

Loving and Letting Go: Bounded Attachment in Creative Work

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Abstract : One of the fundamental tensions of creative work is between the need to be passionate and persistent in advancing novel and risky ideas and the need to be flexible, revising, or even abandoning ideas in favor of others. The tension becomes fraught in part because of the attachment that creators have toward their ideas. Idea attachment is defined here as a multifaceted concept referring to affection, passion, and connection toward a target—in this case, one's projects or ideas. Yet feeling attached can make creators resistant to feedback, making them less flexible and leading them to escalate commitment. Despite a growing understanding of how attachment develops and evolves in response to project changes, feedback, and creative jolts, we still know relatively little about the organizational dynamics that may shape idea attachment. Through a qualitative, inductive study of early-stage R&D scientists in the pharmaceutical industry, this research finds that scientists develop bounded attachment, a mindset that limits emotional attachment to ideas while still fostering engagement in idea development. This research develops a process model of how bounded attachment is developed and enacted across three stages of the creative process, idea generation, idea evaluation, and outcome assessment, as well as the role that organizational practices and professional identity play in shaping this process: these collective practices provided structures to ensure ideas were evaluated in a rational (i.e. non-emotional way) while also providing socioemotional support in the face of setbacks. Together, this process led to continued creative engagement across ideas in a portfolio and helped scientists construct a sense of meaningful work despite a high likelihood (and frequency) of failure.

Keywords : creativity, innovation, organizational practices, qualitative, attachment

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