This paper explores the role creativity has in the decision making process. Many managers like to control the decision making process within a group with administrative checks, regulation on procedures, and the installment of their own interpretation of ideas. In this paper I will put to rest the managers role in blocking creative processes from their employees and focus group. My Parallel Ladder Theory shows, with the help of recent scholars, that freedom and trust are at the base of creative decision making in employees. With convergent thinking processes and the freedom to fail, employees can author collaborative procedures and ideas in order to reach the manager’s objective. In other words, to regulate the creative process of the employees takes away from the fact that the manager is allowing them to do their own work.
Managers and supervisors are continually looking for ways to enhance decision making and creativity in their employees. Marketing managers want their employees to create innovative advertisements while sales reps are looking for new ways to infiltrate distribution channels and reach the consumer. Early literature on creative decision making focused a great deal on the employee creating an individual personal narrative of ideas. Scholars of past decades have repeatedly discussed the significance of personal creativity and the fostering of decision making by an individual. For instance, Crutchfield, author of “Conformity and creative thinking,” (1962) focused on the single employee isolating themselves with different stimuli of the project in order to foster ideas. Additionally, de Bono in 1967 developed the article, “Approaches to Creative Thinking” to discuss what type of stimuli should be set for the most effective ideas to be produced. Until recently, research has progressed toward the effectiveness of collaborative group efforts to reach objectives. Since the middle of the 1980s experience with new products, models for decision making, and simply different decision making trials within companies have developed the importance for group collaboration in developing creative ideas. I will discuss the development of these innovative decision making practices, how managers can ease off the reigns of creativity, and when the manager should guide the employees or focus group.
THE PARALLEL LADDER EFFECT

Research on creative decision making has leaded me to produce my own theory of creative decision making. The Parallel Ladder Effect is a theory is based on the multiple models, methods, and theories that surround decision making. In layman's terms, my theory describes a metaphor to decision making. Imagine two ladders, with a focus group at the bottom of the ladders. At the top of the ladders is the objective their superior would like them to reach. Let’s say they need to develop a cell phone that can fit in the hand of a smaller consumer, going against the revolution of large phones with bigger screens. In order to get there, the focus group would first set out their basic needs, smaller hardware, easier accessibility of the buttons on the side, and the ability for their thumb to reach all parts of the screen (A reader with small hands can understand these needs). With each group member contributing an idea, the group can then look over the ideas and edit, or modify, the ideas to tailor what exactly higher level management would want. The main focus of this theory is trust in the fellow group members. If the members can trust in the base idea, then they make it to the next ring of the ladder, gradually getting closer to the top with the help of the individual ideas.

CENTRALIZATION AND ITS NEGATIVE EFFECTS

The 2011 article “How does Bureaucracy Impact Individual Creativity,” offers a counter argument to the long lasting individual creativity that does not fully undermine the importance of individual creativity. The authors develop a notion based an “Integrative person-in-situation theory,” (Hirst et al. 2011, p. 624) that “describes how situational influences may either restrain or incite the expression of individual differences,” (Hirst et al, 2011, p. 624). The scholars draw on the influence of a bureaucratic system, or hierarchy in the group including the manager,
which can impact how much the employee, may engage in the creative process. This process transcends into the classroom as students and professors are sure to realize. In many classrooms there is a hierarchy with the professor at the top, the smarter students in the middle, and the students who may not comprehend the material at the bottom. The classroom is likely to be physically set up in this traditional way, with the teacher standing at the front, smarter students sitting in the front, and less involved students in the back. Just as Hirst et al states this type of beauracratic control can highlight the employees who are self-engaged, but create a void with the students who may not comprehend the material. Hirst et al shows this in the business setting with their idea of centralization. They describe centralization as how it, “relates to how power is distributed in an organizational hierarchy and whether employees are encouraged to participate in the decision making” (2011, 626). Furthermore, the paper describes the effects of low centralization on a group, “Low centralization captures a context in which all employees participate and are afforded discretion and opportunities to act according to their own inclination,” (Hirst et al, 2011 p 626). In other words, if the employee must refer to their superior each time they develop an idea than the focus on the creative idea gets lost, while the focus is pointed toward making the superior happy.

The physical nature of the classroom, or conference room for this paper’s focus, will entice activity. Take the focus group about the phone used earlier. Most managers will allow one individual to run the group and scribe the ideas of the group. This leader therefore has the power of writing whatever interpretation of the ideas in their own way. This is centralizing the team. Other negative factors of centralizing are dispositions and disagreements in the group. This can be detrimental toward the progress of the group for a multitude of reasons. First, Raub studied the bias of individuals toward others. Although people are not always going to agree it is
adamant that the group puts aside the more elementary differences such as lifestyle, race, and culture that employees tend to disagree on the most. The collaboration of Hirst et al further describes the effect centralization has on a team effort, “In the team context, centralization captures the extent to which within-team decision authority lies solely with a team’s leader or is shared between leader and members,” (2011 p. 626). This second option of allowing the leaders and members to record ideas on the ‘master list,’ or complete list of the teams ideas, allows each member to not only hear all the ideas, but also allows the room to be equally shared, allowing the normally less involved employees to voice their opinion. The hierarchy now shifts, giving each employee a turn in the spotlight while the other employees study and appreciate what the new leader is saying. In the classroom we see this same type of progress during a “circle discussion,” where everybody, including the teacher is sitting in a circle. This allows for the less involved students to become a physical part of the discussion and to feel less timid in the classroom.

**FORMALIZATION AND ITS NEGATIVE EFFECTS**

The other side of bureaucracy in the work place is formalization. This is described as the extent of rules, procedures, and regulations on the group. Think of it as a horse on its reigns unable to break into full stride. The increase of formalization is described by Raub who wrote a paper on bureaucracy’s murder on individual creativity. He claims formalization “reduces the extent of employees’ freedom by prescribing procedures and potentially by sanctioning some courses of action--providing specific direction as to appropriate actions,” (2007 p.182). The sanctioning does not allow the employee to create their own method of finishing a task or creating an idea, rather the manager tells them the exact procedure creating a dictatorship on the focus group’s
ideas. In regard to my ladder theory, the manager is keeping the employees on a lower rung rather than boosting them up and creating stronger engagement among the entire group. Hirst et al describes that “Rules and regulations effectively reduce individuals’ opportunities to engage in discretionary behaviors and provide a setting that ‘presses’ individuals to follow certain procedures and approaches,” (2011 p. 626). These regulations have negatives that extremely outweigh the positives contrary to popular belief. The most recognized positive is the behavioral consequences. With a formal setting, many employees will act mature in a sense that all differences or problems they have with other employees will be forgotten. This is enforced with administrative checks through paperwork that direct the behavior of the group. Unfortunately, this disrupts the employees and their stream of consciousness. If a superior was to check every hour and fill out paperwork on the group, this distracts the group from what they were doing seconds before. This method homogenizes the ideas as well. At the beginning of the meeting, the superior will show the group exactly where their focus must be spent. The employees are unable to create new methods of getting there. In regards to my ladder theory, the manager is only giving the employees one ladder to get to the top, instead of allowing them to provide another ladder to jump to, make some progress, and eventually get to the top with the help of both ladders.

The hypothesis for the Hirst et al studies were that low formalization and low centralization create more freedom in the group creative decision making was more effective. In studies of 330 employees in 95 teams the team created four instances that controlled the group and also let the group ‘off the reigns’ of centralization and formalization. The team used graphs to show the effectiveness of high and low centralization and formalization. These graphs measured the employee creativity on the basis of ideas produced and the collaboration used,
while on the opposing axis was the orientation in which they used. They used two types of orientation for the focus groups; Learning Orientation which is basically a participative decision making using all of the group members, and Avoid Orientation which employs a leader to make the decisions. These four instances, each orientation had a simulation with high and low centralization and formalization, show scholars and managers the effect controlling the mind can have on productivity. On the subject of centralization the team proved their hypothesis correct. The team states that with low centralization the ideas of the group proved to be more effective and abundant, but only when Learning Orientation is employed. In regards to the Avoid Orientation, the ideas started strong, but when the leader began to run the group, the creativity began to drop. In their tests of formalization, the superior set rules and regulations to tame behavior and the process to which the group reached their objective. The results proved more drastic. In the beginning of the simulation with low formalization some employees disagreed on the initial ways to attack the problem, but once the created their own individual process they trusted the process and indirectly each other to solve the problem.

**EMPLOYEE-MANAGER TRUST**

Controlling your focus group as a manager can hinder creativity as Hirst et al show. A manager faces the challenge of getting creative ideas from their employees on a daily basis. Some of the time it is because the employees may not trust the manager or their overbearing ego. Hirst et al states “a desire for control and behavioral regulation may inspire centralized decision making and the formalization of rules and procedures. Our findings confirm that team baecracy can suppress the expression of individual differences that may engender creativity,” (635-636). On another hand, there is a learning orientation that needs to be employed for the group to get
past individual differences that may foster disposition and disagreement. In order for the manager to control this sole negative aspect of group freedom, it is recommended that the group takes a half hour prior to the development of ideas for ‘big picture ideas.’ This time is used to understand where everybody in the group could see the project going toward, with this application and understanding there is an overwhelming amount of trust between the individuals. With more trust from employee to employee each member will feel more comfortable in the creative group and be able to contribute to the the goal in the end. Additionally, low formalization on the side of the manager will foster trust in the manager to employee relationship. If the employees are allowed to create their own procedure in producing ideas and reaching an objective, than it is more likely that the manager will trust the employee as long as they show results.

Once the manager sets up a focus group and allows them to set up their own procedures, it is still the manager’s job to ensure that the group is not wasting their time with ideas that high level management may not endorse. The effectiveness of quantitative and qualitative decision making is something that Harvey and Kou study in their paper “Collective Engagement in Creative Tasks,” (2013). Their main point is that decision making in a business setting has a process, especially in a group setting. These group sessions have objectives to create alternatives for a firm to choose from. With the help of Hirst et all, we realize that a group should be left to do their own creative decision making, but when the group needs to develop ideas, where should they analyze and when should they move on?
Harvey and Kou implement convergent decision making in their study. The purpose of this article is to address the effectiveness of convergent decision making, or using a few quality ideas with a lot of evaluation between group members before a decision is made. Convergent decision making is defined as the ability to create a quality idea by bouncing ideas upward between group members to arrive at a solution, which is where The Parallel Ladder Theory is derived from. The scholars use two extremes, a quantitative approach which focuses on many generated ideas, but little progress on the decisions which they compare to the effectiveness of a qualitative approach focused on a certain amount of ideas and their progress. The design of Harvey and Kou’s study starts with the stages of study. There were three stages to their analytic process which begins with identifying group interactions during the actual session. The sessions were held within the U.S. Department of Health and traced the evaluation of different policies. In the first step to the analytic process, the researchers identify an idea when it was produced in observing the group session. Afterward, the focus group had to make a decision to progress or discard the idea (2013) The environments concerning controlled amount of ideas with many decisions made were recorded and proved the qualitative aspect of the study. In the second stage of the process Harvey and Kou developed meeting maps to judge the effectiveness of the type of environment used. Finally, they tracked the decisions over time to develop an additional effectiveness report of the decisions that were actually made.

The environments they established varied from traditional forms such as brainstorm group to more specific direction to the sample group in order to prove the effectiveness of convergent decision making. The difference between their extremes was the trust in the ideas. With trust in
the ideas between the groups, the groups would further analyze (move up the ladder) the idea toward their main goal. The brainstorm sample generated a medium amount of ideas for the study but was not evaluated thoroughly, reflecting only 18% decision rate (2013). The second environment, or Sequential Mode, the sample generated one idea at a time and work on that idea. This sample was not able to decide on the idea with the weight of their further ideas. On the other hand, this group was able to find more problems in their ideas than be able to decide on them. In the Parallel environment let the sample create a small set of ideas and allow them to be decided and evaluated parallel to each other. This environment had about 70 of their 133 ideas decided upon. This parallelism of ideas allows group members to participate in convergent decision making, in layman's terms, bouncing ideas upward towards a common goal. (2013) The final sample proved convergent thinking was the most effective mode to establish group creativity. With 73% of decisions made the iterative mode is the most extreme of qualitative environments. Instead of describing the problem, the sample spent the time to revise the problem framework, which led to the best quality ideas (2013, Table 2). At the conclusion of the study, the 2013 article proves that convergent decision making is the most progressive and acceptable method by employees in addition to fostering creativity and decision making. When the employees are left alone, just as Hirst et al proves, the group fosters trust in the idea indirectly fostering trust in each other to get to the objective.

HOW KNOWING YOUR BRAND HELPS

It is common knowledge that the identification of creative and effective ideas is the channel to making a decision. Within the company, it is the product or service that is most likely being analyzed in the decision making group. These decisions can vary anywhere from how to
distribute the product amidst certain channels, how to alter the product to reach different target markets, or simply how to make the workplace more efficient. The importance of brand awareness within the company is showed by scholars Nicholas Ind and Cameron Watt in their article, “Brands and breakthroughs: How brands help focus creative decision making,” (2005). The paper addresses how brands can help middle and higher level management steer through the plethora of ideas that their employees would like to make decisions on. Just as management can affect the way employees make decisions, different external forces can affect the way a firm makes decisions. Ind and Watt show the importance of situational intelligence in the working environment and how realizing what the future can be will make an more effective decision rather than using consumer research of the past. Ind and Watt describe situational intelligence as a representation of “a duality of organizational self-knowledge about brands, core competences, capabilities, culture, and stakeholders (particularly customers) and the ability to use that knowledge to focus, resource, motivate, and form and implement strategies that fit within and reflect these situational constructs,” (2006, p. 331). This theory of situational intelligence is vital to the decision making process. The catch is that many firms do not know how to acquire the situational intelligence and revert to traditional forms of intelligence such as market and consumer research. Many firms base their intelligence on the consumer research that they perform, but this research is looking at the past. Alan Mitchell argues in his paper “Right Side Up: Building Brands in the Age of the Organized Consumer,” that consumer research can have an adverse effect on both situational intelligence in addition to creative and effective decision making. Mitchell contends, “[Research] gets in the way of empathy and the ability of the organization to make intuitive and meaningful decision,” (2001) mainly because it looks at the past rather than the situation at hand. Ind and Watt complete their research with case studies on
some of the most prolific companies in today’s market, “Companies such as innovation consultants, IDEO, lifestyle brand Quicksilver, car manufacturers Premier Automotive Group and online game developers Funcom rely on deep-seated understanding of themselves and their customers or end users,” (2006 p. 333). With this reliance on situational intelligence Ind and Watt produce an argument that fosters continual creativity allowing companies like these to rely on their interpretation of the future for success and organizational creativity. Furthermore, the scholars notice the affect situational intelligence can have on the end user:

At its best, organizational creativity creates tension by challenging stakeholders’ preconceptions of what a product or service should do. This is the source of the success of such innovators as Smart, Apple Computers, Amazon, eBay, Cirque du Solie and Sony. Each of these brands challenges the idea of a product category, service or market and defines a new range of positive possibilities or new ‘blue ocean markets.’ These organizations are able to achieve these paradigm shifts because they draw the customer into an active, participatory and equitable relationship. (2006 p. 333).

In this process the customer is no longer the static user or the center of creativity of the future, but rather a partner in the process of innovation. The managers can take certain amount of research, and base it on their experience with the target market, rather than basing a whole project on the results of past research. It takes a certain level of bravery to trust situational intelligence of the employee from a manager perspective, but without this trust there is no use in having a managerial hierarchy, because the manager would then be doing all of the work.

**CONCLUSION**

Managers are constantly trying to make their employees foster creative ideas, but sometimes they have a reverse affect. During administrative checks the employees are subject to going through paperwork in order to show their progress, but this just stops the progress. Ways to promote
longevity in the creative process are decentralizing and deforming the focus group. The more freedom the employee has to think, or climb the ladder than they will ultimately figure it out. “Circle discussions” prove to be great ways to incorporate everybody in the focus group. With the physical distinction of being equal, the more timid employees will be likely to become engaged, rather than a leader molding their ideas.

The Parallel Ladder Effect only works if the employees are allowed to create their own procedure. If the manager is already at the top there is no way that he can help the employees get there, the only thing he can do is guide them. Let’s travel back to the focus group on phones. If the employees have small hands they understand the problem, but not if the manager with large hands tries to infiltrate their creativity.
Crutchfield, R. (1962) “Conformity and creative thinking.” *Contemporary Approaches to Creative Thinking*


