Brilliant and Benevolent:
The Optimism of Teresa Amabile's Legacy for Creativity in Organizations

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Abstract:
In 1982 and 1983, Teresa Amabile published two papers that laid the groundwork for studying the social psychology of creativity. During the same years, she also published two papers that have received comparably less attention. These two papers highlight a profound problem for creativity in organizations: insecure individuals have a powerful incentive to tear down others' ideas, as doing so can help them obtain the intellectual status they desire. This chapter explores the potential implications of this "cruelty incentive." The main proposition is that when people evaluate others' ideas, cruelty can make them look and feel smart, but a more benevolent approach is actually smarter. The goal is to encourage future research on Amabile's profound insights that have remained largely untapped since 1983.

In 1982 and 1983, Teresa Amabile almost singlehandedly laid the methodological and theoretical groundwork for studying the social psychology of creativity. This is when she first published her consensual assessment technique (Amabile, 1982) and componential model of creativity (Amabile, 1983a). Paradigm shifts are by definition rare, and it is even rarer to be able to trace a paradigm shift back to a single scholar at a particular moment in time. Yet, we can point to Amabile's work in 1982 and 1983 as the foundation of a paradigm shift that led creativity to be a core area of study in both social psychology and organizational behavior.

During the same two years, she also published two papers that have received comparably less attention (Amabile & Glazebrook, 1982; Amabile, 1983b). From my view, these papers contain profound insights that remain understudied, particularly when they are combined with

insights from the body of work Amabile has built since then. My goal in this essay is to encourage more research unpacking these insights. To do so, I put forth some initial ideas that I hope will serve as useful fodder for building on the largely untapped gems in these two papers.

The two papers both addressed a common situation in organizations: individuals evaluating others' ideas. The first paper (Amabile & Glazebrook, 1982) used two clever experiments to show that when evaluators were led to feel insecure about their intellectual standing, or they expected their audience to be of higher status than them, their evaluations were more negative and critical in nature. It seems insecure individuals think that criticizing others will make them look smart. But does this actually work—are more negative evaluators perceived as smarter than more positive evaluators?

The second paper (Amabile, 1983b) examined this question, again using two cleverly designed experiments. She took book reviews from the New York Times and adapted them to either be negative or positive, but otherwise the reviews were equivalent. Participants rated the intelligence and competence of the two reviewers, and indeed, negative reviewers were rated as smarter than positive reviewers. She titled this paper "Brilliant but Cruel," conveying that when evaluating others' ideas, cruelty is a way for evaluators to seem brilliant.

Taken together, these two papers point out a potentially huge problem for creativity in organizations. Insecure individuals have a powerful incentive to tear down others' ideas, regardless of how good or bad the ideas may be, as doing so will likely help them obtain the intellectual status they desire. Moreover, given that creativity usually requires considerable effort (Amabile, 1982, 1985), gaining status by tearing down others' ideas likely requires much less effort than gaining status through building one's own creative ideas. From here forward, I will

refer to this as the "cruelty incentive." Insecure individuals who leverage the cruelty incentive may reap the benefits of appearing smarter, but at what cost?

Since these two papers, decades of research done by Amabile and others inspired by her suggest that the cruelty incentive may be a very costly impediment to creativity in organizations. A key tenet of Amabile's body of work is that creativity is fragile. People need supportive environments to take the risks and exert the considerable effort that is required to cultivate creative ideas (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Hermon, 1996). In addition, constructive feedback from others is often critical to creativity in organizations (Harrison & Rouse, 2015). Research has demonstrated that feedback tends to foster creativity when it is framed positively and in an informational way, as opposed to negatively and in a controlling way (Zhou, 1998). This does not mean that negative feedback is always bad for creativity—pointing out flaws and weaknesses in others' ideas may facilitate improvement (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017). But it is unlikely that focusing primarily on negative feedback would be conducive to creativity (Zhou, 2003, 2008). Indeed, recent research suggests that trying to anticipate both the positive and negative outcomes of new ideas fosters more accurate evaluations (McIntosh, Mulhearn, & Mumford, 2019). However, the cruelty incentive may lead individuals to deliver only negative feedback about others' ideas to make themselves look and feel smart, but doing so may undermine the creativity of the subordinates or colleagues who receive the feedback, and perhaps others in the organization who fear similar feedback on their ideas in the future. Harsh criticism may also dampen positive affect in the organization, further stifling creativity (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005).

In my own research, I have found evidence hinting that the cruelty incentive may lead individuals to undervalue others' most creative ideas. One relevant study was in the circus arts

industry, with companies like Cirque du Soleil (Berg, 2016). The study was about creative forecasting, the skill of predicting the outcomes of new ideas. Circus professionals forecasted the success of new circus acts with the audience, and the accuracy of their predictions was tested with a large sample of audience members. The key comparison in the study was between creator and manager roles. Like many creative industries, managers' evaluations are all that really matter in the circus industry, as managers select which acts reach the stage and which do not. Creators are expected to generate new acts, but they have no say in which acts get put into shows. Interestingly, the study results showed that creators were more accurate than managers at predicting the success of other creators' ideas. Creators were not good at evaluating their own ideas, however—they thought too highly of their own ideas. But regarding their peers' ideas, creators were more accurate than managers. Managers were statistically no better than an average layperson with no expertise in the circus industry. Creators' advantage over managers was strongest for the most novel ideas, as managers undervalued novel ideas while creators were more likely to accurately spot value in them.

A follow-up experiment suggested that creators' advantage over managers was at least partially thanks to the nature of their respective roles. Specifically, creators may benefit from the emphasis in their role on divergent thinking (idea generation), as opposed to the emphasis on convergent thinking (idea evaluation) in the manger role. Engaging in divergent thinking to generate their own ideas may help creators stay more open minded about others' novel ideas (Runco, 1991; Runco and Smith, 1992; Silvia, 2008). Managers may miss out on the benefit of divergent thinking by specializing in idea evaluation, ironically making them worse at idea evaluation.

In the same vein, managers in the circus study were also harsher critics than creators. In addition to predicting how the audience would respond to new circus acts, creators and managers were also asked to evaluate the quality of each act from their own perspective, using items adapted from Amabile's (1982) classic work. This showed that on average, creators appreciated *all* acts more than managers. One might expect that liking all ideas more would make creators Pollyanna and undiscerning. But on the contrary, appreciating all ideas more was associated with greater accuracy in forecasting success with the audience, especially for the most novel ideas. By seeing the best in all ideas, creators were more likely to correctly identify the best ideas over less promising ideas. Conversely, by taking a more negative perspective, managers overlooked value in novel ideas that creators were able to see.

In this way, the cruelty incentive may be especially problematic for individuals in manager roles, who control which ideas are selected versus rejected and do not have the benefit of divergent thinking to keep their minds open to novel ideas. When managers feel insecure about their status, the cruelty incentive may lead them to unwisely reject their employees' most creative ideas. This may be especially true for highly promising ideas that are still early in their development, as the most creative final ideas often begin as relatively uncreative and incoherent initial ideas (Berg, 2014, 2019). Thus, insecure managers may reject high-potential ideas long before they have the chance to realize their potential.

The cruelty incentive may not only lead insecure individuals to stifle others' creativity, it may also undermine their own creativity. One of Amabile's major contributions is highlighting the positive relationship between intrinsic motivation and creativity (Amabile, 1985; Amabile, Hill, Hennesey, & Tighe, 1994). Grant and Berry (2011) built on this finding by showing that prosocial motivation—the desire to benefit others—strengthens the relationship between intrinsic

motivation and creativity. In short, people are most creative when they are working because they enjoy it and want to help others. When individuals are focused on tearing down others' ideas, they may be less likely to come up with creative ideas themselves. Moreover, creativity can be contagious, as working with creative colleagues can help individuals be more creative themselves (Zhou, 2003). When individuals stifle others' creativity, they may also undermine their own creativity going forward.

In sum, the cruelty incentive may act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Insecure individuals who harshly criticize others' ideas to make themselves look and feel smart may garner the intellectual status they seek. But over time, their cruelty may stifle their own and others' creativity in the organization. In the end, cruel evaluators may prove themselves right, as the ideas generated by them and others around them in the organization may become increasingly uncreative. In contrast, more benevolent evaluators may produce a more productive self-fulfilling prophecy. By resisting the cruelty incentive, benevolent evaluators may strike a more optimal balance of positive and negative thinking that is more conducive to creativity than solely focusing on the negative. In turn, benevolent evaluators may encourage the important drivers of creativity that cruel evaluators are likely to discourage, such as risk-taking, constructive feedback, positive affect, accurate idea evaluation, and intrinsic/prosocial motivation. In so doing, benevolent evaluators may enhance others' creativity and ultimately their own as well.

In this way, benevolence and creative brilliance may be mutually reinforcing over time. When evaluating others' new ideas, cruelty may be a way to appear smart, but benevolence may actually be the smarter approach. This notion is not only supported by Teresa Amabile's body of research, her benevolence and brilliance are a vivid illustration of it. Those of us who have been lucky enough to receive her guidance and mentoring can attest—her benevolence fuels her

brilliance, and her brilliance fuels her benevolence. The result can be seen in the monumental impact she has made and inspired throughout her prolific career.

To help frame her research question, Amabile (1983b) opens her aforementioned "Brilliant but Cruel" paper with the following quote: "Only pessimism sounds profound. Optimism sounds superficial (Blotnick, 1979, p. 229)." Indeed, in evaluating others' new ideas, pessimists may seem more profound than optimists in the short run. But in the long run, both pessimists and optimists may end up surrounded by the level of creativity they expected.

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