

---

# Cooking Up a Creative Community



By Li Huang , INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour, and Spencer Harrison , INSEAD Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

## **A recipe based on INSEAD research.**

Covid-19 continues to leave its mark on business, in seemingly conflicting ways. On the one hand, by disrupting the competitive landscape in many industries, the pandemic has made executives believe erroneously that **creativity and innovation belong on the shelf** in a tightly lidded box labelled “for normal times”. On the other, it has prompted a mass exodus from physical offices and fundamental changes in consumer habits that may prove irrevocable. These latter trends require organisations to amp up their capacities for adaptation and innovation. Thinking creatively was already part of more than 99 percent of occupations a decade ago<sup>[1]</sup>; to survive the pandemic and beyond, firms must adapt their creative collaboration routines to the remote-working and online-consuming context.

## **Finding creativity through idea linking amid historic isolation**

To meet these new challenges, leaders can find guidance in the growing body of academic literature devoted to creativity and innovation, including work generated by researchers at INSEAD. For example, in our 2019 **paper [2]**, we showed that entrepreneurs who reported (or experiment participants

who were induced to experience) a higher level of specific curiosity – a strong desire to solve a clearly defined problem – were more creative in subsequent tasks. The reason? They were more likely to adopt a unique yet effective technique we have termed “idea linking”.

Idea linking involves using early ideas as stepping stones for subsequent ideas in a sequential manner, so that this associative process zigzags towards the space where the more inventive, innovative ideas live. According to anecdotal evidence, magicians often develop their tricks through idea linking. (For example, after mastering the art of making objects disappear, illusionists might set their sights on living beings. Eventually, they might find themselves making dinosaur skeletons appear and cha-cha in the air.) In our studies, we were pleasantly surprised that laypeople who were instructed to adopt this technique were also able to generate magic tricks that professional magicians deemed more creative than those generated through brainstorming or other techniques that organically emerged.

Our findings switched on a lightbulb: How can we design a creative process for our own research community, in order to best capitalise on idea linking, and other creativity- and innovation-related insights from INSEAD researchers? What should we do to build connections desperately needed by a creative community in a nearly unparalleled era of isolation?

### **A mission that started close to home**

In the spirit of idea linking, we went one step further: How can we design a process that we’d not only eagerly apply to our own creative community, but would recommend to business leaders around the world?

Our answer is CRIB (Creativity and Innovation Brownbag), a series of workshops where INSEAD researchers share and discuss evolving projects on topics related to creativity and innovation. If you have never attended a brown bag research seminar, they can be intellectually bruising affairs in which academics pounce on colleagues’ papers-in-progress, poking them all over in search of weak spots. The intention is to help, not hurt. After all, the research will need to be able to withstand the same treatment when its authors submit it for peer review.

We had a different *modus operandi* in mind for CRIB – one conducive to the connection-building camaraderie required to promote idea linking. To begin with, we carefully chose the name “CRIB” to evoke a nurturing space that is

favourable to the development of fledgling ideas. Next, inspired by the work of world-class business scholars who also happened to be our colleagues at INSEAD, we formulated a three-step recipe in order to whip up our nourishing CRIB community. We encourage creative teams everywhere to give it a try.

### **Step one: Gather experts from domains near and far**

In soliciting participants, we were silo-neutral. The only prerequisite was an active interest in exploring creativity and innovation. In academic research and business practice alike, most topics and issues are relevant across organisational roles or functions. Since idea linking works better when idea development includes divergent and new points of view, we sought out colleagues from areas as diverse as strategy, technology and operations management, organisational behaviour and decision sciences, marketing, and even accounting and finance. The cross-silo approach also enables large organisations to identify what our colleague [Michaël Bikard](#) calls “[idea twins](#)” – two or more innovators working in isolation on essentially the same project. Bringing “idea twins” together cuts down on redundancies and leverages organisational synergies.

Moreover, team members can improve creatively by interacting with domain experts outside their formal collaborations and forging connections with cultures and geographic locations beyond their daily experience. We made CRIB time-zone-friendly for exactly this reason. This is inspired by the ongoing work of [Noah Askin](#), a colleague of ours who has been studying the sources of creative influence for musicians. Noah’s work suggests that a diverse context is an often-overlooked instigator of creativity and that “musicians benefit creatively from not only their formal collaborators but also the genres they are affiliated with or those with whom they share geographic proximity”.

That said, anyone who has ever worked in a team knows it is no easy feat to collaborate or even coordinate with experts from distant domains. This is why our colleague [Quy Huy](#) says, “An innovation process, including both the generation and the execution of ideas, is often ridden with cultural barriers, organisational politics and, consequently, counterproductive collective emotions. Leaders who are willing to honestly face such challenges are more likely to achieve their team’s innovation aspirations.”

For example, we targeted what our colleague [Sujin Jang](#) calls cultural brokers – in our case, PhD students. As Sujin eloquently says, “Creativity is

often lurking at the intersections between cultures. Whether the cultures are national, functional or organisational.” Cultural brokers are those who can facilitate cross-cultural interactions, to avoid the pitfalls and reap the benefits of cross-cultural collaboration. PhD students, are naturally taken beyond the traditional boundary of academic area by coursework and their exploratory collaborations with faculty outside their home area. Inviting them to attend CRIB is not only good for their development, but also good for CRIB.

A deliberate emphasis on the diversity of expertise and contexts can make a lasting impact on innovation, as illustrated by the findings of our colleague [Manuel Sosa](#). His work suggests that not only does collaborating with others on easy-to-decompose (highly modular) inventions help create breakthroughs, but a history of past collaborative work also imparts a significant edge for highly holistic, hard-to-decompose inventions (think scientific discoveries), which generally lend themselves better to individual work.

### **Step two: Sieve out hierarchies and other pressures for premature convergence**

We have consciously tried to remove the influence of hierarchy, which often favours established ideas and practices. No less than business, professional academia has a “totem pole” of power and status, with senior tenured faculty at the top. Consequently, junior researchers may find it risky to share unpolished ideas with their senior colleagues (who may or may not have direct bearing on their career). Among the senior colleagues, the fear of being obsolete and irrelevant is just as real and alive. It behooves all to recognise that innovation is rarely about a new contender replacing the incumbent, but about fruitful exchange between the two. As our colleague [Nathan Furr](#)’s work reminds us, “People often think of disruption as a binary thing with the old technology being washed away by the new. Although this sometimes happens, as was the case with typewriters and PCs, more often technologies coexist as complements based on what emotional, social and functional needs they serve for customers (users).”

Hierarchy is of course not the only factor that could prematurely suppress divergence and promote convergence in a team’s creative process. Our colleague [Natalia Karelaia](#)’s work currently explores how the culture of “knowing” or “having all answers ready” is likely to reduce creativity by

suppressing open-ended, learning questions. In creative teams, if some members hold back from sharing their thought-provoking questions for fear of “not having an answer”, or stop engaging because an answer, though not optimal, is already wrapped up in a neat little bow, the discussion will be less likely to progress in novel and innovative directions.

Consequently, curators of creative teams should strive to cultivate an atmosphere of equality and open-endedness. For example, CRIB has in place practices such as having attendees share ideas and give presentations in reverse-seniority order, giving offline nudges to junior attendees who appear inhibited to participate in the discussion, making space for preliminary thoughts, updates on new direction one’s work is taking and leads to previously unthought-of literatures. Many CRIB attendees, from every rung of the research ladder, have found this approach liberating.

Junior colleagues can also get a head start on engaging senior colleagues who are likely gatekeepers in their field or a neighbouring one. As our colleague [Frédéric Godart](#) points out, organisations “can absolutely promote creativity in their midst not just by hiring creative people, but by forming structures that enhance creativity and by connecting people in the right way, internally, and with the right gatekeepers, externally”.

### **Step three: Sprinkle levity and curiosity, and blend until paradoxes are well integrated**

As a finishing touch on our recipe, you and your creative team would be wise to approach the above with humour, curiosity and paradox thinking.

A sense of humour is not just part of the art of leadership – it is also part of the science of making a creative community. One of us, [Li Huang](#), has discovered this through her work: “Humour, due to its disconcerting and surprising nature, is not only a result of creativity, but also a source for creativity. Even prickly sarcasm can confront team members with the contradiction between what’s said and what’s meant, encourage them to first ask ‘why’ instead of ‘how’, and discover a new way to Rome.” So, we at CRIB stand by “the slow-roasting round” as a counterweight against the well-popularised phrase “the lightning round”.

Curiosity is also a reliable instigator of creativity, specifically through idea linking. In his research with an ever increasing number of business organisations, one of us, [Spencer Harrison](#), has identified a tremendous

gap between how leaders see curiosity and how employees view it. While almost all members of organisations agree that curiosity is critically important, only leaders feel like they can act on it, while their employees feel like they cannot. Therefore, team leaders who are able to take the perspective of their employees and encourage curiosity through tangible (though not necessarily financial) rewards are likely to find their effort reciprocated creatively.

Finally, creative teams often face conflicting demands. For example, CRIB had to deep-dive into the intricacies of a single idea, while also floating several ideas briefly to surface unconventional links. To meet this challenge, we kept CRIB workshops structured yet fluid, allowing each attendee to choose between two broad formal categories based on the stage their projects are in and the kind of input they sought. This was inspired by the work of our colleague [Ella Miron-Spektor](#) on “paradox mindset”. According to Ella, “A paradox mindset entails complementary thinking. It allows people to confront tension, scrutinise opposing alternatives, stay mindful about how they use resources and find creative ways in which competing demands can be met. Moreover, it fosters [optimism](#) and resilience.”

These finishing touches may prove especially indispensable to creative teams in the middle of a global pandemic. Threats breed rigidity, a harmful attitude that can only be truly addressed with the right attitude. Our attitude of choice? One of humour, curiosity and integration.

### **Is this for me, a business leader building a non-academic creative community?**

If our CRIB has inspired you to build your own CRIB in a non-academic context, allow us to share one last insight from our colleague [Stephen Chick](#): “Organisations can learn novel ways of matching supply (in the case of our CRIB, critics of research) and demand (producers of research) from other sectors. To do so, you can look out for the 3 I’s of potential losses in your organisation’s current process, namely information asymmetry, incentive alignment and interface with users, so that what you learn from other sectors helps you identify ways to turn these losses into innovation opportunities.”

[Li Huang](#) is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

**Spencer Harrison** is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

INSEAD Knowledge is now on [LinkedIn](#). Join the conversation today.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

**[1]** O\*NET data from job incumbents and occupation experts in the US, 2010

**[2]** Co-authored by Lydia Paine Hagtvedt of Boston College Carroll School of Management and Karyn Dossinger of Suffolk University Sawyer Business School.

#### Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/cooking-creative-community>

---

#### About the author(s)

**Li Huang** is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD.

**Spencer Harrison** is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. His research expertise is focused on how to encourage creativity, collaboration and connection in the organisation.