not only finding good people but good ideas. If good ideas emanate, in part, from creativity, what should organizations be actively doing to foster creativity?*

Lehrer: Everyone needs to be in the creative game. From the most macro perspective possible, the end source of economic growth is new ideas. There is no shortcut around it. That's really where value comes from—whether it's coming up with a new brand, a new logo, a new marketing campaign, a new product, or a new book. Companies and organizations just need to do a better job of it. For example, whatever you do, don't engage in brainstorming. This is perhaps the most widely implemented creativity technique of all time. Yet, study after study shows that it just doesn't work. Brainstorming actually holds us back. People are actually much better off when they violate the very first rule of brainstorming which is "Thou shalt not criticize." Groups that engage in debate and dissent actually generate a lot more new ideas and ideas which are rated better by an independent panel of judges.

So companies can stimulate creativity by doing everything from refraining from brainstorming to making sure their employees are interacting with each other. I got to spend some time at Pixar and design of their studio is all about forcing their different cultures---their computer scientists, their innovators—to mix and mingle. Forcing people who might not normally interact to interact with each other is an important principle behind every office space. It really is the human friction

that makes the spark—whether that friction comes from a conversation by the water cooler or from some criticism in a group meeting. What we need is more friction.

When it comes to cultivating creativity in organizations, the more voices the better, especially intellectual diversity of voices. You want people from different backgrounds coming together to work on problems. That seems the best template for group creativity. You also want a diversity of social intimacies. This concept is based on the work of Northwestern sociologist Brian Uzzi. He created a template focusing on Broadway musicals and he found that the best Broadway musicals tend to consist of teams and collaboration where there are some good friends, some people who have worked together many times as well as complete strangers, those who can bring a completely fresh voice to the work. His great case study is *West Side Story*, a musical which consisted of several repeat collaborators (Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents) but also a complete newbie and novice, 25-year-old lyricist Stephen Sondheim who had never written for Broadway before. When in doubt, make sure you have a Stephen Sondheim on your team, someone who can surprise you with all sorts of strange ideas.



For his research, Uzzi assigned a Q score to each musical. If you had a Q of 5, then you were all best friends and everyone knows each other really well. If you have a Q of 1, you are all basically strangers. The research found that plays with high Qs tended to do really poorly and to bomb at the box office. The same is true of plays with a really low Q so if your Q was around a 1 or 2, the play also tended to fail. Plays in the sweet spot of Q between 3.2 and 3.7 were 2 to 4 times more likely to succeed. The research led Uzzi to conclude that getting the Q right, getting that right mix of social intimacy affects a really important part of collaboration. In addition to intellectual diversity, it's important to have social intimacy diversity, with a mixture of friends and strangers.

MR: *In your book you mention that creative companies develop their working environment in specific ways that other organizations do not. You cite 3M specifically in organizing for creativity. Can you expand on this?*

Lehrer: One of the things that really drew me to 3M was that it's really easy to get excited about a hot new company with a big new idea, but 3M really has an unparalleled history of innovation. Ever since they were a sandpaper company and one of their engineers convinced them to come up with masking tape and the idea of putting tape on a roll, they've come up with innovative product after product. They have 50,000 employees and 55,000 products. They really are this factory of innovation with a great legacy. I was interested in some of their cultural habits, routines and processes that have allowed them to come up with new idea after new idea.

3M pioneered something called "Bootlegging Day" where they allow their engineers to spend 15% of their day working on their own passion projects. All they need to do is promise they'll share the idea with their colleagues. This process has been widely implemented in places like Google. When you look at their history of innovation, a lot of their ideas have come from this 15% of their day when their employees are free to do whatever they want. They also hold a bi-annual science fair where all their engineers from all their different fields come together and have posters and share ideas.

One of their most interesting routines is that they will typically force engineers to switch fields every 5-6 years. From a certain perspective, this may seem really inefficient, because you're taking an expert and turning him into a novice but 3M believes it's crucial. In one case, moving an engineer from the adhesives to the LCD screen division resulted in the invention of one of their most successful products—a film that's applied to just about every screen in your home which magnifies the brightness of bulbs. The film directs more of the illumination outwards which helped 3M solve the battery life problem of a lot of gadgets. This breakthrough came from simply rotating engineers. The one thing all these tricks have in common is that they're all about increasing the amount of horizontal interaction. It's a fancy term, but basically it means getting people to talk to each other across domains. They want knowledge to be freely shared, to be constantly transplanted from field to field and I think that's a big part of why they've been so successful for so long.

MR: *Brands are finding they need to draft a new definition of the “Big Idea” in order to drive customer engagement. What role does creativity play in generating the truly “big idea” that will help transform a brand?*

Lehrer: That big idea is all about creativity. Typically, when you talk to scientists about big ideas, they'll talk in terms of “moments of insight,” the technical term for when we've got those big ideas in the shower or they come out of the blue. There's some really interesting research into how they happen. They seem so mysterious. We're just shampooing our hair and then, “Boom”, we've got this epiphany.

Research conducted by Mark Beeman at Northwestern and John Kounios at Drexel found we're more likely to have these great ideas when we're in relaxed states of mind, like taking a shower, playing Ping-Pong, or going for a walk. That certainly is counter-intuitive because when I'm really stuck on a problem and my back is up against a wall my first response is to say, “I've got to work harder. I've got to drink more caffeine. I've got to chain myself to my desk.” But that turns out to be the exact wrong approach. I may be focused but I'll be focused on the exact wrong idea. I'll be focused on the problem. Now, when I'm stuck or feel I need my big idea, I'm much more likely to take a long walk, to take a long shower, to follow the advice of Albert Einstein which is “Creativity is the residue of time wasted.” Now, I'm much more willing to waste some time and just trust that the answer will only arrive once I've stopped looking for it. That's why I think a lot of workplaces get it backwards. We're fixated on this very narrow definition on

Cultivating Creativity in the Workplace

- **Embrace blocks.**
Jonah Lehrer suggests that creative blocks are a positive thing. “It's only ...after we've stopped searching for the answer, that the answer often arrives,” he suggests. “Before there can be a breakthrough, there has to be a block.”
- **Interact horizontally.**
Mix it up in the workplace by integrating with others across all disciplines and functions. Gather a mixture of people with diverse intellectual and social backgrounds.
- **Bag brainstorming in favor of plussing.**
Walt Disney coined the term plussing as a way of making an idea even better. Pixar is a big believer in plussing, telling its workers to “plus it”, even when they think they've nailed it.
- **Cultivate acquaintances.**
A study of entrepreneurs found the most prolific among them tended to have three times the number of acquaintances as the average entrepreneur. Look beyond your close friends and cultivate acquaintances.
- **Change your definition of productivity.**
Give yourself and others permission to explore ideas, to think and relax which often generates the best kinds of ideas.
- **Facilitate idea sharing.**
Sharing ideas leads to both greater productivity and innovation. When ideas are shared, they multiply. Develop processes in your organization to encourage idea sharing.
- **Stay fresh.**
Remain innovative by getting comfortable with discomfort. Tackle new challenges, even when you approach the peak of a project.

what productivity should look like. But when it comes to managing innovation and creativity, you have to realize that a lot of our most creative moments are going to happen when we're just taking a nap in the corner, or going for a walk, or doing things that to a stranger may look to be the least productive or like we're just wasting time but often that's necessary.

MR: *Is our increasing usage of social media inhibiting or fostering creativity?*

Lehrer: There hasn't been a lot of good research yet on the subject. The phenomenon is so new. One thing we can say for sure is that Facebook isn't yet a substitute for real-world interaction. Even in this age of Skype and face time and email and video chats, there's still something intangible about meeting in person which is why we still schlep to video conferences and why we still live in big cities. In many instances, these things have become more valuable; it's even more important to go to business conferences. In fact, a Harvard economist shared this great factoid that attendance at business conferences has doubled since the invention of Skype. Even though we could all do this just remotely, we still know there is something incredibly valuable about doing it in person.

MR: *What spurs your own creativity?*

Lehrer: I like taking long walks. Before, when I was stuck on a problem, I really would force myself to chug caffeine. I'd make some coffee and say, "Jonah, you're going to focus because you're going to crack this problem. Of course, I'd squander hours and the next day I'd look at my work and realize it's all junk and I'd be back to square one. Now I'm much more willing to take Albert Einstein's advice and when I'm stuck, I go for a long walk. To make those walks even more productive, I leave my phone behind. That's my favorite recipe for creativity.

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