

# Dr Jennifer Mueller

## The evidence of why managers ignore creative ideas (even when they think they don't)

### Speakers:

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

Dr Jennifer Mueller

### Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** Hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview at the innovation and creativity summit 2017, very happy to have Dr Jennifer Mueller with us today, Dr Mueller is the author of creative change and also a professor at the university of San Diego business school, Dr. Mueller it's wonderful having you here.

**Jennifer Mueller:** Thanks, great to be here

**Nick Skillicorn:** So for people who don't know you or your work, could you give us a brief background as to how you got into studying creativity

**Jennifer Mueller:** Well, you want the long story or the short story because they are both.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Whichever one you feel like

**Jennifer Mueller:** The story that I tell people to be cheeky is the story of how I started my career studying health and then studying marriage. If you are in your early twenties and you go on a date and the guy ask you what do you do and you say I study stuff, getting my PhD and then at first he goes oh and then he says what are you studying and you say marriage and then the date gets alot shorter than you could have possibly imagined and he gets disengaging form you and moving his stool back and I thought to myself not only at the time the job market was sort of drying out for people in health psychology and I was looking around and had the lovely experience of my adviser saying you know what, one of our former faculty members Theresa is looking for someone to work for her for the summer, none of the Harvard student would work for some little money so we thought you would be perfect and I was. She couldn't get rid of me. I had worked with her

then for five years and she was studying people's everyday work lives and she had a collective all these daily diary note of data and including creativity and I had this wonderful opportunity to read through these daily diaries and I started noticing some interesting patterns and one of them was a bits of not surprising at all and also surprising. The not surprising part was that people would say gosh, I am a lady that had an idea, so wasn't just that they felt good that they had an idea, having the idea made them feel good. The second part was that when they expressed this kind of instant negative effect to like deep psychological instincts about their ideas being rejected by others. I

To find out how Nick Skillicorn can help you build your innovation and creativity capabilities, go to

[www.improvides.com](http://www.improvides.com)

started to look more and more into these ideas, like why are ideas rejected are they rejected because creativity literature pretty much says you should know if an idea is great experts can know and if experts can know then you know the idea was very good and so I started to grab on with these ideas, I didn't really know because if you look deep into the writings of the process, they all use a word for people who can know if an early stage creative idea is great, that word is a profit. Economists they call people who can determine if new ventures for examples will be successful astrologers, I am not a profit or an astrologer and I started to realize what is this belief system around knowing if an idea is great, getting this and that's where we started looking at whether or not this whole belief system around there is a correct answer,, all I have to do is figure out what it is and I can look at the metrics and I can look at the data and I can look at the data I can know. Its that we identified with part of what people were doing, trained experts and students even kind of have these beliefs system ingrained in them and when they were thinking in our way, they said they love creativity and creativity was all rainbow and having to know about and associate with creativity with these words because we wanted to get explicitly what they were saying but were associations to help understand our major reactions for stuff that they might not say outwardly and we found that on average when we told people to substantiate the statement that there is one correct solution. We found that people associated, said they associated creativity with all things positive but their reaction time showed us that they associated words like creative reports like permit and in the time they look at creative's ideas that is not so creative versus other people who substantiated the statements that there are multiple solutions that the creative idea was great, associated creativity with rainbows in heaven and said explicitly they love creativity. Which is pretty much across the world what people do; they just get them done and devices. So there are so many about believing there is a correct solution that seemed really problematic when you have creativity and the problem is it's so prolific. We are just publishing a paper showing that merely putting someone in a decision making world was responsibility for allocating resources puts them in their mindset where they are looking for the correct solution and they can't recognize early stage ideas unless they already have great metrics. In other words, what they think a creative idea is, it's something that is already popular which anybody who has ever works in creativity knows it's like oh my gosh that means you can't ever have an early stage idea that is creative with the decision maker and that's a problem because those decision makers also want ideas for potentials that haven't yet been tapped.

**Nick Skillicorn:** And that's some of the things that I am looking forward to speaking about with you, I know you have done a lot of research that is going to be very interesting for people to hear about as far as what the data is showing us about how people in decision making capabilities actually react to new ideas but before we talk about that, I just want to briefly talk about your work with Dr Madeline and this diary analysis because I am very familiar with the work, one of the things I like the most about one of the insights is these time delay between how you are feeling on one day and that affects your ability to come up with a creative insight moment on the following days, can you just briefly let our listeners know what the general statistics that was

**Jennifer Mueller:** Yes, this is a fun thing that I don't think has a lot of notice, these people are gotten wide and decided I think because we showed the relationship between people's daily feelings of positive emotions or positive effort in creativity that's the sign of work but we also showed that this is quite a robust finding in the sense that if you were happy today you not only have a higher likelihood of having a creative idea today but also tomorrow and I believe the next day. So in other

words getting this infusion of positive efforts it just boosts your ability to be creative for a couple of days later. So we thought that was pretty powerful and pretty important and what it suggests is there is this work I am incubating, there is something about the extent to which the unconscious mind can kind of process information more efficiently and go through all these different categories and what not more efficiently than deliberative conscious mind and we thought that was at least some preliminary evidence that could be true because it seems that people were doing something between their emotions, day one of feeling good and day two or three of having this idea. So that was what we found, also in that paper, this is the paper, we also found that when people said they had the idea, they also felt good, so what that meant was this kind of psycho positive effect, you feel good that you have an idea which makes you feel good, which makes you likely to have another idea, so it's the virtual cycle of creativity that almost of course which is broken as soon as your idea is done and you happen to have this idea, this is the worst idea ever or you are just ignored, which also happens most of the time because we find out that more often than not ideas are ignored because they are creative and so this is something that kills the virtual cycle. So in other words companies are spending a lot of money to generate these ideas, they get the viscous cycle until the decision makers see them and they are appalled and all of that positive energy that they get in their pants or is it necessarily turning into value.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I think that's what we should probably focus on right now, this research which was about as we related to earlier what managers and decision makers say they want versus perhaps how they perhaps sub consciously to themselves reacting to your ideas and it's that not being aware of how they are reacting that I think a lot of people are going to be shocked by, so can you just let us know again what the experiment was looking for and what it found

**Jennifer Mueller:** So the initial experiment which I mentioned earlier which looked at this reaction time test, the reaction time test is something that is been used in other dealings of research when you are looking at implosive bias, what implosive bias means is that people are either unwilling to acknowledge or they are potentially unaware that they have negative feelings. This work looks mostly at buyers on the social groups, women Africans Americans whatever, so it's possible for you to feel positively towards some of these social groups of authentic positive feelings that you are expressing, you are great, you are wonderful, you are caring and what not but also have an implicit unacknowledged association with women for example let's say at home and not at work, that you think women should not be at work, they should not get promoted, they should be at home even though specifically you can say no I think women should have equal opportunity. So these tasks were designed to pick up these difference now sometimes you can have a difference, you can explicitly say something and implicitly feel the opposite way and there are two reasons why you could do this. First is it's just a social desirability problem, for example in the case of women, at least when I was dating I found out that most often guys when you first met them would say yay yay, I believe women should work it's very important, I was working I wasn't going to fly over like a log book, they said to me on my first day yea women should be at home, they knew that so they were going to say that. Then as the relationship moved on, you started to hear conversations like a woman should stay at home if they have children and things like this which indicated to me that we didn't have similar values on this even though initially they had a different views when we first started dating. That's an example of people who are trying via social desirability to frame themselves in those positive way even though they are kind of aware that they have this other associations

which might not be seen as socially desirable to have. There is another profile which is people really aren't aware that they have this negative association, so people might really truly authentically believe that they for example they support women that work, in fact they associate women with home life and they are not just aware of it there is this disconnect, we don't know which of those stories to tell about creativity, what we do know is that for the most part for whatever reason in the US, it is an American value to say you value creativity and novelty. These ideal individuals and independence and we were told stories of the founding fathers and the values that they had and I think so it becomes such that you don't hear in the US and I say in the US because you do hear this in other countries, you don't hear people in the US say why would we want innovation, why would we want creativity, in fact they either won't talk about it or they will talk about it as their key aim but if you look at their actual value structure it's like low unattainable of the things that they value. What we did was we brought people in the laboratory and we found out that when people had this mindset around them being one correct solution, they explicitly said creativity was great but implicitly their reaction time thus showed they associate creativity with words like permit and they weren't able to recognize creative ideas unlike people who were prime with this notion that there are many possible solutions. So what it suggests is that people very well may be unaware that they have this.....they are prompt to recognize because I have actually experienced the bias myself, I mean I will tell the story in my book creative change, I tell the story of I am teaching creativity of all things and students get in groups and brain storm and usually this is for a box and one student was so excited about their idea is they first say can we go first and I say okay and I say what is the idea and they tell me it's a solar oven, I run this exercise about at least fifty times or more and not only laboratory but in class rooms and I never heard this response in people and this may be surprising because my husband for example saying solar oven don't you know, we use that all the time I didn't know what it was but I am in a position where I need to know the answers, I am a professor, I am an expert if I don't know I look stupid and you don't want to look dumb in front of these group of MBA's but what was all it was, my immediate reaction and this is something that happened so fast I was barely aware of it was to say that's a dumb idea and of course I remember my brain slowing down to say why did you just say that, what is going on and then saying something even more judgmental like saying does something like that even exist, why would someone even do that, I probably humiliated the student but it was incredibly quick so the reaction time was almost instantaneous and I think that's when you know you have the biased, this nature of reaction never work, it's that reaction which I think people need to be more aware of because that's the reaction that is the most likely to be the responses that are accurate just like very well could be extremely positive also like oh my gosh that's amazing right, so I think those initial major reactions or the things when it comes to creative ideas, creative ideas have this sort of uncertainty and what we know about uncertainty is that uncertainty is what you can fall in love with or you start hating it, when you think about it oh this uncertainly, so is surprise both of these can be extremely positive. Anxiety is also on the circle and we don't want anxiety, we don't want fear and I think that's what is happening with people in creativity they fall in love or they are having hate initial reactions and they are not aware at the wrong feelings and so they are making bad decisions. In organizations, I think there is this belief that you can know the answers and this emotion stop that doesn't matter when it comes to uncertainty, the emotion stuff is all that matters, this is because you can't know. I think something a team that is really important for managers because I think they are put under a tremendous pressure to know and they are accountable and they are responsible for knowing. I think that certain

## The evidence of why managers ignore creative ideas (even when they think they don't)

managers up to fail and creating difficulty and basically applying spots in organizations to find creative ideas they really want and they need to survive

**Nick Skillicorn:** I think this flows into something else which we talked about the beginning which is when people are trying to figure out whether or not an idea is creative or not, quite often people assume that if you have got a enough knowledge in a domain or in a subject area, there is going to be some broad agreement amongst similar people that something is creative or not but as far as I understand there is this other study which is trying to access that, can you let us know what those where and what they found.

**Jennifer Mueller:** Well, what we know in my field for example if you have a paper, you have multiple reviewers, independent experts access the paper. I believe this guy Bill is kind of a rebel in my field, he ran a correlation on agreement ratings amongst those reviewers for papers and I think the correlation was so low; you couldn't publish the correlation in a journal. It will be too low, the data will be too unreliable to be worthy of publication in a low tier journal, it was so low certainly like a point one to the average person to me is basically no relationship between these three experts accessing a single paper. Theresa, one of the things she had done earlier on in her career and this is very important for the field of creativity, she identified that experts could agree, so you get three experts together and you give a bunch of a products or paintings or whatever it is, you have them rate each in terms of how creative they are and they will agree. So they independently rate, that's important and so she said if experts can agree than we have on that field where we can reliably access creativity so what happens instead, what we found is that it's not just being expert that matters for creativity assessments, the role you are in the organization can shift how you define creativity itself. So it's not only what you know, it's how you define creativity and what we found so far is in the US at least, there's two definition of creativity and they are totally opposite, seventy percent of Americans believe that creative ideas are fundamentally just new, they don't even necessarily have a real use, it's not even part of how they think about creativity, they think it has potential, they think it's surprising, makes people happy, combines things people think should be separate, re purposing something, a beak through and it's this kind of clues, technologies also something people kind of look at to determine that something is creative. It's the ques that most Americans are using and whether or not an idea has a function, it's almost not even related to how people think about creativity because they are focused on the potential not that it works. Thirty percent of people in the US believe all those ques do relate to creativity but they want more, what they want they want to have a prune reputation, mass mortgage, they want it to be feasible, they want it to be easy to use, intuitive and it turns out that the first seventy percent when they look at those quest like intuitive and mass mortgage and feasible they think that's not real they think the opposite. There are these two definition out there that compete, one is we get the early stage ideas have potential we don't know whether or not the work has mass appeal yet and the second is no, we want these early stage idea to already proving mass appeal and it turns out that when a person shifts from the everyday personal working around to a decision maker where they have to speak their money and now they are accountable for their decision , they want to make an accurate decision, they shift from this one definition of hey creative ideas have potentials to I want prove, I want to know that it has a market, I want to know what work and so being aware of that is important because if you are in an organization and you are a decision maker, if you are not aware of that what can happen is what happens in most companies that I see which is the people on the

To find out how Nick Skillicorn can help you build your innovation and creativity capabilities, go to

[www.improvides.com](http://www.improvides.com)

## The evidence of why managers ignore creative ideas (even when they think they don't)

front lines who are generating these ideas are so angry, they are so angry at leadership and they think they are hypocrites and leadership is like I don't know what is going on with this creative people they go and off on their changes and they are not solving the problems that we need creativity, we need more creativity and what they mean by that is the definition is we want mass market feasible, we can use it now, want guaranty results and they are not necessarily aware they are thinking about it that way and its opposite how the average person in the organization is thinking about it which is in their mind it has potential, it's not proven yet and I think there is actually a little clash going on almost like a main war and I think it's just a miss communication.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Absolutely, it's so common for people when they have something to loose, resources that needs to be allocated or budget or time that they stop looking at things differently but what I find fascinating about what you are talking about is if you present them with a list of let's say ten projects and a couple of the projects have the proven track record mass appeal confirmation that they are going to work, are you saying that the research says those people will think that those are the creative ideas rather than the ones which are more un proven but more creative in the traditional context.

**Jennifer Mueller:** Those are kind of bizarre, weird, not really innovative, not going to generate profits that's right. In other words where that matters that could potentially matter for decision makers is that way of thinking about creativity is not necessarily how their consumers think about creativity. That's what they should care that their consumers, seventy percent of Americans, we ask seventy percent of Americans what kind of products do you think are creative because we know when people think a product is creative there are more likely to share with others the social occurrence, kind of cool to know about it. You are more likely to want to buy it potentially or at least express the desire to buy it and so the question is what is it that they are looking for, what they are looking for is this many potential uses that all of novelty steps that I told you before they are the seventy, they are not necessarily that in whether or not it has mass appeal and in fact for the average American symbol the fact that it has mass appeal can harm their feeling or fit with the idea of creativity. So an example would be apple, the watch that they recently sold, they market it as the first mass market, this is how it goes like the early two thousand that were done on apple versus ibm, they used the apple symbol and they showed people an apple symbol and they show people an apple symbol versus an ibm symbol and then they were asked to generate creative ideas and they found that when they would shown the apple symbol they generated more creative ideas than when shown the ibm symbol. You could argue that apple seems synonymous with creativity so imagine the huge misfit you would feel as a consumer when your watch is marketed as a mass market wearable, that's like heck, I don't know you may think different mass market, doesn't mean but for thirty percent it might. I bring that up because there was a recent article where someone was talking about how people under a certain income level should be saving money for health care and not buying Iphones, why are they buying iphones because they want to be distinctive, people have the fundamental need to feel distinctive and to belong too but also feel distinctive walking that fine line is important, Apple figured out the way to do that and potentially starting to lose that and part of the reason why is how people are defining I think what creativity is and being in line with that is a huge advantage in the market. Other companies have that kind of brand of being creative but apple does but marketing as mass marketing kills that, but that I think what we have recognized, what we have learnt is that there is this fuzzy middle bridge process between generating ideas and

To find out how Nick Skillicorn can help you build your innovation and creativity capabilities, go to

[www.improvides.com](http://www.improvides.com)

implementing them. This fuzzy middle bridge is the person's ability to abide with say yes, to green light it and we used to think that you don't need a skill set around that, you could just do that, anybody could do that and I think Bill Gates said it best about Steve Jobs, saying look Steve Jobs if he has one skill he said he has this intuitive taste, what is intuitive, intuitive mean gut feel, intuitive means you don't really know, you don't have all the data you just have this sense and I think that's what we are finding, its related to whether or not people can see the potentials in ideas. More so than I have all the answers, here is the data, here is the face book likes or the number of potential users in this market, like that stuff, the data is starting to come back showing its not predicting anything but still people are using it. They are using it because it can help them justify failed ideas, the problem is its not actually predicting success, so companies in some ways are losing out on all these value and they can gain so much value if they just paid attention to this one simple thing and the problem is that it's not always guaranteed because that's the thing about creativity. So to manage creativity, it's a different skill set, it requires different methods and we have been treating creativity like it's any other kind of change and it's just different

**Nick Skillicorn:** So what can companies and individuals do to improve this buying ability to actually get more of the slightly riskier out there creative ideas of through the decision making process.

**Jennifer Mueller:** So we conducted a study and this was featured in Harvard Business review, Jeff, Jennifer Dale and I and we conducted this study on a company, we looked at their decision making team and we had that decision making team look at a port folio of ideas they were considering at that time. We had them read out how creative these ideas were, how new they were, how likely profitable they were we had other people in the organization make this ideas too but also their customers. We had them read write idea of how much are you going to buy each of this. This is a company that valued creativity, they wanted creative solution and they explicitly said it, it was on their marketing material, it's really how they thought about themselves and what they wanted to embrace. So what we found was that they embraced, they just chose to actually implement ideas that were hardly familiar to them and feasible. It turns out that ideas that were hardly familiar to them and feasible are those ratings were negatively related to what consumers wanted because consumers didn't want those ideas and it turned out that the ratings of those ideas novelty and creativity were positively related to what consumers and this is a totally separate set of people and their ratings were positively related to help creative these ideas work and they happen to be rejected. In other words, the companies spend all these time and money rejecting the ideas the customers wanted and embracing the things that were low and easily implemented that the customers didn't want.

**Nick Skillicorn:** All sort of an irony

**Jennifer Mueller:** So when a company saw this data, they re configured because they were kind of shocked in the stuff, because sometimes the decision makers are the people making the decision to re configure. So it's a very tough position to be in, and here is I don't know the rest of the story because I probably wanted to do this in a preparatory way but what I will recommend that company would do and I told them this, I don't know if they have actually this, I think they started to take this advice but I am not exactly certain, my recommendation is I think a lot of companies are worried about their ideas being proprietary, so they really worried about focus groups, I think that's a waste of time, I think the better way to go about it, is to have idea generation of people who are

## The evidence of why managers ignore creative ideas (even when they think they don't)

generating ideas or other people in the organization rates idea creativity and quality. You basically crowd source our own people in the organization to see the portfolio of ideas and how they rate them to being quality. It's key that you have them rate creativity also and the reason why is not because you necessarily want to choose ideas only because of creative but because when ideas are creative, you are more likely to get that major totally positive and totally negative reaction. So you can help people become more aware of the kind of idea, the challenge that they face in making the decision and they can have that information when they are looking at these ideas and seeing what the ratings are from other people not them. Also the creativity rating tends to be different, the decision makers will not see the more infeasible ideas as creative for example. The second thing I will recommend and this is a bit more controversial is that management mandate a certain number of creative ideas being accepted. In other words, you tell decision makers here is the portfolio of ideas; they have been rated by everybody else in the organization. You have quality ratings, you have creativity ratings and you have to choose at least one two or whatever number of the creativity set, you want to choose for a total of let's say 10 whatever it is, and what that does is it gives the decision makers some data to justify their decisions in case the idea fails. So that creative idea, we didn't figure what work and we had to choose one. We think it can help decision makers and it could also help you get better data about the cognitive decision making challenges that you face in that meeting when you are choosing amongst a portfolio of ideas

**Nick Skillicorn:** I mean that's fascinating, it's the concept of changing the mindset of the people in the organization, because if you don't actually show them the evidence that something might be wrong without them being aware of it, the fact that bias exist, there is the almost ironic bias sphere where people don't think that they are biased.

**Jennifer Mueller:** It's a real problem and I think in the sense that I think this is an emerging awareness that the bias exist, I think there is an emerging awareness even in my own field, there is the bias showing the data is coming back and it's pretty scary to me, I mean you will find that ideas even in science, even education and certainly in business are more likely to be rejected because they are creative. This is I think I can at least on the top of my head I could rattle out this ten different studies. So it's not just me that is showing this, the data is very very clear that institutions are having trouble recognizing value in a new and this might not be a problem if the status quo solutions are working fine but the problem becomes really acute when the organizations are starting to die and they don't know what to do. Now my recommendation is because they are instances to track rejectivity none of this gets even more powerful when they are on the threat. My recommendation is okay, if you want to die okay organizations die maybe they should and maybe that's just the natural life cycle, but if they really care about making change when creativity is needed, they need a new skill set and it's not just basic change management that's not enough, you need to change how people think not just how they behave and that requires more of this mindset shift and more of this tolerance about uncertainty without falling in love or major reaction to hate

**Nick Skillicorn:** Is that what you talked about in your book creative change

**Jennifer Mueller:** I do and we find that teams that tend to embrace novel ideas on average I think they don't just talk about all the benefits and how great things are without talking about how feasible they are and the costs and the real world constraints that they face. They tend to..... but teams that there embrace novelty what we see is that they talk about constraints but



immediately afterwards they will talk about what is the problem that we are trying to solve, they will come up with analogies, they will talk about this multiple solutions, what are some other ideas that we can think of that could solve this problem, how could we make this problem work, wait a minute this are the goal ultimate and status that we need to fulfill. Here are the feasibility concerns that we have and safety and what not, so t is kind of dialogue because it goes back and forth and that can back and forth versus the resource for this industries versus and the next and this dialogue tends to result in better decisions and there is major reactions to talk about how things are often that tensed to result in losing out on fabulous opportunities

**Nick Skillicorn:** It's absolutely fascinating, I am sure we can keep speaking for hours and hours on, but we are coming up to the end of the interview unfortunately, one thing I like to ask all of the experts before we go though is if you have got one tip or actionable insight that people who are listening to you and they want to start getting some value out of these concepts and then proving their ability to recognize good ideas and be more innovative, something that doesn't take too long that they can do maybe this afternoon or this week, what would you recommend they try

**Jennifer Mueller:** Without being too self serving, I would say buy my book and here is why. Creativity is one of the most complex human activities that exists, there is no power pose that is put your hands on your head and I feel powerful for creativity that I have ever seen and anybody who says that is let's just say that this is a new problem we just recognize people have, it is complex it is just the mind saying oh this solution, that solution doesn't necessarily translate into action and it's implementation, you really have to understand when to use it and why you are using it and you audience and I really try to go in to that because I think there hasn't been an in depth discussion about what this problem is, why we have it, when we have it, what the solutions are, there are so many different solutions in the book and that's the witness of the book. It's not a book where okay, one solution in the title, great examples all the way through, it's like here is a really really big messy problem and here are many ways to solve it and really what it's about is you engaging with this dialogue and becoming more aware of it. I would say if you really want to lean this new skill set, this is a new dialogue become part of the dialogue. I have this feeling that this is going to be the next way of research in my field, this is going to be the new dialogue going on in my field because it is such a huge problem, we know it exist and I think that most people in the organization understands it exists, even decision makers and we just need to find ways to solve it or talking about it doesn't feel so stigmatized or people don't feel stigmatized about it and that just a first step.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, we are going to have links to all of your resources and twitter and facebook and everything down on the space below the video but if people want to go and find out more, can you just tell them what is on your website

**Jennifer Mueller:** Sure, you can go to Jennifersmueller.com, you can see who I am, you can see the book itself , you can see other papers that I have written for sure, you can download these papers, all of them up for free and get a sense of work on the work, what we have done and how we approach these questions and you can certainly email and contact me via that website or even send me stories of your own about how you came up with the way to overcome resistance to creative idea on your own end perhaps by using some of the strategy in my book or strategies that you didn't see in the book that you thought this is really important and you should consider this, I love to see that



The evidence of why managers ignore creative ideas (even when they think they don't)

**Nick Skillicorn:** Dr Mueller it's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you and I look forward to speaking with you again soon.

**Jennifer Mueller:** Same, Thank you so much.