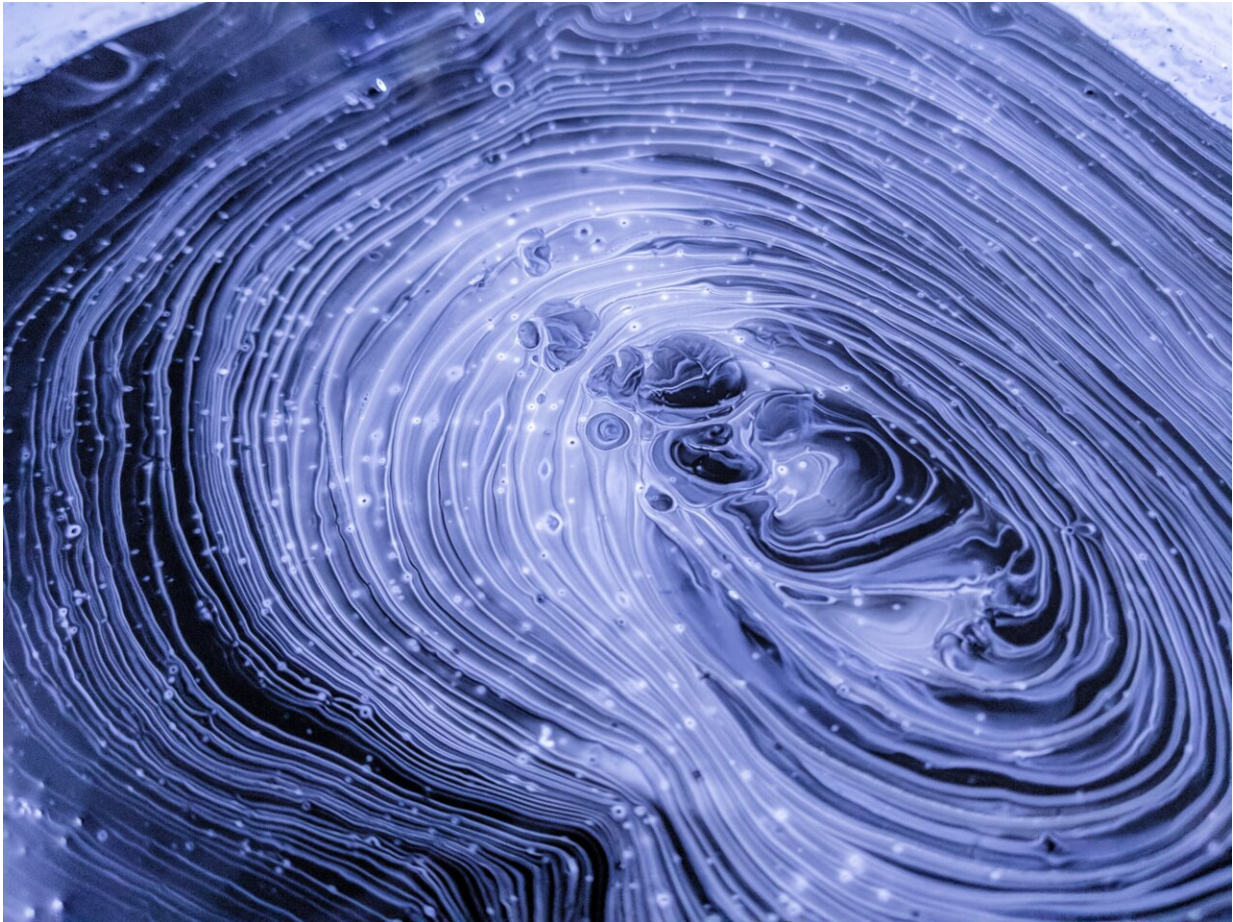# Here's why you dread brainstorming at work

November 14 2018, by Lukasz Andrzej Derdowski

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The nature of work is changing. In today's fast changing and interconnected world many companies operate in highly competitive international environments.

Technological advances can happen almost on the spot and information can flow through a globalised network in a split second.

And while this can set the pace for the development of many firms, it can also contribute to increasingly complex problems that organisations must face.

Many companies, such as Google or Pixar, adapt to this stark reality by emphasising the role of job-related creativity in sustaining organisational viability. What's more, corporations are increasingly interested in workgroups and teams to deliver novel and useful ideas, propositions, and solutions, to emerging challenges.

Yet, some teams appear to be more successful in their creative endeavours than others. Why is this? And how can we explain this unfulfilled creative potential?

The Underlying Expectation

Creativity at [work](#) is often depicted as a process of generating new and applicable ideas, products, processes, or services.

Changing technologies, increased globalisation, and international competition result in increasingly complex tasks that individuals are expected to cope with on daily bases. Under these conditions, no single employee possesses all the knowledge necessary to solve organisational problems, and as such, workgroups are often seen as a remedy to this limitation.

Intuitively, people with distinct job-related backgrounds possess different knowledge, expertise, experiences, and this diversity of information and perspectives may inspire a so-called Creative Synergy Effect. After all, Aristotle once said that "the whole is greater than the

sum of its parts".

However, whereas group members are expected to capitalise on their job-related diversities, available research and practice (see, the Aristotle Project at Google) shows that some groups are more successful in these endeavours than others.

Impediments to the Creative Synergy Effect

Our existing knowledge on impediments to workplace creativity is still relatively limited. However, several organisational researchers (see, the work by Roni Reiter-Palmon) have managed to identify certain social psychological mechanisms that are responsible for reducing the creative synergy in groups:

- Production Blocking – decades of research on the brainstorming technique shows that it is difficult for people to generate creative ideas while listening to others in a group. The time and effort we use to understand others' propositions cannot be spent on generating our own ideas. Additionally, interacting with others leads to the exchange of new knowledge that at some point may feel overwhelming, and could result in a so-called 'cognitive overload'.
- Evaluation Apprehension – normally, individuals at work want to belong to their teams and as such, they care about what others think about them. Sharing unique ideas carries the risk that submitted propositions would trigger negative responses, criticism, or even a social exclusion. Thus, the social nature of the creative exchange can generate anxiety that is particularly problematic for people who are highly concerned about being evaluated.
- Conformity Pressure – several studies report that team members happen to experience a social pressure to conform to a group

majority, which does not necessarily seek creative and out of the ordinary ideas. Sometimes, established group norms influence individuals to the extent that they accept the 'good enough' solutions to the task at hand.

- Social Loafing – research agrees that cooperating within a group setting makes some people feel less motivated to share their personal views on a task, as their individual contributions to the team's work are less likely to be recognised. It follows that the same group members prefer working alone so that their meaningful inputs are properly acknowledged and widely appreciated.

- Information Sharing Bias – while working in groups, individuals often prefer to share common information only to validate this knowledge, and further show to one another that a given speaker is competent at the task. Apparently, this approach prevents the formation of unusual points of view that may advance group creative problem-solving efforts.

- Social Categorisation – diversity at work may invite distinctions between individuals seen as in-group ("us") and individuals seen as out-group ("them") that are likely to result in further challenges in communication of creative alternatives between the members of these sub-groups.

- Ownership Bias – existing research shows that employees are likely to select and develop ideas they personally worked on while brainstorming over and above the suggestions presented by other groups or their members. This can evidently hamper the implementation of truly novel propositions.

Facing the Paradox?

These examples are far from exhaustive, yet they indicate that social processes in working groups can effectively prevent teammates from achieving the desired state of the creative synergy. Clearly, group

interactions interfere with the very advantage they are expected to provide.

Still, research suggests that these social-psychological working processes can, to some extent, be addressed. For example, companies that implement a brainstorming method instruct their employees to abstain from criticism during the exercise so as to avoid "evaluation apprehension". Yet others prefer to conduct electronic brainstorming sessions where participants share ideas on computer platforms without having to wait for their turn, and so alleviate the "production blocking issue."

Techniques can also be adopted, such as the nominal group technique, which allows every member of a team to provide their view of the solution accompanied by a short explanation. Having articulated their ideas, each individual proceeds to systematically rank provided propositions from which the one with highest score is finally selected. This minimises the difficult-to-manage group processes. Alternatively, a team leader who prefers a top-down management style may assign very specific work roles to group members.

All of these actions have been designed to overcome the diminishing effects of the often dreaded group work processes unfolding during meetings. But surely such constrained and limited modes of operation kill off the very essence of the group genius that often materialises through the unconstrained exchange of creative ideas. Aren't they?

Clearly, we are still at the beginning of the road towards fully grasping the intricacies of how best to foster teams' creativity at work.

But, while working towards this goal, we should at least have the vocabulary necessary to identify some of the processes that can stifle creativity, and hopefully start to address these issues as they arise.