



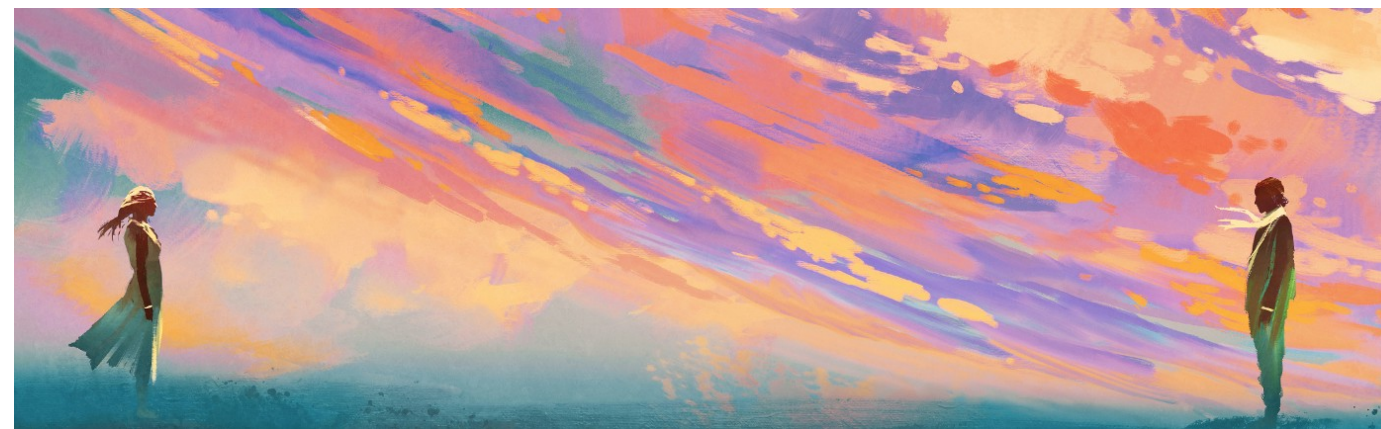
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# How Strangers Unlock Our Creativity

Our networks are full of friends, family, and people just like us, and that’s killing our creativity. Professor John Daly explains why.



## Want to be more creative? Start by saying “hi” to a stranger.

The benefits of having longstanding, deep connections — both personally and professionally — are obvious: People who care can better offer understanding, trust, and support.

But if we want to have more groundbreaking ideas, it’s important to interact with people we don’t already know well, says John Daly, professor of Management at the McCombs School of Business and Liddell Centennial Professor of Communication. Daly differentiates between “strong ties” with people we see routinely or know intimately, such as family, friends, and immediate coworkers,

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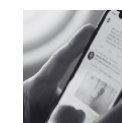


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and “weak ties” with people we know more vaguely, such as loose acquaintances or people we pass in the office hallway.

While it’s more comfortable to interact within our established networks, they also tend to be comprised of people who are like us, reinforcing our existing approach to life. People whom we don’t yet know, however, may offer an untapped source of differing values, world views, and ideas.

Establishing these weak ties can benefit individuals and companies looking to challenge the status quo.

“Innovations often happen when you combine two or more things in unexpected ways. Within organizations, weak links offer a variety of backgrounds and interests. When you have a diverse group of people working on something, magic often happens because each person brings a different perspective and experience to the table.” — John Daly

For those who want to cultivate weak ties, Daly recommends taking an attitude of curiosity toward the wider world. “Be interested. Open yourself to exploring new things and meeting new people,” he says.



Daly suggests some ways to begin:

- Chat with the neighbor down the hall
- Take classes where you don't know anyone
- Get to know your classmates
- Take part in activities that seem just slightly out of your comfort zone

As proof of the benefits of trying new things, consider a story shared by Apple Inc. co-founder Steve Jobs at the 2005 commencement ceremony for Stanford University. Jobs dropped out of Reed College in the 1970s but continued to take classes based on his own interests rather than to fulfill school requirements.

One of those classes was calligraphy. A decade later, the lessons from that class made their mark.

“If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows just copied the Mac, it’s likely that no personal computer would have them.” — Steve Jobs

Because creativity and innovation flourish when we encounter something new, Daly recommends that companies encourage cross-functional teams, allow employees to take brief internal sabbaticals with other work units, allow more people to participate in meetings, and use social media to get people sharing interesting tidbits — either about the company or themselves.

As he writes in his book, “Advocacy: Championing Ideas and Influencing Others,” organizations that integrate various work specialties (or weak ties) are more innovative and creative than firms that keep specialized workers isolated from one another. Moreover, innovative organizations actively seek out unfamiliar ideas by sending employees to conferences around the globe, bringing in academic or industry experts to introduce new ideas, and studying what successful companies are doing well.

For anyone who wants to build weak ties but is hesitant to strike up a conversation with a stranger, Daly recommends taking some steps ahead of time.

“Figure out some interesting things you might talk about with them, and learn to ask good open-ended questions to get them talking. People love to talk about themselves,” he says.

**Then take a deep breath — and introduce yourself.**





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