



Why Should You Work With a Creative Star?

Collaborating with creative stars can make you more creative and help unlock your star potential.

“Before the terms streetwear or luxury existed, he was bringing forth street culture ideas through the high fashion system.” -- Virgil Abloh in Dazed

Virgil Abloh, Louis Vuitton’s men’s artistic director and founder of haute streetwear label Off-White, paid tribute to Kim Jones, his LV predecessor and former mentor, now creative director for Dior Homme. Abloh admits to learning a lot from Jones, who he first met in 2007 when he was a virtual unknown and Jones was a prominent designer renowned for successfully blending high fashion and streetwear. During a series of talks with streetwear fans in London in 2017, Abloh noted, “I slept on his couch in a front room in Maida Vale and forced him to teach me stuff, I spent a summer sitting there with him.”

Like every aspiring innovator, Abloh knew that working closely with stars such as Jones would be good for him. Indeed, stories of junior designers learning from creative masters are common in various industries. So, what do you get from working with a creative star beyond fame and connections? And does it actually make you more creative?

Creative stars contribute far more than just status and additional knowledge to a collaboration. They bring a superior set of creative skills that allows them to push existing paradigms into new territories; to see new possibilities that others

overlook; to uncover similarities across different perspectives; and to iteratively refine the most promising ideas. These stars typically have the ability to synthesise diverse ideas in a way that maximises creativity, leading to exceptional innovations.

Collaborating with stars provides non-stars with the opportunity to learn and develop these superior creative skills, increasing the likelihood they will go on to create a series of radical innovation. The non-star can become more creative, and even gain their own star status.

Star designers are adept at creative synthesis

Where does outstanding innovation come from? Common belief associates breakthrough innovation with a lightning strike, with a lightbulb moment or an apple that’s fallen onto a head. It assumes that there is a flash of insight, an incredible moment where a genius establishes novel connections between different elements and thus makes a breakthrough. To understand the benefits of working with a creative star, it is, however, crucial to recognise the role of an alternative view of creating breakthrough innovations: creative synthesis. This less understood approach to innovation focuses on the notion that radical innovations are likely to emerge by taking a single idea and persistently reframing, refining and

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retesting it until it shines. Although the quality of the raw concept is certainly important, it is the work that follows that determines whether an idea becomes great. Creative synthesis has been likened to sculpting a complex shape or creating vanguard cuisine. It is a holistic and artistic approach to creative tasks requiring wisdom and experience.

People who master creative synthesis share certain tacit, intricately linked traits and behaviours. They are consummate questioners who constantly challenge common assumptions and are adept in connecting disparate fields, problems and ideas. They are better at being able to clarify and define complex problems, and focus collective attention not only on the “what is” but also on “what could be”. When collaborating with others, they attend to ideas in a way that each member of a group can understand, helping to facilitate communication that pushes innovation forward. They are also persistent and are better at pacing the creative process, knowing when to continue evaluating ideas and when it is time to start enacting them.

Creative synthesis is the mystical touch that transforms

These skills are not something that can be fully learned by reading a book or attending a design class. For many creative stars, they are intuitive or gained through experience. However, the likelihood of someone learning these skills (and eventually becoming a star themselves) is significantly higher if they work in close proximity to someone who possesses them.

This was the hypothesis put forward and tested in our recent study **Where Do Stars Come From? The Role of Star Versus Non-star Collaborators in Creative Settings**. Our research, which examined the collaboration patterns of 144,288 designers granted design patents by the United States Patent and Trademark Office over 35 years, found that star designers who created the most influential patents (those most cited by other future patents) exhibited more creative synthesis behaviours than non-star designers. Specifically, they spent more time refining a potentially ground-breaking idea than non-stars. We noted that non-stars working with stars were more likely to imitate this behaviour, suggesting that non-stars learn creative synthesis from the stars with whom they collaborate.

Optimum conditions for star power

Admittedly, creative synthesis is not the only approach to develop a breakthrough. There is the well-established approach to creativity that sees innovation as a new way of combining existing elements. This view is central to an evolutionary theory of innovation put forward by Nobel laureate

Joseph Schumpeter and supported by a stream of academic research. It involves the combination of as many diverse ideas as possible increasing the chance of creating a potentially ground-breaking concept. Based on this claim, you need to rely on a pool of diverse collaborators to ignite the creative spark.

Creative synthesis and the combinatorial approach of creativity can both bring extraordinary results and work well in tandem. However, creative synthesis is the skill, if mastered, which will ultimately transform your creativity.

It is important to note that optimal working conditions and collaboration processes differ depending on whether innovators are working with stars or non-stars.

Our research confirmed previous findings which showed that when teams of non-stars work together, diversity is the key to creativity. The greater the divergence in knowledge and ideas brought to the project, the greater the chance something new and significant will be created. In these cases, to maximise the likelihood of a breakthrough and eventually nurturing a creative star, managers should make decisions that limit redundant social connections to the team and bring in new members whose expertise and experience are different from others in the group.

On the other hand, when collaborating with stars, a very cohesive environment brings better results. Shared social connections and closer similarities of expertise help to build a common understanding of new paradigms and encourage collaborators to see similarities among their different perspectives. As well as increasing the likelihood of breakthrough innovations, this facilitates the transfer of creative synthesis knowledge and skills to non-star collaborators, significantly increasing the chance of one day becoming a creative star themselves. Indeed, organisations like Pixar and El Bulli (the former highly influential three-starred Michelin restaurant) have generated remarkable innovations in their small, close-knit creative teams where creative synthesis skills were learned from star members' superior abilities.

In short, when working with a star, creative synthesis is the key skill an aspiring innovator should focus on – a skill more likely to be learned by working with those who exhibit it. To magnify this effect, special attention needs to be paid to maximising shared social connections and expertise around star collaborations.

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