

# Three ways to sustain creativity

Submitted by: BlueSky Education

Thursday, 10 November 2022

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Why is it so hard to sustain creativity? Dr Dirk Deichmann, associate professor in the department of Technology and Operations Management at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University (RSM) wanted to find out why some people become one-hit-wonders while others keep up their creativity. He identified three tips that could help keep the creative juices flowing.

“It is very difficult for people to sustain their creativity. And that’s a problem because a continuous stream of new ideas is critical to remain competitive. We wanted to identify the factors that may constrain people from continually creating new ideas,” explained Dr Deichmann, who tested this theory with a study of first-time cookbook authors in the UK, plus two experiments.

Dr Deichmann worked with Markus Baer, Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis.

They tested two factors that have been known to enhance the success of a creative production, like writing cookbooks. The first is the novelty of the underlying idea, and the second is the acclaim it receives from awards or recognition, which can, paradoxically, constrain the author’s appetite to produce follow-up work in that same domain.

Their results supported their theoretical model. Artists and creatives can find it daunting to be expected to make a second ‘something’ that’s as creative and novel as the first because it’s experienced as a greater threat to creative identity; there’s a fear that the second idea will pale in comparison to the first.

So how do you hold on to your creativity when fear is holding you back? The researchers identified three strategies that could help reduce the feeling of having your creative identity threatened.

Structure your approach. Don’t just rely on your gut feeling. Instead, follow a structured approach to generating your fresh and innovative content. You could use an innovation process, like design thinking to systematically develop new ideas.

Use collaborators. Don’t try to do it alone. Using a team of collaborators means you are less likely to experience a personal threat. Dr Deichmann’s own research into idea generators and the pros and cons of teamwork also shows that working with collaborators increases the chances of subsequent success.

Find a safe space. Enhance your ‘psychological safety’. There’s always the risk that a follow-up cookery book – or any project – could be perceived as less impressive, but if it’s done in an environment in which risk-taking is made more acceptable because there are fewer negative consequences, you could feel less of a threat to your creative identity.

The full academic paper can be found here: Deichmann, D., Baer, M. 2022. A recipe for success? Sustaining creativity among first-time creative producers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, forthcoming: (<https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001019>).

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