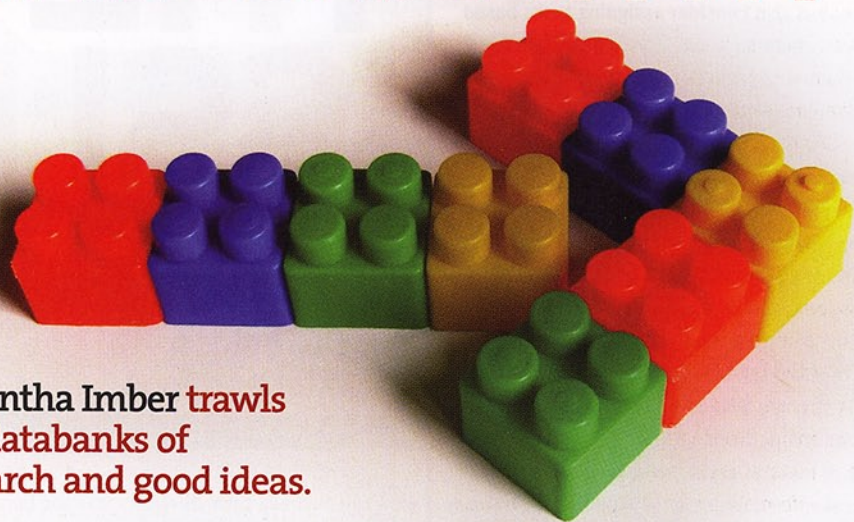


# CONSTRAINTS, TEAMS, TERMS AND CREATIVITY



**Amantha Imber trawls  
the databanks of  
research and good ideas.**

## THE INNOVATION LAB

### Constraints don't always constrain creativity

Common sense tells us that constraints and parameters are bad when it comes to idea generation. Indeed, free expression is what leads to the flowing of creative juices. Letting your mind wander to wherever it needs to wander, starting with a blank canvas, and being free of rules, are all thought of as being conducive to creativity. However, according to the latest psychological research, this has been shown not to be the case.

In one study, a group of adults were asked to make a construction using Lego. One group was given no constraints – they were told that they could build whatever they wanted to. The other group, in contrast, had several constraints placed upon them. Specifically, they were told that their construction must contain no right-angled joints and that only one kind of brick was allowed to be used.

After receiving the instructions, both groups went ahead and built a construction. The constructions built by the 'constraints group' were judged to be significantly more creative and lateral than those in the 'free expression' group.

To apply this finding to your workplace, try challenging yourself or your team to a task that has a constraint this week. Ask them to create a presentation without PowerPoint, or express an idea without speaking. And in general, when you do set

people specific projects that require creativity, make sure you give them at least a couple of constraints.

### CEO language can predict innovation

Predicting a firm's innovation success can be as simple as analysing the words used by the company's CEO in letters to shareholders.

Researchers from the University of Minnesota have revealed that organisations whose CEO used more future-oriented words in communication with shareholders performed significantly better in relation to innovation. For example, these companies were shown to adopt new technology at a greater pace and develop innovations more quickly than their competitors.

So to find out whether you are working for an innovative company, go and find your CEO's letters to shareholders and start counting.

### Up for a challenge

One of the strongest predictors of creativity in the workplace is whether employees feel adequately challenged by their job. Those who feel that their job, and specifically the objectives and goals they are set, are challenging and stretch their capabilities, are more likely to behave more creatively.

This effect is enhanced when employees are allowed to work autonomously, as opposed to being

given step-by-step, day-by-day instructions on how to reach these goals by their manager. That is, creative behaviour occurs when employees have the freedom to work out for themselves how to reach their challenging targets.

However, it is important that employees do not feel too stretched, as this can lead to frustration. Likewise, not feeling stretched enough can lead to boredom.

So within your organisation, remember that it is not only important to fit the task to an employee's experience, but also consider assigning tasks based on employee interests as well. And always ask for feedback from your team to check that they are feeling adequately challenged by their job.

### Size matters (in teams) ...

Teams come in all different shapes and sizes, ranging from pairs of people through to department-sized teams of 30 plus. When teams are being structured and created, organisational creativity is generally the last thing from the structurer's mind. However, recent research suggests that the size of teams is strongly linked to how innovatively an organisation will perform.

A group of researchers at the University of Oklahoma examined the issue of what the optimal size is for teams that need to think creatively. They found that organisations that were full of very large sized teams (more than 15 members) were less creative than organisations that were made up of medium sized teams of around 6 to 9 members. Likewise, organisations that were made up of medium sized teams were more creative than those consisting of smaller teams made up of 5 people or less.

Consider the size of teams in your organisation, particularly those teams that are specifically formed to work on an innovation project. Ensure that these teams are not too big and not too small to maximise the team's, and thus the organisation's, creativity.

### ... as does cohesion, or lack thereof

On the subject of teams, a low to medium level of team cohesion is ideal for producing a creative culture. Teams that get along too well (that is, are highly cohesive) tend to fall victim to the not-invented-here syndrome, in that they tend to discount ideas that were not born from within their team and do not look outside their team for stimulus.

So don't feel too concerned if occasionally there is some intra-team conflict within your team. Indeed, a bit of conflict should be encouraged to ensure that all points of view are heard and considered. Just be sure to manage this process carefully to ensure your team does not produce any lasting vendettas against one another. *Dr Amantha Imber is head inventiologist at Inventium. Questions and comments can be sent to amantha@inventium.com.au.*