

## Innovation

# Research: How to Build Consensus Around a New Idea

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August 20, 2024



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**Summary.** Previous research has found that new ideas are seen as risky and are often rejected. New research suggests that this rejection can be due to people's lack of shared criteria or reference points when evaluating a potential innovation's value. In... [more](#)

Picture yourself in a meeting where a new idea has just been pitched, representing a major departure from your company's standard practices. The presenter is confident about moving forward, but their voice is quickly overtaken by a cacophony of opinions from firm opposition to enthusiastic support. How can you make sense of the noise? What weight do you give each of these opinions? And what does this disagreement say about the idea?

In a [recent paper](#), published in *Nature Human Behavior*, we explored why people disagree about an idea's value. Through a mix of experimental and archival studies, we found that the more novel an idea, the more people disagreed about its worth.

We also found that people often interpret disagreement itself as a sign of risk, lowering their belief in an idea's value, and making them less likely to support it. The bad news is this newness-disagreement link forms a barrier to innovation by making more creative ideas seem less appealing. But understanding why this problem occurs creates opportunities to address it. We evaluate our findings to propose research-backed strategies to help your team build consensus when evaluating new ideas.

## How Criteria Can Affect Perceptions of Value

Previous research has described creativity as “[novelty that is useful](#),” where novelty is defined as the [distance of departure](#) from existing offerings or practices. The newer the idea, the harder it is to compare to what already exists. In other words, the newer an idea, the less likely there will be a common reference point or criteria by which to evaluate it.

Lacking a clear evaluative template or criteria, each person will be forced to create their own, idiosyncratic version, considering different stakes or potential rewards. This can result in different conclusions about the worth of the same idea. We proposed that the more novel an idea, the greater the number of differing criteria used, resulting in a wider spread of beliefs about an idea's value.

## Comparing Novelty and Value

To test our hypotheses, we conducted five studies. In the first, we used 1,088 business pitches from the reality show *Shark Tank* and

asked 1,927 U.S. participants to rank the novelty of the pitches. Pulling their 250 most novel pitches and 250 least novel, we asked 1,000 new U.S. participants to rank the pitches' value. As predicted, we found the more novel the pitch, the more variability there was in its projected value.

Next, we examined the audience review scores for films shown at the Sundance Film Festival from 2015 to 2022. Sundance helpfully has numerous categories for films, including classic genres like U.S. and world documentaries, and more avant-garde categories, like their "NEXT" grouping for films that use innovative storytelling methods, and the "Midnight" group, which features films that "defy categorization." We reviewed audience rankings for the 523 films that had more than one audience review and again confirmed our hypothesis that in the more novel film groups, there was greater variability in the films' perceived worth, or score.

### **The Problem of Mismatched Templates**

We next looked to evaluate how shared or differing templates for evaluation impacted beliefs about value. In our third study, we sorted 200 U.S. participants into two conditions, asking them each to evaluate art made by an alien society on a faraway planet. Group one saw paintings, highly acclaimed in the alien society, from Artist A; group two from acclaimed Artist B. Each group then saw 20 paintings containing a mix of pieces by the two artists. The groups were then asked to evaluate the value of the pieces they saw. We found that each group thought the art by their own prototypical artist to be the most valuable and the art by the other artist to be of lower value, confirming our theory that when people have different reference points for evaluation, their judgements of value differ, even for the same pieces of art.

We also tested whether associating value *with* novelty would impact variability. In our fourth experiment, we asked 200 U.S. participants who had experience working in hospitality to review 19 highly novel sandwich ideas and 19 low-novelty sandwich ideas, determined through a previous survey. We sorted the participants into two groups: baseline and novelty-as-value. We asked both groups to evaluate the sandwiches' value, but in the novelty-as-value group, we asked, "At a restaurant specializing in sandwiches no one has tried before, how successful would this sandwich be as a menu item?"

We found that, consistent with our other studies, there was high variability in value ratings of the sandwich ideas in the baseline group. However, for the group who were told to evaluate the sandwiches for a restaurant focused on novelty, we found that this effect went away, suggesting that providing people with clear criteria for evaluation muted the tendency for variability in people's judgments of the value of novel ideas. The spread of scores diminished further when we controlled for subjects who had worked in restaurants specifically, providing further evidence that shared context and reference points can help limit contention in perceived value.

### **How Disagreement Affects Evaluation**

Finally, to test the impact that disagreement, or variability, itself has on perceived value, we recruited 401 U.S. participants with experience in investing. We told them they would be asked to rank how willing they would be to invest in an innovative electronic product, but first they would receive ratings of the product from their close friends and advisors. One group saw a wide variability in advisor ratings, with some ranking the product very highly and others giving it a low score. In the other group, their advisors had a narrow range of opinions, with most people finding the product to have middling worth. Participants were

then asked to rank how valuable the investment would be, their likelihood to invest, how risky they viewed the investment, and how novel or unique the product sounded.

Confirming our hypothesis, participants in the high variability group were less likely to say they would invest and found the investment riskier, though both groups found the idea equally novel. This confirms our theory that variability, or disagreement itself, rather than just the novelty of an idea, makes people less likely to invest in it.

Our research supports that idea that differing templates for evaluation can lead to major differences in perceptions of worth for the same idea, and that the conflict caused by differing beliefs in worth can also lead to negative evaluations of new ideas. So how do managers cut through this disagreement and get their evaluators on the same page? We offer the following suggestions:

## **How to Build Consensus**

It might be tempting to interpret conflicting feedback about an idea as a sign that the idea is a bad one and should be rejected — imagine the contention in the 3M conference room when Spencer Silver proposed creating a product with an extremely weak adhesive (Silver went on to invent Post-It notes).

However, viewing contention as a sign of ambiguity rather than negativity may help you also see hidden opportunity, in addition to risk. We propose using conflicting feedback as a sign that you need to explore the criteria upon which evaluators are making decisions about an idea's worth.

## **Gather information on evaluators' reference points.**

Ask evaluators questions such as: What ideas are you comparing this new idea to? On what grounds did you find those reference points successful or unsuccessful? What would success look like with this idea? What would failure look like?

By finding out what criteria evaluators are using, you can better judge how well it maps onto the new proposal. Are some judgements biased, such as by evaluators' moods or other factors that are irrelevant to assessing idea value? Discussing how someone is evaluating something, rather than just weighing their opinion, can open up the conversation, and help teams determine what criteria are the most important or relevant.

Previous research has shown that individuals often incorrectly assume others share their thinking. By identifying strengths and weaknesses in different perspectives, evaluators can use discussion to build consensus around the most pertinent factors to use in evaluating a new idea.

### **Develop criteria to focus discussions.**

Another way to build consensus is to create and disseminate criteria ahead of time. Ask employees to evaluate the idea based on specific factors, for example, logistical strengths and weaknesses or advantages compared to existing offerings. Are there case studies you can hand out beforehand that relate to the strengths or weaknesses of this new idea? Offering shared reference points can help focus discussion.

You could also create separate meetings meant to anchor conversations. One meeting might be based on logistical feasibility or potential costs of a new idea, while another could focus on what ways the new idea might impact efficiencies or improve client relationships, for example. Focusing evaluations by offering specific criteria, rather than opening them up to wide-

ranging discussion, could help make feedback more focused and useful.

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Creative ideas are important to keeping companies relevant and helping them to grow and adapt. So, too, is diverse feedback. While our study focused on ways that differing criteria can stifle new ideas, a limitation of our study is it does not explore the opposite extreme of groupthink, where new ideas may be hindered because evaluators agree too much. Group discussions can lead people to converge too much, but this research investigated people judging value separate from the influence of others. Our research offers useful findings for managers wading through wide ranging opinions and contention around new ideas, and offers solutions for how to get employees on the same page, creating avenues to submit meaningful evaluations for a novel concept.

Understanding why people are more likely to disagree about the value of creative ideas creates opportunities to anticipate when a lack of consensus may occur. Understanding lack of consensus is a signal to investigate, assess, and weight the reasoning different evaluators are using will help facilitate thoughtful decisions, helping overcome what otherwise can be a meaningful barrier to innovation.



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