As an act of self-disclosure, workplace creativity can be risky business

September 4 2019, by Phil Ciciora

It's increasingly common for managers to instruct employees to "be creative" during brainstorming sessions. But according to a new paper from Jack Goncalo, a professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business at Illinois, being creative in the workplace is potentially fraught with peril because creativity itself is deeply personal. Credit: Gies College of Business

It's increasingly common for managers to direct employees to "be creative" during office brainstorming sessions. But should employees acquiesce to that managerial edict? According to a new paper from a U. of I. expert in work behaviors and organizations, being creative in the workplace is potentially precarious because creativity itself is deeply personal, which can make the creative act feel self-disclosing.

Research from Jack Goncalo, a professor of business administration at the Gies College of Business, investigates the psychological and interpersonal consequences of creativity, showing that when prompted to be creative, people share ideas that reflect their unique point of view and personal preferences—which can be risky business in the office.

"One of the things organizations often tell their employees is be creative, but that's not a benign instruction," Goncalo said. "When you're being creative, you're sharing something about yourself and allowing others to make judgments about you. I think people—both managers and employees—should be mindful of the risks involved. There ought to be some caution flags raised around the idea that employees can be freely creative, unless you go through a lot of hoops to make sure there aren't consequences."

Whether it's formulating the latest scientific breakthrough, developing new technology or creating a collaborative work of art, creativity not only entails conjuring novel ideas but also mustering the courage to openly express those ideas to colleagues, and thereby expose them to criticism.

"When people are being creative, they're not just solving problems. They're actually revealing something deeply personal," Goncalo said. "The ideas that we share when we're [brainstorming](#) and generating ideas—they're not just abstract, cold solutions to a problem. They're derived from our own unique idiosyncratic perspective. You're reaching

down into yourself to share something that reflects your point of view, and that makes sharing those ideas risky, personal and consequential."

Over the course of five experiments, Goncalo and co-author Joshua H. Katz, a graduate student at Illinois, sought to test the hypothesis that generating creative ideas would prompt the perception of self-disclosure.

When subjects were told to be creative, they inevitably "thought about their own preferences, their own likes and dislikes, and less about what other people thought," Goncalo said.

"That reveals why creativity is risky, and it reveals something about the process that people go through, and we measure this in the paper," he said. "We had experiments where we instructed people to generate creative ideas for potato chip flavors and candle scents, and you can't help but read their ideas and feel like you know the person afterward."

Most of the research on creativity is on its antecedents and how to generate more of it. But this paper shows that there are consequences to being creative, Goncalo said.

"When you say you don't like my idea, you're actually rejecting someone's perspective or point of view, which is dangerously close to rejecting that person—which is risky, to say the least, when you're in a workplace," he said.

Another finding of the research is that being creative together is a way of getting to know someone else.

"When I hear your creative ideas, I get the sense that I can predict something about your personality," Goncalo said.

One of the respondents for the creative candle scent experiment came up

with some fairly unique ideas—"Zombie Outbreak," "Spoiled Milk in a Hot Car" and a euphemism for canine flatulence.

"Based on those ideas, you may feel like you know this person, but you also might not necessarily like them," he said. "When people are being creative, they are sharing the kind of information that may rub people the wrong way."

Being creative also is something that can help people bond or know each other better, Goncalo said.

"The most positive spin on this is that when people are creative together, a byproduct is that they get to know each other a little better," he said. "Then again, you might not like what you hear. That's where the risk comes from, but you can certainly match people on their mutual preferences, which could easily lead to bonding."

The research not only has implications for creative types and marketing managers, but also for any group setting where out-of-the-box thinking and brainstorming is demanded.

"This speaks to making people feel anonymous when they're brainstorming," Goncalo said. "It's the same reason that people share more when they know that their response will be anonymous, because there's less risk. So one way to be more creative is by lowering the risk, but also realizing that it's an opportunity to get to know each other better. It could certainly be an icebreaker."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign