

David Burkus

Our misconceptions around creativity

Speakers:

Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit

David Burkus

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello, everyone and welcome to another insightful expert interview at the Innovation & Creativity Summit 2017. I'm happy to have a friend of mine, David Burkus, with us today. David is an author of multiple bestselling books including the new one, *Under New Management* and the one that I got to know him, *The Myths of Creativity*. He is also a professor at Oral Roberts University and expert in innovation and creativity.

I'm very happy to have you here today, David.

David Burkus: Oh, no. Thank you. I'm excited to be here. And thank you for reaching out I don't know how many years ago that was when we started to get to know each other after *Myths* came out. So, it has been great.

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely. So for people who don't know you or the sort of work that you've done, can you just give us a brief insight into how you go up into insights around creativity and innovation?

David Burkus: Yeah. So my goal with all of my writing or when speaking on my work is to make good ideas easier to use basically, to take – and when I say good ideas, I usually mean evidence-based, empirically researched, lots of science behind the idea, and to make those easier to use because a lot of times, those hangout in the Ivory Tower that we don't really know about them and we sort of – we owe a debt of gratitude to people like Malcolm Gladwell and places like TED but there's a whole lot more good ideas trapped in the Ivory Tower that we want to sort of escape.

And one of the first places that I was sort of motivated to attack that was in and around creativity and innovation mostly because there are so many best practices, so many things that people do that are elevated to the level that they're almost unquestionable and also have no science to support them. So that was the goal and sort of OK, well, here's what the research actually says and it's bad news for a lot of these faulty beliefs about how creativity is supposed to work.

Nick Skillicorn: I know. It's something I found doing a lot of the other expert interviews at the summit. When you actually speak to the people who are editing the journals, researching creativity, who are doing the research on the ground, you're finding a lot of counterintuitive evidence come up which really goes against what people expect to be the norm just because it feels like what best practice should feel like.

David Burkus: Yeah. I mean – and you bring up a really – you used an interesting word that I think stems from a lot of these problems is feels. We are in scientific terms, we're a sample size of one, so that's how we feel something when and we have mostly our own experiences to go on either for good or for bad, et cetera. Then we reflect on that and sort of tell ourselves a story about why it felt that way.

The interesting thing is that often we don't have the benefit of knowing whether or not that was even successful. So we did it and we after the fact feel like it worked out OK but that doesn't necessarily mean it did. It's going to take a number of years after we've done the thing to know if that was the best thing or not.

And also, we have no comparison. We can't – whenever you make a decision, it's not like there's another one of you that makes the opposite decision and then you go off and you can compare a year later who has the better life outcome.

You can do that in scientific research. You have a control room and a regular group or an intervention group and then you can actually compare it and address the differences and see what works well not because it feels like it worked but because it actually did work better. And that's where a lot of the things that we're relying on feeling and reflective storytelling to explain fall away because they're based on feeling.

Nick Skillicorn: I think that's why you and I are such kindred spirits in a lot of ways. We both want this evidence behind what we're talking about. And so that's why I'm excited to have another chat with you today about some things that people can actually get some form of grip on when it comes to understanding how creativity and innovation actually work.

So, let's get started and let's talk about some of the things you've written about in your books. We've covered quite a few of them around the other talks in the summit. But one which we haven't touched on amongst others is a lot of people feel like there's a certain type of person whose much better at coming up with ideas and these are the people we should leave the creativity to in the business. What's your view on that?

David Burkus: Yeah. Well, there's not a lot of evidence to support that. So this – I mean to me, this stems from – it's two-fold. It stems from our natural desire to sort of apply genetics to everything. Ever since we discovered DNA, we've been wanting to figure out what's genetic or what's not, what's nature and what's nurture. Some of it actually goes before that. I mean you look at Sir Francis Galton who had this book, *Hereditary Genius*, that was all about trying to figure out where does genius come from? Is it genetic?

It's an interesting idea. It was a little weird because everyone who was a genius and Sir Francis called the study, it was wealthy white male living in England but he was OK. So ever since then, we've been trying to see is there a sort of genetic component?

And the truth of the science is that nature has yet to eliminate the role of nurture. So there is some evidence. But the way that I like to say is in the same way that if you are tall, really tall, you have a better than average chance of making the NBA than if you're 5'1". Or I don't actually know what that is in meters. My apologies.

And in the same way, if you're tone deaf, you're going to have a much harder time becoming a genius composer or musician.

And so, there are certain genetic predispositions for sure. We know that. The best way to think of it is it sorts of sets a range. And then after that, it's what you do inside that range. The thing about that is that everybody has the potential to move up in that range. I've never met somebody who has achieved the peak of their creative ability. I think everybody can move up in that range. I have no idea what the top of that range is for anybody but most people can move up in it.

The other thing that sort of compounds that organizationally is we've started to apply this term "creative" to certain roles, not even as an adjective anymore, as a noun. These are the creative industries, and the adjective. And then people start calling themselves, "I'm a creative."

And it sends a subtle message that if you are not in one of those roles, if you're not in that box in the org chart, then your role doesn't require creativity. It doesn't require innovation. It doesn't require an ability to solve problems. And it's simply not true especially in 2017. The majority of the work that's being done in the industrialized world, in the knowledge work era, is work that involves solving problems. What's the fundamental component of solving problems? Creativity.

So every role is that and yet, we sort wrongly associate it with certain boxes. And the truth is, I think a lot of us do it to let ourselves off the hook. Creativity is inherently risky. It's dangerous. It's uncomfortable. Sometimes it doesn't feel right to go back to our prior point. And so if we can just say, "Oh, I'm not creative. I can't draw. Therefore, I'm not creative."

By the way, I can't draw but I can write. So there goes that argument. But if we do that, most of the time, we're doing it to let ourselves off the hook so that we don't have to try to begin with and we can hide in certain roles in the organization and say, "These things are never going to need my creativity." And that's just faulty. In 2017 in the business environment that we're in, we need almost everybody's brain to help us solve the problems that we need to solve in order to move forward as an organization.

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely. There are a lot of studies and surveys which have gone around very senior leadership levels over the last couple of years asking what's going to be important for your company in the future. And creativity is becoming more and more and more sought after in the corporate setting.

In fact, I think in 2010 or so, IBM interviewed 1,500 CEOs and creativity was the number one thing they said they needed for the future. And yet, they are still doing things unconsciously, these CEOs and people in leadership levels, which they don't realize are hampering people's creativity in the actual businesses that they're trying to help.

So let's talk about that for a while. What sort of things are companies doing which are unknowingly hurting people's creativity?

David Burkus: Yeah. Well, so there are a couple of things if you want to go into the unknowing category. There is this sort of direct and indirect influences. So indirect influences as I talked about earlier are things like the organization chart, the way that we assign certain tasks, this belief that creativity only comes from certain departments, marketing and sales and engineering and R&D for example. But the creativity can't come from accounting. I mean I guess it can. We all remember what happened with ENRON and that was pretty creative.

But I mean we could use that same creative ability towards good ends as well. So letting that sort of org chart shape who is, that's an indirect influence. The other thing that the org chart often does is it sort of defines who our relationships are so we have this subtle tendency to associate with and be around mostly with people that are in our department or in our leg of the giant periorbital shark.

And so, information doesn't flow through the whole organization to the level that really should optimize everybody's creativity. So, that's kind of another indirect influences.

From a senior leader perspective, there are a lot of direct influences as well. I mean one of the biggest challenges is that as things move up in organization, they move up in organization because they're more difficult problems to solve.

I can remember our former President, Barack Obama, had this quote that I love that applies to every CEO, every small business owner, anybody who has even been the top person in an organization, "So the things that land on my desk are problems nobody else can solve." That's why they got there. If they could have been solved in a different level, then they would not get there.

And the challenge is that is in evaluating those solutions in coming up with here's the problem, here's what we have to decide, et cetera, leaders are put in this role where they're also tasked with judging people's solutions. And the way that they respond to that can really send a message as to whether or not they actually want creative thinking and innovative

thinking or not. So we're all familiar with being told that we want people to think outside the box but a lot of us are familiar with being rejected because we thought outside the box.

And I know that you're an admirer of the work of Jennifer Mueller and I think she is another speaker on the summit on the kind of the larger implications for this.

But even in just the language that we use when we're accepting or rejecting an idea, we could have a direct influence on whether or not our people decide their creative ability is welcome.

And creativity is like a muscle. If we don't allow our people to keep using it, it falls into atrophy and they become more likely to believe lies like, "I'm not creative."

Nick Skillicorn: I mean it's interesting you say that you should use it like a muscle because it's an analogy that I use when I'm speaking with clients who say, "I'm not creative." And I ask them, "If you were to go to the gym a couple of times, would that improve your muscle fitness and would that improve your health?"

And it's a very similar mindset that if people say, "I'm not fit because I'm not as fit as the guys in the NBA or playing Premier League soccer or in the Olympics." That doesn't mean that you can't become fitter if you work at it. And it's the same as if you are comparing yourself to Picasso or Beyonce or Steve Jobs or Elon Musk. Just because you're not at that level right now, it doesn't mean that you can't improve your ability by working at it.

David Burkus: Right, exactly. And also, it doesn't mean that you're supposed to. If you put those people on a pedestal and you define that as the entry, the price of admission for who gets classified as creative then your – I mean truthfully, you're probably looking for an out. You're setting yourself up to fail so that you don't have to exercise that muscle at all.

So it's sort of, to use your analogy, it's sort of the equivalent of saying, "Well, I'd never be able to play in the NBA so I might as well never work out and never try."

And I guess you could do that. You can have a very short, very depressing life but you'll probably watch everything that's available on Netflix. And creativity is kind of the same way. If you're going to say that, "I need to have Elon Musk level of creativity to be any good," well then your organization can't use you because you're not going to allow it to use you.

But your organization just needs you to make your contribution and then everybody else to make their contribution and collectively, we as a whole organization can be far more creative than Elon himself or Thomas Edison himself or whomever, Steve Jobs. You pick whoever you want, these people on pedestal. Multiple minds all contributing their part are going to go further than that one person's creativity.

Nick Skillicorn: Absolutely. A lot of people forget that even Thomas Edison and Elon Musk and Steve Jobs, they didn't do all of the invention themselves. They had huge teams of smart people, hardworking people behind them who help them achieve these things.

David Burkus: Absolutely. I mean I say it often, creativity is a team sport and we forget that. I'm an American so we have this tendency in all of our media even in sports to associate to the one instead of to the entirety of the team. And we apply the same thing with business. As soon as you make your dent in the universe, the world tends to forget all of the people that help you get enough momentum to make that dent.

Nick Skillicorn: Let's talk about something else then, which is this concept of what makes up a good idea. So a lot of people think that if you're going to come up with something new, it needs to be fundamentally different from anything that has come before. But sometimes the best ideas are the ones that are just slight tweak on something which was nearly there previously.

David Burkus: Yeah. I mean again, we have this idea of setting the pedestal too high. So if your pedestal is your price of admission or your admission's criteria is a wholly original idea, for one, you're going to set yourself up for failure because there's no such thing as a wholly original idea. Ex nihilo creation is kind of outside the realm of mere mortals. And therefore, all ideas are combination of pre-existing ideas. No matter what, you're going to borrow an influence from somebody else.

This is where artists and musicians are usually a little bit more intellectually honest than a lot of engineers or individuals in business capacity thinking about creativity, because if you ask a musician who are your influence is, what you're literally asking them are who are the people that you listen to so often and copied from in the process of finding your unique sound? And that's all creative ideas. They're a combination of pre-existing ideas.

So if you're setting that as your admission's criteria, you're already setting yourself up for failure. You might be doing it to give yourself an out. You might just not know.

But then the other thing to your point is that some of the starting places for coming up with the best ideas should be the old ideas, the discarded ideas. Most often, I mean I'm a big fan of the design thinking methodologies and they talk about the idea that it's an iterative process. You start with a minimum viable product prototype, you start with something small, you iterate, you iterate, you iterate, you eventually arrive at that thing.

Now, each iteration is just a process of adding a new idea or a new tweak to an older idea. Usually, that first prototype even starts from something else. And if we look at, to go back to all of these people that we put on pedestals, Elon Musk is not the first person to try and create an electric car. He certainly wasn't the first person to try and go to space.

Steve Jobs wasn't the first person to create a smartphone. In fact, he wasn't the first person, it wasn't the first Apple product that looked like a small handheld smart device. They tried it once before and learned a lot of lessons in the process with their failure that then they could fix when the technology is better.

In the same way, Thomas Edison's patent on lights is actually called improvements in electric lights because he was the 22nd or 23rd, I always forget, person to file a patent on electric light bulbs. He was playing around with other people's ideas and making improvements to them and he became the one – really what he gets credit for is becoming the one that unlocked the right combination of that scale. But we have to understand that he would have never done that if there weren't the 20 something people before him who were experimenting with combinations as well.

Nick Skillicorn: So let's talk about this concept of expertise. What is expertise play in creativity and being able to execute those ideas?

David Burkus: So expertise is a tricky thing then because Edison for example needs to know enough about previous work to be able to have raw material to copy from. The challenge is that if you look at the entirety of a creative process working in teams of working as an individual, you have this sort of idea generation, you're creating a prototype, you're getting feedback, et cetera, but every time you come up with an idea, there's a judgment phase in every creative process.

You have to decide, "Am I going to elaborate on this? Am I going to build this or is this a failure?" You have to try thousands of things or I don't remember – this Smithsonian I think says it was only 600 filaments but he said tens of thousands. Great marketer by the way, a lot to learn there.

But – so you have to try a bunch of things and you have to judge whether or not they were successes or failures. In that moment of judgment, expertise can actually be more damaging than it is helpful. So expertise can help you in the frontend but on the backend when you're trying to decide whether or not you invest the time to keep going with this idea, it turns out expertise can actually be sort of bad thing. And this is just a cork of human nature.

When we see a problem, one of the things we naturally do is we make analogies back to similar problems we worked on. So we come up with a solution to a certain problem and our mind goes back to similar solutions to similar problems. And most often than not, we come up with false negatives. So there's a saying in physics for example that if you don't do Nobel Prize winning work by the time you're 30, you should just retire. And I think it's a really curious phrase because it's essentially saying that after 30, you're not going to come up with that idea. You are.

What tends to happen is that after 30, you have so many past failures that you're associating with this new idea and you decide it's not even worth a try. Like those young late 20, early 30

something businesses, they have just as many crazy ideas as the people with tons of experience. The difference is, they have a lot of time and not a lot of past experience of failures so they try stuff and they waste a lot of time. But eventually, they stumble into the thing that gets them the Nobel Prize.

Similar thing happens in medicine. Actually, after I wrote *Myths of Creativity*, which I'm still kind of weirded out by, my wife when she finally read the book like six months after said, "Oh, you should have included the story of H. pylori and ulcers." And I was like, "Wait, what? Why didn't you tell me this when I was writing the book?" But essentially, similar things happen in medicines.

So, we discovered that ulcers are not necessarily caused by stress and high acidity levels in the stomach. They're caused by a bacteria. We discovered that because two people came up with the theory, presented it to the medical community. They said, "You're crazy. We've already solved this problem. No need to continue." Their expertise blocked them from seeing a solution.

So one of the two medical doctors swallowed a vial of the bacteria and then photographed his stomach as he developed an ulcer. And they presented these new findings to the medical community. Of course, they say, "You're still crazy but thanks for doing the experiment for us because now we know."

So it happens often in that that expertise can certainly help you come up with new combinations but it can also kind of frame the way that you are going to judge the value of investing in those new ideas and you're going to tend towards false negatives a whole lot more than reality actually dictates.

Nick Skillicorn: What seems to happen though is it's not just in the scientific communities and musicians and artists, it's CEOs and business leaders as well who have this experience of how the companies run up until that point and that's how the – this is how we do things here is. That's one of the most dangerous phrases you can hear when it comes to innovation.

David Burkus: Right. This idea can't work because it's different than how we do things. Well, wait a minute. If how you do things was working and was the only way to work then you wouldn't need out of the box thinking to begin with. So if the way we did things around here was working, nobody would need creativity anyway.

And there are legitimately some industries in which we haven't seen major innovation for hundreds of years and we don't need to because they have pretty simple problems. But there's a lot of industries that have wicked problems that are incredibly difficult to solve and are only going to be solved doing something different than the way that we do things around here.

Nick Skillicorn: So let's talk about another thing which is related to getting the best ideas. And again, it goes against what's considered common knowledge. It's this idea of criticism and giving feedback on ideas during the process. A lot of people feel like if you criticize an idea, people are just going to turn into wallflowers and put their hands up and say, "I don't want to participate anymore." But what's your view on it?

David Burkus: Well, so you speak to the exact fear. So decades ago, a gentleman by the name of Alex Osborn really wrote probably the first creativity manual, he wrote a book called *Applied Imagination*. And it was all about the things that his advertising firm and his colleagues in the firm did to stimulate their creativity. This is like the Mad Men era which we tend to associate with all these amazing ad campaigns. The truth is, most of them weren't at all that creative. People were just so – advertising was so new that any ad campaign would work really, really well.

But we took his advice. So we read his book, *Applied Imagination*. It has this new technique called brainstorming in it. Brainstorming has four rules. Nobody remembers what all four are anymore. But they remember that one of them is to defer judgment. No idea is a bad idea. You're not allowed to criticize because just like you said, the fear is that when there's criticism in the room, people will self-censor out of fear of that criticism.

And while that may be true, it turns out that the more damaging thing is that there's no criticism because then we're stuck with just the ideas that people generate individually. The truth is that when you push back on somebody's idea, when you question it, when you ask a why on it, and they have to defend it, collectively, the two of you or the entirety of the room now work towards a stronger, better quality idea.

We've seen this in the research. Probably the best study is a study by a woman named Charlotte Namath, led by her, a bunch of different colleagues involved, that literally compared traditional four rules of brainstorming to four rules with the criticism one modified so that you push back on every idea that's generated.

The group in that condition not only came up with more ideas right away, came up with more ideas later when they circled back and resurveyed them because their mind was continuing to think about and sort of defend those ideas.

So the trick is, not how do we avoid all conflict but how do we stay focused on task-oriented conflict because task-oriented conflict is going to actually encourage everyone to think deeply but also more broadly about the idea so that we can strengthen it. We're going to get more and better ideas if we can push back on them if we can get comfortable with the idea that there's a time and a place for conflict and we need it in everybody's creative process.

Nick Skillicorn: I want to change text slightly now then because one of the reasons I was so keen to have you on the summit is you just ran a summit of your own a couple of months ago which was all about figuring out how to work smarter and more efficiently. And part of that

was also about how to get the best types of ideas to bubble to the surface and actually get executed.

So can we talk a bit about the sort of myths and preconceptions that people have about how they should work smarter and the sort of insights you've got over the last year or two about what it actually takes to make your ideas happen?

David Burkus: Yeah. So this is an interesting one. So we started this summit and the idea was that we would focus a lot on productivity tips. So how do you get more focus? How do you stop from checking your email after hours or et cetera?

And we found that we really had to broaden that because so much of work smarter is also taking an active approach to things that sort of happen accidentally. So we ended up with tracks around how do you interact and collaborate on the team.

This conflict one is a really good one. We chase cohesiveness in teams for example. But the truth is that if you're trying to do more creative work, you need people who care enough about you and care enough about your project to push back on it. So that's something that we sort of uncovered.

We also kind of found that part of working smarter is treating your career smarter. And I think this is probably the big one I was not expecting but has really interesting implications for creativity and innovation in particular.

So, we talked about earlier this idea that org charts kind of have this indirect influence on people. They tend to hang around in just their little area and create silos and clusters. And one of the predominant social scientist of the last several decades is a gentleman named Ronald Burt. He came up with this idea, the theory structural holes.

And essentially, a structural hole is someone – well, structural hole is the gap between two different sort of clusters in organization, two different legs in the org chart, two different departments that never talk to each other, et cetera.

And when someone can be a broker and fill that gap, fill that structural hole, Burt actually says it in a beautiful way. He says, "They're at a higher probability of stumbling upon good ideas." So they have – they run the danger of finding great ideas much more often because they're in that structural hole.

Now, how do you become that type of person? Well, you've got to take a pretty active role in your career and map out. Clearly, I can't just sit around and wait for promotions to happen. I have to think about what is the total career path and how do I move more laterally as I'm moving up in the organization or how do I move from different organizations to the vendor, to the supplier, to other places in the whole network of the industry that I'm in so that as I build my career, I'm building these connections and bridging structural holes because those

are the people just by their very nature that are going to encounter more great ideas that both sides of the gap need.

So, the career one especially with one, it wasn't planning on we went and do it. It was planning with one of these actionable things because the book that I'm currently working on sort of deals with a lot of the science behind networks and structural holes and that sort of thing. It was also in the advice of a lot of these career experts that we had sought out. It was really quite curious.

Nick Skillicorn: Fascinating how that happens. And it's one of the reasons why you want to get interacting with as many different people as possible because you'll end up just getting these gold nuggets that you weren't expecting coming out of nowhere.

David Burkus: Yeah, absolutely. And to the point about – we were talking earlier around originality and the idea that a lot of breakthrough ideas are just adding one little thing to a pre-existing idea. A lot of times, a lot of the disruptive innovations, the things that really shake up an industry or allow for high probability in an organization are actually taking an idea from one area and bringing it over to a different area. And you can only do that if you have the ability to expand that structural hole.

Nick Skillicorn: David, I'm sure we could keep talking for hours and hours and hours but we're coming up to the end of the interview. One thing I'd like to ask you like I ask all the other experts is if you've got one tip or one as I say actionable insight to start getting more value out of your creativity, sort of favorite thing to do that you recommend people do over the course of an afternoon or a week, what would you recommend they try?

David Burkus: So something you could do really simply and fairly quickly, so you said an afternoon, we can probably do it inside of 30 minutes is I would encourage people to email or call or text or reach back to former colleagues. So we just talked about the structural holes and that idea, the truth is, your career probably already has some of them that you're allowing to be a hole even though you have prior relationships in that company, that industry, et cetera.

And your former colleagues are far more valuable than you think because in reaching back to them, it doesn't take as much work as meeting new people because we already have a pre-existing relationship. But by not keeping in touch with them every once in a while, you're not allowing them to influence you, you to influence them, and to take advantage of all of those things we're going to talk about.

So yeah, make a list of about five people that you used to have a strong relationship with but because you moved on or they moved on or whatever happened, you are not talking to very often, and just reach back. No agenda. No advice-seeking. No whatever. Just trying to reconnect with those people. You will find that the benefits of those conversations are far more valuable than you think

Nick Skillicorn: I like that one. I might try that out on LinkedIn this week. David, it has been absolutely wonderful having you here. We're going to get links down to your resources below the video here. Can you just let people know what sort of things they can find if they go there?

David Burkus: Yes. So we have developed a lot of stuff around *Myths of Creativity*, around *Under New Management*. It's actually kind of cool right now because I'm in the midst of writing this new book and we're kicking out a couple of different resources not unlike that former colleague's thing.

We're giving out a couple different resources designed to be sort of helpful for people. A lot of them are activity sheets, templates, short articles that you can read, et cetera. And they're all there at DavidBurkus.com/resources. And they're categorized by what you're looking for. So if you want creativity, it's there. You want leadership and management there, you're networking is there. So you can kind of pick whatever you're looking for.

Nick Skillicorn: David, it has been wonderful having you here. Thanks so much again for being part of the summit. And yeah, I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

David Burkus: Yeah. Thank you again so much for having me.