How Collaboration Needs Change From Mind to Marketplace

Identify and pursue truly novel concepts by helping the innovators in your organization collaborate in the right ways at the right times.
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BY JILL E. PERRY-SMITH

It can be a long slog from initial concept to final product. Even in organizations that pride themselves on rapid iteration and experimentation, most truly novel ideas either stall out at some point in development or lose their originality along the way. How do you defy those odds? By adjusting collaborative behavior to meet the idea wherever it is in its journey from mind to marketplace.

That journey entails four phases: idea generation; concept elaboration through tests or prototypes that flesh out the idea and assess feasibility; internal promotion to get the sponsorship needed to move forward with a product; and implementation, which involves finalizing plans and specifications, creating the product, and delivering it. In my nearly 20 years researching creativity and innovation, I’ve found that as an idea progresses from phase to phase, its collaborative requirements change. (See “The Idea Journey at a Glance,” p. 26.) Here, we’ll look at how those needs shift and how innovation managers can help people adapt accordingly instead of relying on go-to connections and patterns of behavior.

If novel ideas moved in a straight line from conception to completion, it would be easier for them to gain traction. However, they often loop...
back to previous phases or cycle between phases several times, which complicates the journey and stalls progress. When this happens, an idea is likely to be stripped of its novelty so that a more mundane version can move forward with less resistance. Novel ideas are inherently risky. Because they are unusual, they lack strong precedent, and it’s tough to cite clear examples of success. So convincing stakeholders to invest in them can be difficult. Thus, high-potential novel ideas tend to devolve into safer, less inspiring ones that ultimately get the green light.

That’s hardly the stuff of competitive breakthroughs. By taking a more adaptive approach to creative collaboration, your organization can increase its odds of bringing truly new ideas to market. Let’s begin by examining the core collaborative needs of each phase of the idea’s journey.1

**Sparking Idea Generation**

Each new concept originates as a spark of creative inspiration. Innovation managers can ignite that spark by exposing people to a range of perspectives. This builds cognitive flexibility, priming minds to make novel connections that lead to original ideas. During idea generation, exposure to alternate points of view needn’t be immersive. Brief, even fleeting, encounters with others who see the world differently can enhance creativity.

Indeed, in a series of studies I conducted, interactions with strangers and acquaintances had that effect. For example, in one R&D organization, engineers with an abundance of weak, surface-level network ties to people in different functions were rated by managers as more creative than engineers with fewer weak ties. In contrast, strong ties did not promote creativity and in some cases harmed it.2

To understand why, think about the people you interact with most frequently or consider to be friends. Chances are pretty good that you’re connected by some thread of commonality. Maybe you’re in the same department or in the same type of role. Maybe you have similar personal interests or temperaments. You may share experiences or identities associated with your race, gender, or profession. Although such relationships provide comfort and support, they are less likely than weaker ties to expose you to new ways of thinking.

Close friends may actually be too supportive during the idea generation phase. In another study, London Business School professor Pier Mannucci and I invited both friends and strangers, on campus and in the surrounding community, to come into our research laboratory so we could observe their conversations after assigning them a task: Generate and develop novel decor ideas for a university bookstore. Participants worked alone and submitted their own ideas, but they were randomly assigned to talk to two strangers or two friends, one at a time, before they began their focused brainstorming. We found that friends showed support by building on one another’s ideas — and people went forward with those ideas, even when they were not very creative. Strangers, in contrast, exchanged a greater variety of ideas in their conversations, and people came up with more novel concepts as a result.3

Interactions with strangers or acquaintances can provide another benefit during the generation phase as well: We work harder to mine creative nuggets from these connections, and so the yield tends to be richer. In a simple experiment where people were asked to come into the lab and solve human resource problems, they jotted down their initial thoughts before receiving input from others — either friends or people they didn’t know well, one person at a time — and then independently formulated solutions to propose. Those who received concrete advice from people they

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**THE IDEA JOURNEY AT A GLANCE**

Collaborative needs shift from phase to phase throughout the development and execution of a novel idea.

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didn’t know well spent more time coming up with solutions, presumably putting in more cognitive effort to integrate different perspectives. Even though participants deemed ideas more useful when they came from strong-tie interactions, independent raters judged the solutions generated by weak-tie interactions more creative. We may intend to pursue novel ideas with equal rigor no matter who or where the initial spark comes from, but weak ties provide an edge. So, encouraging novelty in the generation phase means providing ample opportunities for innovators to get inspired by weak ties. (We’ll go into detail later about how to do that and how to meet collaborative needs in other phases.) It’s best to encourage one-on-one interactions rather than group discussions this early in the idea journey, when letting many flowers bloom makes it easier to find the freshest ones. A considerable body of research shows that teams generate fewer and lower-quality ideas than the same number of individuals working alone. One problem is that people have difficulty simultaneously paying attention to teammates’ new ideas and coming up with their own. Teammates tend to produce similar ideas when brainstorming together, and they get distracted by social niceties like taking turns when others are expressing themselves. Ideally, innovators should engage in one-on-one interactions with weak ties to stimulate creativity and then generate ideas alone to maximize originality.

Supporting Elaboration
During the elaboration phase, the concept is fleshed out, although it is by no means complete. Activities include lab testing and prototyping to give the idea shape and assess its viability; they do not involve creating detailed blueprints or CAD drawings.

For elaboration, the core collaborative needs are support and encouragement — the same behaviors that stifle creative generation. Though beloved by its creator, a highly novel idea inevitably has flaws that are clear to others. But at this point, detailed critical feedback can prematurely squash the idea by highlighting barriers and undermining confidence in its potential before a fair case can be made for it. The creator may take the criticisms personally, abandon the concept, and avoid sharing highly novel ideas again, not wanting to be perceived by decision makers and colleagues as being too far “out there.”

Because of these risks — and because there isn’t yet evidence that the idea could really take off — the creator needs courage to persist. So keeping the idea moving through the elaboration process requires a constructive stance and positive developmental feedback in the form of suggestions and observations. Close friends can be excellent sources of support and encouragement in this phase by serving as creative confidants. Friends tend to listen with an open mind, and even if the rough concept seems flawed to them, they are likely to provide encouraging advice and feedback that could help shape the idea into something with staying power rather than pick it apart. In the study that tasked people with generating bookstore decor ideas, friends who provided input extended and built upon ideas rather than offering new ones. For instance, they suggested additional color combinations or technological capabilities. With this kind of feedback, creators were more likely to move forward and even expand the idea’s novelty. But when strangers continued to offer new ideas during the elaboration phase, creators abandoned their own, perhaps taking others’ contributions as a signal that their own ideas were flawed.

Managers may be tempted to act as creative confidants, especially if they have a close relationship with the idea’s creator, but they are not the best source of feedback and support during elaboration. Research shows that they are less equipped than peers to recognize a creative idea’s downstream potential. The manager’s role usually emphasizes evaluating ideas through the lens of prior experience and knowledge, leaving little room for open inquiry and exploration. And creators may assume that managers are always in evaluation mode, even if they don’t mean to be.

Although collaborative needs shift from strangers or acquaintances during generation to friends during elaboration, the two phases do have something in common: an emphasis on input from individuals rather than teams. Groups’ social dynamics create unnecessary threats to creative ideas during elaboration. For instance, our desire for social acceptance and our tendency to make sense of things based on social cues from others may cause team members to coalesce around a particular position that could summarily squash a novel idea while it’s still being defined. Individuals don’t fall into the same traps.
The role of creative confidant is best played at a distance from very early development work. When people don’t contribute directly to the testing and prototyping, they can more easily focus on giving encouragement and support rather than providing tactical assistance, and they aren’t as inclined to engage in overly critical evaluation. And anyway, the prototyping and feasibility studies don’t require as much collaboration as the more extensive development work later, during implementation, when a team is useful and necessary to create detailed blueprints, for example, and to solve technical and specification issues that arise. In the elaboration phase, the creator may enlist the help of others to complete first-stage prototyping, but this should be a creator-directed effort rather than a codevelopment activity.

**Seeking Promotion**

The main activities during the promotion phase include selling the idea internally and seeking approval to blueprint, create, and deliver the finished product. The creator or business manager pitches the idea to key gatekeepers, such as innovation panels or top management teams, who can provide political support and resources.

Success in this phase requires organizational influence. Persuading people to invest in novel ideas with minimal precedent is difficult, especially when many ideas are vying for support. So it’s useful to collaborate with a network broker—a linchpin who connects otherwise disconnected people.

A network broker can efficiently secure buy-in and resources from various areas of the organization. A rich body of research, inspired by sociologist Ronald Burt’s structural hole theory about networks, confirms that brokers are well positioned to capture attention for ideas because their connections give them access to people and information that others don’t have. Their status as go-to sources of knowledge confers legitimacy and power. Tapping someone who simply has a lot of connections won’t provide the same benefits. The key is connecting those disparate pockets of people so that the idea and the opportunities associated with it will have more touch points throughout the organization.

In addition to expanding the idea’s reach, network brokers can help describe ideas in a way that will resonate for a variety of potential backers. They are adept at moving between groups and social circles that do not share the same history, norms, values, and approaches to decision making. They speak the language of these circles and understand what matters to them.

**Streamlining Implementation**

Once the creator has the necessary go-ahead and funding, the idea moves to the implementation phase, where the main activity is executing on the prototype or refined idea. In addition to building and delivering the product, this often involves finalizing the plans that will allow you to fully realize the concept: developing detailed engineering specifications (such as CAD drawings), sourcing the materials, and outlining the logistical operations. Of course, this work takes different forms in different fields—it doesn’t always look like traditional product development. In the film industry, for instance, execution entails finalizing scripts and storyboards, working out production details like shooting angles and lighting specs, directing and filming the actors, editing the movie, and distributing it.

The primary collaborative need during this phase is for a shared vision that will motivate team members to persevere and overcome obstacles by giving each of them a sense of ownership. To understand the optimal collaborative patterns in the implementation phase, think about how cliques work: In these dense groups of friends, each member has a direct association with every other member. There’s no need for a network broker. The relationships are so close and intertwined that group identity supersedes individual identities. Indeed, anyone who is too inwardly focused may risk social isolation from the others. Sociological research reveals that this group structure has a lot of advantages. Members of a clique enjoy a great deal of trust and cooperation. Their tightly woven relationships give them leverage to bring in line any behaviors that are contrary to group norms and expectations. And positive sentiment is high: It feels good to be part of such a cohesive unit.

Product teams can apply the same principles—trust, cooperation, social correction, and group cohesion—to implement an idea. When individual members know they can rely on one another, are
confident about one another’s intentions, and feel an intense commitment to the group and its work, they can embrace the creator’s vision and advance it in lockstep.

A call for teams that resemble cliques may seem like an invitation to engage in classic groupthink — a cognitive trap that is associated with a strong desire for belonging and leads team members to fixate on the merits of a single idea, without noticing its flaws or raising alternatives. Groupthink does cause problems during the generation phase, where a variety of perspectives begets novel ideas. But during implementation, the focus is on getting things done; it’s time to converge on the chosen idea and make it work. While cohesive teams with a shared vision can handicap idea generation, they generally have an edge with execution. Plus, research shows that they are also quite capable of critical evaluation and objective decision-making once their high-level vision is established. Clarity around roles and ease of communication allow members to effectively push back and raise concerns. So a tight-knit team can think critically while building out detailed specifications and implementing ideas — and make better decisions as a result. If group members all understand and support the goals of the project, they’ll more effectively share information, work together, and overcome obstacles.

**Make It Easier to Flex**

Changing collaborative behaviors to meet shifting needs requires collaborative flexibility, but most of us rely repeatedly on our strongest relationships, no matter where we are in the idea journey. In studies of a live-action role-play troupe and individuals in the lab, people disproportionately thought of their closest ties during idea generation, when these ties are not optimal, and tended to stick with the same ones during elaboration, even if they had large networks. So a tight-knit team can think critically while building out detailed specifications and implementing ideas — and make better decisions as a result. If group members all understand and support the goals of the project, they’ll more effectively share information, work together, and overcome obstacles.

**Create spaces for independent thinking and exposure to different perspectives.** When you’re just entering the generation phase, try to avoid asking teams to come up with novel ideas together. Often, it’s setting them up to fail at a task they’re not designed to do. Instead, have individuals generate ideas on their own before discussing them with the group so that independent, original thinking isn’t immediately thwarted by the impulse to conform. If a team must assemble during the generation phase, try brainstorming silently (a process known as “brainwriting”) before sharing.

Sometimes ideation naturally falls to teams — when a visibly joint effort is needed for buy-in, for instance. If that’s the case, invite outsiders to attend discussions and empower them to ask questions. Infusions of fresh perspectives can mitigate the strong urge to reach consensus too quickly in groups. Even naive questions from someone with no stake in the problem or project at hand can push the team to process early ideas more objectively, nudge team members to reconsider closely held views, and lead to creative outcomes.

You can also consider a team rotation program, where newcomers visit groups as guest members for a single meeting or for several weeks. This benefits the newcomers by exposing them to different areas of the company and expanding their points of view, and it brings new insights into the team. It takes guest members away from their regular responsibilities, but not for long — and organizations that commit to continuous innovation must carve out time to work on unfamiliar or unspecified challenges.

**Convene strangers who can see problems in a new light.** Give employees opportunities to share problems in need of creative solutions with colleagues beyond their immediate circle. Think of structural ways to do this. For instance, you might create an idea board or council, staffing it with a rotating assortment of members who listen to challenges people are puzzling over and offer observations from an outsider’s point of view. People could schedule 30-minute one-on-one sessions with council members to get the benefit of various perspectives without incurring the creative and social risks associated with group work. This sharing opportunity is good for the presenter, who might otherwise be heard, but also for the board members, who gain exposure to employees and parts of the business they may not know well or at all.
Pixar has adopted a similar model: It assembles brain trusts of directors so that other directors can present challenges they’re facing with works in progress.14

Idea boards can also solicit solutions to problems they have identified, and they need not interact face to face. Consider virtual platforms to enable broad participation. Internal web-based problem-solving competitions are one way of sourcing ideas from colleagues far and wide who are unfamiliar with a particular problem or project and can provide fresh insight. At General Electric, aviation engineers were grappling with a small bracket that weighed an engine down and undermined its effectiveness. So they launched an online community competition and posed a challenge: Whoever redesigned the bracket to reduce the weight most effectively would win $7,000. The winner was a stranger to the organization. As a manager, you can model this behavior by sharing ideas of your own with members of your inner circle and openly debriefing your team on what you’re learning and gaining as a result.

**Bring friends together to elaborate.** Once innovators have identified an idea they’d like to explore, encourage them to seek early input from close allies. Recall that sharing highly novel ideas involves personal risk. When no established precedent exists, others may think the originator of the idea is ill informed or lacks grounding or credibility. Push key team leaders to work around this psychological barrier by identifying and cultivating creative allies within and outside the organization. As a manager, you can model this behavior by sharing ideas of your own with members of your inner circle and openly debriefing your team on what you’re learning and gaining as a result.

But again, a structural change may make it easier for others to adopt similar collaborative behaviors. For instance, you might ask an employee with a constructive disposition to serve as your group’s creative confidant for raw ideas. You would want to select someone who likes to encourage others and help build ideas rather than suggest new ones or dive into a premature critical evaluation — or at least train this person to provide the optimal balance of support and feedback. It should be someone whose informal evaluations or impressions of the creator would not become an unintended barrier — maybe a trusted peer in another department, for example (if that person’s manager is amenable and perhaps interested in having one of your team members help their group in a similar way). The creative confidant could set aside informal office hours for this purpose so these conversations wouldn’t become too onerous. The idea is to provide an easy, psychologically safe way for people to spend a few moments sharing a core concept with a receptive listener so they can elaborate on the idea before sharing it more widely in the organization.

What if the idea is simply a bad idea? Should the creative confidant encourage an idea that will never work? Yes! Organizational psychologist Jennifer Mueller, in her book *Creative Change*, describes the inherent difficulty of spotting and embracing high-potential creative ideas.15 As mentioned earlier, managers in particular have trouble identifying these ideas, given their tendency to go into evaluation mode. If you want to encourage novel ideas, it’s better to risk letting some bad ideas move forward into prototyping than to abandon good ones prematurely. Save the critical evaluation for later, during promotion, once the idea has enough substance to weather the scrutiny needed to make a persuasive case, and during the early stages of implementation, when specifications are being finalized.

**Identify superconnectors, and put innovators in touch with them.** Finding the network brokers, or superconnectors, in your organization is easy when they have formal positions that bridge disparate groups. Still, these roles may be more obvious to you than to the innovators you work with, because of your vantage point as a manager. So explicitly point out who the formal brokers are and provide introductions. But also remember that other brokers (sometimes the most effective ones) do not have a job that reflects their network position. As you work to identify these hidden superconnectors, look for people who have worked in or with various business units and have, as a result, maintained key relationships throughout the organization. Even if they are not decision makers or gatekeepers, they can fulfill the influence and translation roles of brokers.

It helps to pay attention to the trajectories of job switchers in your network. For instance, one executive in my research noticed that a former finance colleague had branched out and assumed roles in operations and marketing. They eventually became allies, creating a tie between the executive and an informal superconnector.

**Build teams to execute.** When assembling teams for implementation, seek members who have
relationships with one another. Interpersonal connection is as important as prior experience and technical competency. Consider office layouts: you might cluster departments during implementation (versus intermingling them when generation is the primary goal). Close ties make it easier to adopt a shared vision for execution, and it’s difficult to develop those quickly. Offsite team-building activities can help groups gain familiarity and interpersonal awareness, but it’s much more efficient to tap members who already have connections in place. You can then build on those connections by assigning tasks that will yield small wins early on. Bonding through success is more effective than bonding through occasional fun activities and expensive offsites.

**IDEALLY, COLLABORATION BECOMES** more intensive as new ideas progress from concept to product. Although innovators do need exposure to others for creative inspiration, that exposure should be constrained early on: During idea generation, one-on-one interactions with strangers or acquaintances promote open-mindedness and originality. During elaboration, when ideas are half-baked and sharing them is risky, close allies and friends can give innovators support and encouragement to help them persist in the face of uncertainty. As an idea moves to internal promotion, innovators have to connect with more and more people — in various pockets of the organization — to secure the resources and buy-in to proceed with a product. In this phase, complicated networks must be navigated and relationships brokered. Teams finally come into their own during implementation, when consensus is more valuable than threatening. Once novelty has survived development, getting in sync is the point — it’s what brings the idea home.

As a manager, you can create the conditions to meet the shifting collaborative needs of innovators. It doesn’t require an organizational overhaul, though it is largely a structural challenge — mainly a matter of helping people make the right kinds of connections at the right times. That’s happening consistently in a business, truly novel ideas have a fighting chance to make it to market.

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**REFERENCES**


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