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Managing Yourself
Collaborating with Creative Peers

How to honor—and influence—the people in your workplace who identify as artists *by Kimberly D. Elsbach, Brooke Brown-Saracino, and Francis J. Flynn*

Not long ago, in the course of studying new product development, we were witnesses to a breakdown in the creative collaboration process. A toy company needed a hit offering for the next holiday shopping season. Early on, a marketer we'll call Kyle came to a meeting where one of the company's most talented game developers was previewing a car-and-racetrack game concept. During the discussion, Kyle piped up with his advice: "It needs some kind of creature." The developer paid little attention. If anything, he resented the feedback from someone who had no expertise in creative design.

But the marketer's intuition was sound. Several weeks later, the design team concluded that a villain (or "creature") would indeed make the game more engaging. Unfortunately, it was too late. Incorporating the new element would push the game's ship date beyond the holidays. So the whole project was shelved.

Our research into the dynamics of collaboration suggests that this scenario is fairly common. It can be difficult for people like Kyle—nonexperts with valuable input—to influence the work of creative colleagues. Small but significant numbers of these coworkers—whether they're innovative toy developers, clever advertising copywriters, brilliant biotech scientists, or whip-smart bank analysts—are generally much better at giving ideas than taking them.

In a recent set of studies, we decided to investigate why this phenomenon exists and what the Kyles of the world can do about it. We

JENNIFER MARAVILLAS

discovered that the problem centers not on ego but on identity. A healthy percentage of people in creative roles self-identify as "artists" and react in unproductive ways when they feel that identity is being threatened.

To be clear, we're not talking about *artistes* in the design department or accusing anyone of being thin-skinned; those are stereotypes that we'd actually like to erase. The people who think of themselves as artists work in a range of functions, and their passion for their work is often critical to the innovation and long-term success of their firms. But these artists differ from other creative people in an organization in that they feel a very personal stake in their endeavors. Their strength of feeling can energize them tremendously and sometimes drive them to achieve nothing short of genius. It may also make them resist useful feedback and great ideas if that input seems to put their core identity at risk.

So how can you work with these colleagues more effectively? The first step is to learn a little more about what makes your artistic peers tick. The second is to master four tactics that increase the odds of getting them to listen to—and incorporate—your ideas.

Understanding the Artist Identity

According to our studies, 15% to 20% of professionals in jobs that require creative work see themselves as "creators of unique outputs that embody personal, artistic visions." They prefer working independently on projects that they can "own" and that, in the end, will carry their distinctive stamp. This separates them from the majority of their creative peers, who typically self-identify as "problem solvers" and who readily embrace others' ideas, put their expertise into action in

collaborative groups, and help channel projects toward commercial viability. In research on populations of toy designers, R&D scientists, and Hollywood screenwriters, we've found the mix of problem solvers and artists to be roughly the same.

Problem solvers are a known breed in most business contexts, but what does it mean to identify as an artist at work? In our interviews with many such professionals and their colleagues, three elements consistently surfaced.

A creative signature style. Artists feel pride in producing work

> Artists want to control how their ideas are generated, shaped, and executed, not just contribute an initial design or vision.

that bears their unique stamp. As a result, some resist incorporating others' ideas into their projects, even when those suggestions address problems they'd like to solve. A common concern for artists, we find, is that the input might contaminate or dilute the special quality that marks the work as their own. One artistic toy designer admitted that she and people like her often react to proposed modifications with a reflexive "No. This is my idea. This is the way it should be." She explained, "A lot of times, if you're very idealistic and conceptual, you're not particularly open-minded."

Control over how ideas are executed. The artistic experts we interviewed weren't satisfied with simply launching a project; they wanted to see it through. One R&D scientist shared her frustration at being left out of decisions on packaging designs for a new candy

she'd conceived. "We don't just add our two cents in part of the process," she said. "We actually create the whole thing." In short, artists want to control how their ideas are generated, shaped, and executed, not just contribute an initial design or vision.

Noncommercial motivation. Artists often see a fundamental antagonism between their own goals and those of their employers, causing them to resist influence from colleagues they perceive to be more profit-minded. One artistic toy designer put it this way: "The thing I would not want to do is give up who I am. If I become one of them [administrators], I lose all my value." He took pride in his constant "willingness to ignore rules, power, and authority." We saw this attitude bubble up especially in artists' interactions with marketing department colleagues, who were viewed as eager to strip concepts of the most innovative, interesting elements in order to widen their commercial appeal. "If somebody from marketing asks me to do it," another R&D scientist confessed, "my heart is not 100% in it."

Nonartists may misperceive these attitudes and behaviors as arrogance rather than as (at times unconscious) manifestations of creative identity. If they instead recognize why an artist colleague sometimes resists their ideas—and learn to offer input that doesn't feel like a violation of the person's signature expression, holistic control, and noncommercial ethos—productive collaboration becomes more likely.

Four Tactics for Advancing Your Ideas

Managers who want more give-and-take with their creative peers can use four proven tactics, identified by our research, that reduce threats to

CEOs in the U.S. who have military experience are **70% less likely to be involved in corporate fraud** than chief executives without a military background.

"Military CEOs," by Efraim Benmelech and Carola Frydman (National Bureau of Economic Research)

the artistic identity. (See the sidebar "Getting Traction When You Know You Have a Point.") These solutions are underused, perhaps because they run counter to what is typically taught about collaboration and persuasion.

1 Offer broad suggestions.
The researchers Susan Daniels-McGhee and Gary Davis have shown that specificity helps people visualize and build on proposed concepts, thereby facilitating collaboration. That makes sense in many settings. But when people are collaborating with artists, we find they are more likely to have influence when they avoid presenting specific ideas and, instead, offer broad suggestions or general inspiration.

For example, one executive at a large consumer-products company reported that when interacting with very creative people on her firm's R&D teams, she likes to offer "seed ideas." She said, "If you present [an idea] as not fully finished, people are more willing to think about it, take it into account, and then do something with [it]." By contrast, if you present a completely realized idea, you might imply that you're trying to impose your own creative stamp, take control of the process, or drive the project primarily from a commercial perspective. One artist we interviewed said that when people give him very specific suggestions, they seem "too focused on finishing the project rather than getting the idea right. It's almost like they've already decided on the way the project should go and have no respect for what I've done."

2 Temper your enthusiasm.
Although artists believe passionately in their own ideas, they are more receptive to input from others when it is presented without emotion. Enthusiastic idea-givers can come off as keen on taking over the process, whereas people who are dispassionate seem less threatening. As one artistic R&D scientist put it, "Too much passion about their idea says to me, 'I don't need you anymore' and 'I'm going to do this my way.'" An artistic toy designer admitted that even when he seeks ideas from others,

Getting Traction When You Know You Have a Point

A marketing manager we'll call Rhonda and a designer, Jim, worked at a food company that wanted to relaunch a popular product with new packaging. Jim presented a design concept involving an innovative material. Rhonda immediately noticed that it was unlikely to work in some environments—for example, in vending machines at gas stations, where fumes might penetrate the packaging and contaminate the product.

Her first impulse was to ask for a complete redesign, but recognizing that Jim was proud of his work, she held back. "If you think of it from his point of view, this is his baby," she explained. "He came up with the idea, and he designed the packaging from scratch. If you criticize it, he feels you're stopping his idea from going to market and reframing it into something else."

Instead, Rhonda used the tactics we describe in this article. She raised her concerns about the permeability of Jim's proposed material as an additional, interesting design challenge, not a flaw. "Look, we all want to see this happen," she was quick to say. "But we don't want to have a product that gets recalled." In a neutral, dispassionate tone of voice, she then pointed to some new trends in packaging that might provide general inspiration for getting around the problem. And she showed appreciation for Jim's expertise: "I said, 'I understand the merits of your idea because of A, B, and C. However, have you thought about D and E?' That showed him that I really did get what he was trying to do." She also made sure to ask questions and refer to the strengths of Jim's previous work.

Jim ultimately agreed to change the packaging, and the relaunch was successful—all thanks to a thoughtful approach of valuing Jim as an artist.

"there are [a] few people I might not ask because I know they are going to get overinvolved and take away my creative stamp on the project." This finding was particularly surprising to us, because in our own research on Hollywood pitch meetings, people were more effective at selling ideas when they expressed passion for them. But those are scenarios in which artists are seeking help from financial backers. When the artist is the audience, the approach must change.

3 Delay the decision making. It's best not to expect artists to react right away to an idea; instead, give them time to evaluate it on its merits. Your approach can be as simple as asking your colleague to "just think about it" or to "meet later to explore its potential." The delay gives artists not only more say over when and how to respond but also a chance to consider how they might incorporate your suggestion without detracting from their signature style. One manager at a food company described how she planned to suggest using a savory flavor in a conventionally sweet context to people on her firm's product design team: "If the idea blows their mind at first, it's really threatening to them. So it's better to ask them to go away and think about it a while ... [so they can] see it might actually work with what they've already got going."

4 Show respect and like-mindedness. Our first three idea-giving tactics let artists retain some control so that, as one would-be collaborator put it, they "get their EQ out of the way and get their IQ thinking." The fourth tactic works from a different angle: It reassures creative colleagues that your ideas and theirs are likely to be congruent. Artists have told us that

when someone shows familiarity with their existing ideas and previous work—and seems genuinely interested in learning about the creative process—the collaboration is more likely to be productive. You want to prove that you understand the artist's perspective and are on the same wavelength. This advice was explained well by a project manager who worked with an exacting food scientist; in fact, the scientist often referred to himself as the "czar" of his product. The project manager noticed that the best way to build mutual respect and become more "worthy" in the czar's eyes was to "be completely vulnerable," to show you'd made the effort to "get" his thinking, and to spend more time asking the right questions than presenting ideas. "Part of showing worthiness," he said, "is just asking."

We all know that creative collaborations typically yield better solutions than lone-genius efforts. But when you're not the creative expert in the room, it can be difficult to gain traction for your ideas. Our research reveals insights and practical strategies to increase your influence with your artist colleagues. It can also help managers enable all kinds of talent to flourish and create value together. By taking the time to understand how your colleagues' identities affect their perceptions and actions—and then behaving in ways that respect them—you reveal your own gifts as a collaborator and a professional. ▽

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Words to the Wise