Jack Goncalo

The individualistic vs collectivistic people affect creative teams

Speakers:

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Jack Goncalo

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello, everyone and welcome to another expert interview at year's Innovation & Creativity Summit 2017. I'm very happy to have on the line again, I would explain a bit more about that in a minute, Dr. Jack Goncalo from the University of Illinois, professor of Business Administration with some very interesting research he has done on creativity.

Jack, it's wonderful having you again.

Jack Goncalo: Great to be here again.

Nick Skillicorn: The reason I say again is that this is actually the second time we've done this interview. The first time, the file that I recorded got corrupted. But it's actually a positive thing because we found some more things we want to talk about that we didn't.

Jack Goncalo: This will be better, right?

Nick Skillicorn: Awesome, yeah. So for people who don't know you or the research that you've done, can you give us a brief background as to how you got interested in creativity?

Jack Goncalo: Well, my interest goes way back to when I was an undergraduate at Berkeley. I took a seminar with a mentor of mine, Charlan Nemeth, and she studies how to send in the open expression of conflict helps creativity and really inspired me to pursue the topic further. So I just basically started from there and went on to study in graduate school and through tenure and here I am. So it has been a long almost interest of mine.

Nick Skillicorn: And we're going to highlight some of the different experiments that you've done, studies that you've conducted today.

One of the first ones that I'm really keen to talk about is this idea of what's better for creativity, an individual working alone or groups working together?

Jack Goncalo: Well, that's an interesting question. So I think that working alone is actually really helpful at the beginning stages because there are a lot of problems when you form a group too early. People haven't had a chance to really think and reflect on the problem itself.

But also, there are problems with the interaction. So when you're in a face to face group, there is a problem with people talking over each other. I have to wait for my turn to speak and then in doing so, I can forget what I was going to say. So there are conversational bottlenecks that prevent people from being creative.

There's also this problem of what brainstorming researchers call evaluation apprehension. And that's just simply I want to be liked and accepted and so I'm worried that if I share ideas that are too creative, they will be criticized. And so to fit in, I start suggesting really boring ideas.

And so, I think that period of working alone can really help address these issues. But I think at some point then it's useful to come together as a group and actually have a discussion.

Nick Skillicorn: And what was that study you did around this or studies?

Jack Goncalo: So, we actually looked at face to face groups and we found that the individualistic groups were more creative than their collectivistic counterparts. And by individualism, I mean a shared norm or value in which people feel free to stand out to be different to assert their uniqueness, to engage in conflicts if the group is pressing them to accept positions that they don't really believe.

And this is in contrast to collectivism, in which it's basically the opposite. The emphasis is on fitting in, maintaining harmony, looking for things that we share in common, and so forth.

And what really got us started on that particular project is our sense that management is really swung the pendulum too far in the direction of collectivism. And if you look at all the research that has been done, it's like it paints the picture of collectivism as this sort of panacea in which conflicts are avoided and we're in harmony and we like each other and we identify with the group.

But what we found is that when it comes to creativity, collectivism really stamps out that sense of uniqueness, that creative spark that you need to share ideas.

Nick Skillicorn: It's like the concept of design by committee. It just becomes the lowest common denominator that offends the fewest possible people.

Jack Goncalo: Yeah, yeah. That's consistent with a lot of the videotape. We actually tape the – in fact, even the current terminology now, what we did back there, it was really tapes, taped these conversations actually happening. And in the collectivistic groups, there were like – someone would share an idea and they would say – someone would say, "It's a great idea. I

have one just like it." And there was a sense of liking and enjoyment that came out of that conversation.

In the individualistic groups, it was more like I share an idea and you say, "Well, I have one better. Let me show you." And the thing is, that was kind of unpleasant for people. But it got the group diverging in different directions. And so, that was really critical.

And so if you ask people, "Who did you enjoy working with? Who do you want to work with again?" It was the collectivists. They reported liking each other more and want to repeat interaction.

The individualists didn't like each other and they didn't even think they were particularly creative but their output was more creative.

And so, it's the sort of tension between being liked and having harmony and getting everyone to fit in versus having conflicts, allowing the eccentrics and slightly unhinged people to have a go at it in a sort of less constraint and it's messier but it's more creative. And so that was really the tension that got us started there.

Nick Skillicorn: How can company actually take this concept though? And are there any things like the way you start the sessions and the way you provoke people to approach challenges in a specific way that's going to either make them more creative or actually less creative?

Jack Goncalo: I think that if we were translating this into an organization setting, I think that you really have to build, if you want creativity, this sense of individualism into the culture in a deep way. So you have to select people who were relatively more competitive and interested in standing out. And then when they do those things, you have to allow it and encourage it and have some incentives built in to promote it.

And I think it's also important that there are sanctions to make the culture strong. There are sanctions to really punish people who don't comply with that expectation. So if you're someone who wanders into the group and you don't fit and you're looking for everyone to just go along and not argue and not debate and not really stand out then you'll be identified and weeded out very quickly.

And so, I have another study which we actually showed that you can actually get uncreative people to conform to an individualistic culture. And in doing so, you make them more creative than if you were just to left them alone.

And so really, culture is really a tool that you can use to leverage creative potential in a real way and make relatively uncreative people more creative than they would have been had you not really engineered that situation.

Nick Skillicorn: The ultimate question then is how? What are the triggers that you found that make that change?

Jack Goncalo: It has been very simple. We actually had people fill out a questionnaire to get them thinking more individualistically, think about what makes you different from other people, think about why it's good to stand out.

And in the other condition, we did the opposite. But even those simple prompts were enough to get to really change behavior for the duration of that interaction.

Another example, we got people to endorse an equity norm. Meaning that some people are going to get more money depending on what their contribution to the group is. And so we have them sit around and discuss why an equity norm is fair and endorse it. And in the subsequent interaction, we found that there were more individualistic, more competitive. They cut each off more in conversation in kind of a rude way but their output was way higher and not only more ideas but more creative ideas.

And so again, this sort of speaks this tension between having things be harmonious versus being creative. But I think it's actually quite easy to do if you have a small face-to-face group to get people thinking about direction.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. I'm sure there must be some sweet spot where you don't want a room full of assholes who are only out for their own interests. And you also don't want a room full of wallflowers who are just trying to please everyone else.

So what do you know about getting the right balance of people?

Jack Goncalo: Yeah, that's interesting. Actually consider that question in the context of narcissism, which is it's a personality trait that sounds exactly like what it is. It's people who are self-aggrandizing, self-absorbed, people who expect more in return for their contributions than they deserve.

In the context of the university, there was interesting study that I'm showing that the more narcissistic a student, the more likely they were to complain about their grade because they just think that everything they do is so great. They also tend to be orange guys. Trump jokes, sorry.

Nick Skillicorn: I mean choose the wrong t-shirts.

Jack Goncalo: Right. Narcissists wear orange. But the thing with narcissism, if you look at the literature, they're really a pain in a very negative way. Narcissism is something that is not a desirable trait and nor would self-describe that way, right? But we actually found some benefits when it comes to creativity.

So we looked at intact groups working on project over a 15-week period and we were able to give them a test that tapped into how narcissistic each individual was and we found that the most creative groups were groups that have roughly half the group who were on the more narcissistic end of the continuum. And the groups with no narcissists at all were very uncreative possibly because no one was willing to put themselves out there to do all the sort of individualistic things like, "Let's do something unique. Let's stand out."

On the other end of it though, there were groups in which everyone was narcissistic and they were not creative either because their process sort of broke down. They were delayed in making strategic decisions. They couldn't agree on what idea to pursue. They put off meetings. They had destructive kinds of emotion-based conflicts.

And so, there really is a happy medium, at least I think that's what the narcissism data would suggest, that you have to have a mix and match of different kinds of people.

Nick Skillicorn: So it makes it some narcissists are some people who are more self-involved and some people who are more who want to get involved.

Jack Goncalo: Yeah. So the composition matters. There's another great work done by Ella Miron-Spektor. She is a scholar of Israel. And she has done some really nice work on the composition of a group being conducive for creativity. And she found that it's a mix of creative people, of attention people who are very attentive to detail, and people who are conforming.

And you get that mix together and you have someone with the ideas, someone to critique whether or not they're feasible, and someone to play the good role and sort of ties things together and keeps the process moving.

And so, composition is a really interesting window into this. Yeah.

Nick Skillicorn: I know that you've also done some other work which is a bit let's say after the ideas have been generated, how we actually figure out whether or not they are decent ideas.

Jack Goncalo: Evaluate.

Nick Skillicorn: Evaluate ideas and figure out what makes better ideas in the first place.

Jack Goncalo: I was first interested in idea evaluation in the context of individualism. So the stuff I already talked about. We got incredible pushback from critiques who were saying that, "Well, maybe you got these individuals to groups to generate a lot of ideas. But when it comes to the stage of picking something, it's all going to break down because they can't agree."

And so we said, "Fine. We'll go collect the data." If that were true, it would be interesting too. But let's see what happens. And we actually found that didn't occur. What ended up happening was that each individualist wanted some aspect of their idea to be present in the final product because you want to stand out and to be unique and you want to feel as though you are recognized for your work.

And what ended up happening was this process in which to compromise, they ended up creating a final idea that was a mix of everyone's best ideas and they made really interesting combinations.

And what happened with the collectivistic group is they sort of reached premature closure. They were like, "Well, you had a great idea. OK. Well, I'm not going to – I don't want to argue that your idea wasn't good because then you might not like me," kind of thing. And so, they ended up just sort of convening, they're reaching a compromise quickly on an idea that wasn't very good.

And again, at the end, they all like each other because they didn't have uncomfortable conversations about, "Well, you think your idea was good. I don't it was. I think mine should be the one." But it's that kind of debate that helps. And so, that's one aspect of it.

Nick Skillicorn: What about when you're actually trying to figure out what makes an idea creative or what makes one idea better than another?

Jack Goncalo: Yeah. So I don't have a – you asked me, how do you pick? Unfortunately, I'm not at the stage where I can tell you how that actually happens. We're at the stage of just telling you – I can tell you that we're really bad at it, phenomenally bad at recognizing good ideas. And I think that's an important point to make because so much of the research has been around let's just come up with good ideas because once they're on the table, we'll just pick one and it will be easy. But in fact, people are really bad.

So back to narcissism, we also looked at narcissism in the context of idea evaluation. And we predicted that because narcissists are so self-aggrandizing and so self-absorbed and so confident that that confidence will be quoted as charisma by people who are evaluating their ideas.

And in the absence of really strict criteria, people would say, "Well, you believe so much in your idea. It might be good." There's really passion and authenticity in everything. And so, we actually set up an experiment in which we brought people into the lab and we randomly assign them to either play the role of an evaluator or an idea pitcher. And we asked the idea pitchers to come up with a new movie idea, write the idea down, and then develop a pitch that they were going to go into the next room and pitch to the evaluator and get them to think their idea is good.

And so we did that. And then evaluators were like, "We made notes and read." And what we found was that the more narcissistic the pitcher was, the more the evaluator was likely to say things like, "This is a creative idea. This is a high quality idea. I would fund this idea. I would pay a ticket to go see this idea."

The interesting thing though is that when we quoted the ideas for actual content, they were terrible. I mean across the board, either narcissistic or not. They were not good.

So what really drove it was this sort of over confidence. So I think that's one stream of research that has been reinvigorated by the recent events leading up to the election. They were taken in by a narcissist who are not really very good, don't really have any particular talent, but they believe they do and they are so confident in the way they represent themselves that we're in by it. And so, here we are.

Nick Skillicorn: One thing the last time we talked which really fascinated me and I'd like to touch on now again is you've also done some research on other effects of creativity on people with some pretty interesting experiments.

Jack Goncalo: Yeah. So I was interested in sort of turning the tables a little bit in the sense that a lot of the work that has been done on creativity has been looking at to students to create an output. So what do you do to get creative ideas to come out?

And I was interested in somewhat different perspective looking at what the consequences are for engaging in the creative process and does it change the way you think? Is there an experience that has other kinds of effects? And so, could it be that engaging in creative work has some kind of psychological benefits?

And one of the reasons I was interested in this is that I was surfing the web instead of working that I should have been, and I often do this. I'm looking at I think it was an advice columnist is what I ran across. A depressed person wrote in asking what they could do to overcome this sense of malaise that they have. And the advice from the columnist was to get a creative outlet. Go paint. Go dance. Go do something. And that will be something that will help you overcome this sort of negative psychological state.

So I thought, "Wow! That's really interesting." It turns out, there's no evidence to suggest that it's actually true. I guess if you're an advice columnist, you don't have to be troubled with evidence. But I found it an interesting idea.

And so, we actually went to test this and we found that there are actually some psychological benefits.

Nick Skillicorn: And that what experiment did you run? What did you actually find?

Jack Goncalo: Yes. So we looked at a particular psychological burden which is the burden of keeping a big secret. And so, psychologists have shown that people who keep secrets literally feel weighted down. Keeping a secret is not just metaphorically burdensome but it actually is experienced as physically burdensome.

And if you – they have actually had some really clever ways of getting how to assess the level of burden. So for example, if I had you estimate how steep a staircase was you would estimate it to be much steeper if you were keeping a secret because you will feel burdened and weighted down.

If I ask you to help me carry some heavy books from one office to the next, you're more likely to volunteer if you're not carrying a secret because you don't feel that sense of being weighted down.

So there are all kinds of interesting psychological and behavioral consequences of keeping a secret. And so what we suspected and we did an experiment to test this is that if you give people the opportunity to be creative, people who are keeping a big secret will experience that and it's a liberating experience.

So if tell you to be creative, it means that I get to think outside the box. I get to consider ideas that are beyond normal constraints. I get to really explore between ideas and across categories and all these things. And just the act of being creative is in and of itself something that our subjects reported actually felt liberating to them.

And when we put them in a position where, "OK, you've kept a secret but I've given you a creative outlet. Are you going to volunteer to help me carry those books from one room to the next?" The people who have that creative experience were more willing to volunteer and be helpful and cooperative because they were – they had the burden lifted. And they were also more accurate in terms of their estimates of how far things were, how steep things were.

And so, there was this real sense not just psychologically but behaviourally. But their burden was lifted as a result of doing creative work. And so, I think there should be more of an emphasis on creative work itself and something that has value that is separate from the output that we normally think of like ideas and/or by-products of being able to be creative that can be beneficial even if we don't even care about ideas. And so, I think that was one takeaway from that research.

Nick Skillicorn: I think that's very important for a lot of people to realize that the act of being creativity as you say isn't just about the outputs. It's not about the list of ideas for the business or the new column or the new musical sequence or the new code that has been generated. There is individualistic and personal benefit to going through creative exercises as well.

Jack Goncalo: Yes. It's therapeutic I guess, which get to the meaning of why do we do what we do.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah.

Jack Goncalo: Being creative has meaning aside from whatever the measurable output is.

Nick Skillicorn: Dr. Jack Goncalo, what are you working on at the moment then? So what sort of experiments are coming up that we might find interesting?

Jack Goncalo: So at the moment, I'm working on something related to idea evaluation, further along with a theme of we're really bad at it. And we have some data showing that if you change these really incidental cues that have nothing to do with the idea itself, you can get people to endorse ideas that really aren't very good.

So for example, we've shown that the same idea pitched by someone from the Midwest is viewed as less creative than someone from either coasts. Unfortunately for me, I just moved to Midwest. My career is over.

Another example, an idea pitched by someone who is politically independent is viewed as more creative than someone who is either a Democrat or a Republican.

Another finding. Someone who – an idea pitched by someone who reports being Buddhist is more creative than either any of the other monotheistic or mainstream – more mainstream religions.

And we suspect that it's just giving off cues of being unconventional can signal to people that you're creative even if your ideas really aren't very good. So this is sort of more along the lines of self-presentation.

And I guess if you tie it all together, a narcissistic Buddhist from New York who is politically independent is going to have a big advantage. So anyway, I think we can sort of be a little bit playful about how we combine these things.

But the main thing for me why I find is research interesting is that it's an issue of fairness for me because not all ideas can be pursued to fruition. And some people are going to get funding and others aren't. And I think there should be a better process, a deliberative process of evaluation. And what we're showing is that people are just phenomenally terrible at it.

So one thing I forgot, having crazy hair makes you seem – your ideas seem more creative than having a conventional hairstyle. So even at that level, it's just shockingly superficial. And I believe that if that process is allowed to unfold in an organizational setting then it's very unfair. And I do believe things at that level of stupidity do happen in the real world.

Nick Skillicorn: It's something I haven't considered before but it's an interesting concept to think that you really need to be able to separate the quality of the idea itself from the person who generated it.

Jack Goncalo: Right.

Nick Skillicorn: As you were saying, there seems to be some evidence to suggest that there's this bias. And I'm not sure which of the biases it is. Perhaps you do. But there's this bias of perception that because the external cues are suggesting creativity that the output itself is naturally better than someone else's.

Jack Goncalo: Right. But people would come up with creative ideas, right? And so, if you fit the profile. And many, it's just basic stereotyping. It's just that we know a lot about stereotypes in regards to sex and race and other things. But when it comes to creative people, and we know very well about what those stereotypes include and how they drive evaluation. And so I think that there's a lot of work to do to sort of flesh out the content of the stereotype.

Nick Skillicorn: Yeah. And just to keep an eye out for that.

Jack Goncalo: Yeah. Another one I'll mention too if we time is I'm looking at religion and creativity. And I have a series of studies showing that when believers think about God, they are less creative than when they think about other things.

And so I think that this is also interesting in the context of organizations like the Hubby Lobby who put a lot of emphasis on religion and their core values. And there's sort of –

there's a lot of variation on the extent to which organizations make God salient. And there may be negative consequences when it comes to creativity and innovation.

Nick Skillicorn: Interesting. Are there any other studies? Are there any other pieces of research by other academic which you think are really important that people are aware of? Maybe ones that haven't been published yet or just ones you're excited about.

Jack Goncalo: Yeah. So I mentioned Ella's work which is really interesting. There's another – there's an assistant professor here at Illinois and he does really fascinating work. He is working in marketing. And so, a lot of management people are not very aware of his work but I think it's very interesting and he has done things like showing how the color of a room impacts your creativity. And he shows that people are more creative in blue environments than in other kinds of colors and I thought that was a really clever paper.

And he has done another one looking at how ambient noise influences your creativity. And he did a really great study showing that when you're working at a café, you're more creative and it's because of the ambient noise that's occurring around you. So I think he is really doing interesting stuff on how the environment impacts creativity. And I think that's part of the new way of research that's looking more closely at that.

Nick Skillicorn: Nice. We're unfortunately coming up to the end of the summit – at the end of the interview. But one thing I wanted to ask you is if you've got one tip for people on something that can really enhance their creativity or an actionable piece of insight from your research, what would you recommend that people try out?

Jack Goncalo: Well, I think it would be for people who are managing groups that are attempting to be creative that creativity is messy and that it requires people to do all kinds of unpredictable things to stand out, to be different, to be unique, to question things, to engage in conflict. And I would say, allow that to happen and encourage it even though it's scary because you don't fully control the entire process. But that's what we have found links to creativity.

And I think that the people in charge have the most difficult time allowing those things to happen. So I guess that would be my piece of advice on that.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. Dr. Goncalo, it has been wonderful having you here. We're going to have links down to your profile below the video. Is there anything else you want to highlight as far as the ways that people can get in contact with you?

Jack Goncalo: My email address is there so I'm happy to respond to email.

Nick Skillicorn: Perfect. It has been wonderful having you and I look forward to speaking again with you soon.

Jack Goncalo: It was a fun talk.

Nick Skillicorn: Yes.