Boosting Creativity by Talking to Strangers with Jill Perry Smith (S7:E5) (Transcript)

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Chris Congdon: Jill, welcome to Work Better today.

Jill Perry-Smith: Thank you, I'm delighted to be here. Thank you for having me.

Chris Congdon: Well, I think your work is something that is critically important for all kinds of organizations. You focus your research on creativity and innovation. And it feels like, of all the leaders that we talk to, this is one of the biggest skill sets that people are looking for in their organization.

But I want to get your backstory a little bit, because it's kind of interesting. You started your career as a civil engineer, and did project management, and I would say that those are careers that people think about in terms of, like, logic, and organization and precision. I don't know if that's a career that people would say, "oh, that's highly creative". So, first of all, I'm interested in what made you switch from engineering into creativity as a field of study?

Jill Perry-Smith: My backstory is unusual, I believe. I started my career as a stereotypical young engineer. I was focused on the problems at hand, I loved the quantitative aspect of engineering and solving problems, and frankly, at the time, I saw people as almost a distraction, if not, a necessity work.

It didn't take long after I started my career working for a very large oil and gas company, a wonderful corporation, to see that there were aspects of organizing and being in a company that I just did not understand at all.

 And I wanted to understand those concepts, what it means to be in a business, what it means to have a strategy, what it means to think about people and motivating them? So I decided to get my MBA part-time. just to learn, and to be better. And I was exposed to some classes that I had never been exposed to as an engineer. And those included organizational psychology classes, organizational leadership classes, and I learned about these concepts and areas, such as the importance of relationships, influence, status, power, working in teams, etc. and I was hooked!

CC: I want to move into your sweet spot of creativity, because when I hear the word creativity, and I think about, like, my work, I often think about the people in the design functions, you know, the people who design beautiful furniture, or… I think about, one of my coworkers whose title is literally Creative Director, but maybe that's too narrow of a view in terms of creativity. And I've heard you associate creativity more with the idea of problem solving. Can you talk about that a little bit?

JPS: Yes, I see creativity as being much broader than how we typically think about people who work in creative industries, or where their job involves art or aesthetics. Those aspects of creative work are really important, and I encompass those in my research and my work as well. However, in addition to that, I think there's a place and a time for all of us to be creative, and a need, in fact.

As you mentioned, organizational leaders and executives often describe creative, innovative, problem solving, these are the key skills that they're interested in. And the reason that's the case is creative problem solving becomes essential when standard solutions just will not do. When you think about really challenging problems with lots of constraints, where we don't intuitively or easily understand how to solve the problem, that's when we need to be creative.

And in organizations, there often are constraints. We're not unbounded with how we think about solving problems. Even if we're thinking about strategy and going forward, we're not doing so without constraints. And so, creative problem solving, I think, is essential in almost any kind of job.

CC: Yeah. You mentioned the role of relationships, and I'd love to talk about that a little bit more in terms of creativity, because, you know, I feel like in my work, you know, I've had some good ideas when I've been working by myself and really focused. At least I thought they were good ideas. But in general, I feel my most creative when I'm collaborating with other people, like, somehow my ideas got better. And I'm interested in what your research has shown about that. Are we better off thinking through things alone or together, or… or both?

JPS: The answer is really, more complex than we typically think of. So my work suggests that creativity is fundamentally a social process, but some of the assumptions about social connectivity and teamwork for creativity are quite simply misplaced. And one key way of understanding this kind of dilemma that you described, where, you know, sometimes when I'm alone, I think I'm highly creative, but when I'm with other people, I also believe that my ideas are getting better, is to think about the journey that an idea progresses as a creative life cycle, if you will.

And there are various stages, from and the birth of the idea and the mind to the marketplace, when the idea is an implemented product that hopefully is changing the field. And so, if we think about the phases that an idea traverses along this journey, what's really fascinating and important to understand is each of those phases has a different social need that is stimulating in that phase.

 Also what's interesting is if, you know, we leverage the wrong kind of relationship, or working alone versus working in teams at the wrong time, we fundamentally destroy the chances of that novel idea progressing and developing and turning into something. So I think that speaks to this duality that you're getting at, which is, you know, sometimes when I'm alone, I think I'm, you know, really creative and coming up with great ideas. Other times, when I work with people, that exchange is very stimulating and helps to build and develop the idea.

CC: Yeah. Well, why don't we talk through these stages of, basically, the day in the life of an idea, so to speak. So, it starts out, as you said, with, like, idea generation, or generative kind of work, as we often refer to it. What needs to happen in that stage, and what kinds of relationships should I be, pulling in to help me generate an idea.

JPS: So, during this generative phase, what we really need is inspiration. And so**, 9:34 -10:01** the kinds of relationships that provide that inspiration are the weaker ties, the acquaintances, the people that we don't know extremely well, but we know a little bit, just a tiny bit. And the reason that those relationships are really helpful is we're more likely to get novel insights, novel information, and different perspectives from people that we don't know well.

CC: So a weaker tie, I just want to touch on this to make sure everybody's on the same page. So, a weaker tie isn't a bad thing in a relationship. It just means we don't know each other as well. Is that correct?

JPS: Exactly. We don't know each other as well, and I would like people to understand… why these relationships are actually really beneficial. These are golden relationships.

CC: Oh. Tell us more!

JPS: Yes. So, when we think about people that we know really well, it's likely that the reason that we know them very well, the reason that we were attracted to them, is that we feel comfortable with them. We have something in common with them, maybe a similar personality style, a similar orientation, we do the same kind of work, we're from the same region, and so on.

And… that similarity gets even stronger over time. So, these relationships aren't our best source for novelty. It's the people that we don't know well that are likely to provide those sparks.

In one project I did among research and development engineers. I found in that project that engineers who had more weaker ties to people in other departments, people they didn't know well, were the engineers rated as the most creative by independent managers. And it's because those ties gave them exposure. They were more likely to give them exposure to people in different departments, people from different disciplines, and this stimulated their creativity.

And there's another thing that makes these ties really remarkable that I think is very fascinating, and that is we actually pay more attention to novel insights that we get from people we don't know well, compared to people that we do know well.

CC: So… So we listen more to people that we don't know as well? As opposed to people that we do?

JPS: Yes. So… We know a lot of people. We know a lot about people that we know very well. We know where they're coming from. We know how they think. We expect them to think in ways similar to ourselves. When we're interacting with people we don't know well, we're intrigued and attuned to what they have to say. And that's very important to not only get exposure to these different perspectives, but also pay attention to the ideas.

In another project I found, for example, that people spend more time processing the information that they get from people that they don't know well, compared to people that they do know well, and that this helped them solve problems more creatively. And the other fascinating part is, though, when you ask people, they think they're actually paying more attention to the people that they know well, but in reality, they're not.

So these acquaintances, these people we don't know well, provide novel insights, and we pay attention to those insights, which are huge for inspiration and generating creativity.

CC: It feels like this explains why my husband says I don't always listen to him that well. But also, you know, it gives me food for thought. Like, if I'm in the generative stage of a project, we're trying to come up with a new idea or solve a really complicated problem. Maybe pulling together the tried-and-true group of people that I know really well may not be my best first step. I should maybe pull in some people that I kinda sorta know, but, you know, get that much more diverse group of people to come together.

JPS: Exactly, exactly.

CC: Yeah, okay. So, moving on from there, we've got an idea, but, you know, we have to elaborate on the idea, so you call that the idea elaboration stage. So, what kinds of networks do I need in that stage? What advice do you have for us when you're trying to move an idea from that very precious little germination stage, so to speak, into this elaboration stage.

JPS: So, one thing to keep in mind is that exposing novel ideas comes with some personal risk. So when we think about extreme novelty, we're thinking about maybe something that has never been done before, something that may be a little wacky, something where there's little precedent to evaluate the idea. So there's some… personal risk associated with even exposing this idea.

So, during this stage, when we've got this fuzzy concept that's really novel, we think can solve the problem, what we need at this point is support and encouragement from people that we know really, really well. One of those inner circle ties that are, "Hey, you've got this," "maybe tweak it slightly," "go forward with it," "take a risk."

That's exactly what we need at this stage. And we've found that the stronger ties in providing encouragement are more likely to build on the idea. For example, suggest ways to alter it that could be beneficial rather than continuing to propose new ideas. which gives the implicit message that maybe my idea isn't so great.

CC: It wasn't as good, yeah.

JPS: Maybe I should abandon the idea. So my research suggests that support and encouragement is really critical during the elaboration phase to maintain the novelty inherent in the idea. And so those kinds of relationships become very helpful during elaboration.

CC: Yeah. So, let's keep discussing these stages, because I feel that, first of all, I'm learning a great deal from this, and I'm very grateful, Jill. Because also, I feel like there's kind of a trick to moving an idea from those early stages where it's kind of germinated, and you've gotten somebody who can kind of give you good feedback, but now you have to start moving it forward in the organization. I have to get somebody to give me a budget, or I have to get somebody to pay attention, who maybe is in a position of authority. What do I need during that stage?

JPS: So, during this stage, what's critical is some degree of influence. And gaining the intention of whoever the critical gatekeepers are within the company or within the field who can provide that. Those resources to develop the idea and implement it.

So, those resources can be in the form of, of time, and also money to be able to implement and move the idea forward. So, at that stage, we need to start thinking about the network more broadly, and we want to tap into those people who are well-positioned within the organization, such that we can leverage their influence for the good of the idea.

So we tend to call those people the brokers, the central stars. Those in the organization that can, by association give our idea some legitimacy to help move it forward.

CC: Okay, so I need somebody to help… champion it, and once I'm able to say, well, you know, I talked with so-and-so, and they're… going to support this idea of… or something like that. That's important. So, then to actually bring it to life, to make the idea a reality, to implement it. Like, what has to happen there? So, I've received my budget and some support, but now I really have to bring it into the marketplace, for example.

JPS: Yeah, so now we're talking about how do we execute on our idea, and so we've generated, so we're out of this generative inspiration phase, and more into execution, and this is where working in a team becomes very… important. I didn't say this earlier, but, if we work in teams during these early phases of the creative life cycle, that can actually be detrimental to our generative creativity.

CC: Oh, interesting.

JPS: Yes, and we can come back to that later, and that's a very important point. But to stay in this implementation phase, we need shared vision, cooperation, and trust at this point. And the way that we can achieve that from a relational perspective is via a team of individuals who have very tight connections with each other.

CC: Wow.

JPS: So not thinking about, do I have a strong connection with Chris? But rather, think about the entire team, and the extent there's an equal distribution of strong relationships across all pairs in that team. That's the most ideal kind of team structure. for execution during the implementation stage. So we're seeing a real shift and change in the social needs as we think about these different phases of the idea journey.

CC: Got it. At that final phase, I need people who share my like-mindedness. We're not… we're not arguing and debating about it anymore. We're… we're all… we locked hands, and we're all gonna go together. Is that kind of the right idea? Yes, and the like-minded, the way I think about that is a shared vision around the product. That's really important during that phase.

JPS: And the… the close and interconnected relationships among the individuals on the team helped to facilitate that shared vision, which is crucial to move the idea forward during implementation and deal with all the various challenges and changes that can happen during that stage.

CC: Okay, so let's go back now to what you said a few moments ago, because, you know, I've just always, throughout my career, learned that, you know, teams, you get so much better with a team, but you said something about how teams can sometimes be detrimental to this process. Can you tell us more about that?

JPS: Yeah, so let's, let's focus on the beginning, this generative phase. One of the biggest myths is that teams are better generators of creative ideas during that phase than individuals. And in actuality, individuals are better at generating novel and creative insights during that generative phase.

CC: Okay.

JPS: And there are a variety of reasons why that's the case. When we're working with others during this generative phase. We're thinking about social acceptance, so maybe we're not raising our wackiest ideas as they're… coming to us in the moment. We're focused on the social cues, you know, what are other people… how are other people reacting? What does this mean, when someone responds to an idea in this way? We're matching the novelty of the ideas that we share with the novelty of the ideas that others share, so that might mute the overall novelty that the group generates. So instead, what we want to do is think about being inspired by other people during that stage via these weaker relationships, but not necessarily generating together.

CC: As. Okay. Okay, so I'm drawing more on the… Maybe their expertise, or just things that they might think about. but not necessarily trying to co-create. Is… am I getting that right?

JPS: Yes, during that… during that phase. It would be better for individuals to work alone. Get inspiration via casual, even short conversations with others that they don't know well. And then once those ideas burst in the creator's mind, if you will, then that's the time to start coming together a bit more. And once we get to implementation, then we're in full team mode.

CC: Yeah, I got it. Because what you're saying makes so much sense to me, like, I can think of times where I've had an idea. But maybe I've held back on it because… I don't know, maybe the dynamics in the room, the hierarchy structure, I'm like, they're gonna think I'm crazy, or I'm just worried that they're gonna shoot this down, so I'm not even gonna articulate my idea.

JPS: Yes, yes. And then sometimes in that setting, you know, the train has left a station where, you know, the team has grabbed onto some other idea, and you, as, kind of withholding that idea, maybe the team has lost the opportunity to develop an idea that could be really impactful and really novel.

CC: Got it. Okay. So, I think these are… these are really helpful guidelines. If you were to just give us some advice as individuals, because sometimes it's hard to hold all of those ideas in your head when you're trying to move something forward. What do you think are some of the biggest pitfalls that we experience when we're trying to ideate, when we're trying to come up with a new way of solving a problem? What would be, like, your biggest piece of advice to try and do differently, or do better?

JPS: I think my biggest pieces of advice would be to use teams sparingly, and only when necessary to work alone and understand the value of working alone, but how to be inspired by the right others. Inspiration from people we don't know well is great.

CC: Yeah. I think the importance of weak relationships that you were talking about before is such an overlooked area that we don't think about in our work in general you know. Because, again, I hear people talk about… You know, that they feel like people can be a distraction, or people can be kind of a nuisance, sometimes, in terms of trying to get things done.

But this value of people that I don't necessarily know as well, particularly at work, like, it feels like work is one of those last places left where you're gonna interact with people that maybe think differently than you do, or that, you know, have different sets of experience or beliefs than maybe you do. I feel like that's a gem there for us to hang on to.

CC: Of course, in our work, we're almost always thinking about how we can create physical experiences that help shape and impact the way people behave. I'm curious if you've done much thinking about what were some of the best physical experiences you had, or the places that worked the best for you during a creative process?

JPS: I have more from the perspective of my personal experience, and thinking about my research and what that might suggest for physical spaces.

So, one of the things that I've done recently is participate in several writing workshops. And these are really interesting because you're in a common space with others outside of your normal space. Everyone's working on their independent project. So you're not working collaboratively as a team. You're not working on the same project. Everyone has their writing goal that they're accomplishing, but you're all there together in that space, writing.

And it's interesting, because I found the shared experience of that to be very generative. And it's an example of working alone, but in the presence of other people that is stimulating and energizing.

CC: That's super interesting. We did some work a few years ago with Microsoft, where we were thinking about creating spaces that helped promote creativity. And of course, we were thinking about the physical and the digital kind of aspects of that experience. But one of the things that we've found that was super interesting was the role of movement and physicality.

Like, we had observed when people were just sitting. Sometimes they were a little less engaged in the conversation, but then when people were encouraged and the space encouraged people to stand up and put up a sticky note, or write on the board, or do something, it seemed to infuse a lot more energy and engagement in the process.

And, you know, that was just a really that was, like, a big aha moment that we could begin to think about places in a way that would really help people, maybe spur them into interactions that… in some situations, they might not, they might not be as open to.

So, before we wrap up here, I just want to ask you, like the importance of network seems to be such a theme going through your work, the importance of those strong ties and the weak ties and having both. If people wanted to have a greater impact at their work where do you suggest they start? Like, are there misperceptions about networking that might be holding people back, or what are some tips that you would give people to have greater impact?

JPS: There are some misperceptions that are quite interesting, and so one is that larger networks are better. That's… that's a huge myth about the act of networking. We're thinking about collecting as many relationships, if you will. as possible. And larger networks actually aren't beneficial. We only have limited capacity to develop and cultivate relationships, even these weaker ones. So we can find that we're just spread way too thin, or a lot of these ties are, in fact, dormant and can be distracting. When we have lots of information, we tend to just hone in on certain components of that information and certain areas of the network. So I would say, forget trying to form as many relationships as possible, and think more about the kinds of relationships that you are forming.

CC: I love that so much, because I just feel like you just set me free from that feeling that, you know, I have to have thousands of followers on LinkedIn in order to be successful, or I have to go to these networking events and talk to people that, like I might not really have a strong interest in some of the things that they're doing. Like, I can just lean into what feels right for my process. That's such a freeing thought. So, I'm gonna wrap up on that one.

Jill, it has just been such a pleasure having you here today and talking with you about your work, because really, I do think that what you're learning about creativity is so important, particularly now in this kind of age of AI, of being such a force in the way that we work. Learning how we interact with other human beings to advance ideas is such an important thing. So, thank you for being with us.

JPS: Thank you, I have enjoyed the conversation very much.