URL: https://ecorner.stanford.edu/?post_type=podcast&p=57505

You don't need as many ideas as you think you do. In this episode, Stanford Professor Bob Sutton and Henning Piezunka, assistant professor at the European Institute of Business Administration (INSEAD), debunk brainstorming myths and talk about the importance of saving time and energy. Piezunka explains that rejecting ideas is a delicate art that can actually deepen relationships—and that saying "no" is much better than saying nothing.

Transcript

- You see, I think one of the mistakes we make is that we take the numbers of ideas as an indicator of creativity.. - Right, right, right.. - And very often, all you need is to have one good idea.. (piano flourish and static) - Friction (static crackles) is huge psychological burden.. (static crackles) - Without friction, we would not have fire and we would not have sparks.. - (static crackles) I gotta get a knife.. (Bob laughs) I gotta hide it.. (static crackles) (upbeat music) - And I end up spending a lot of time ruminating.. (static crackles) (upbeat music) - Hi, I'm Bob Sutton.. I'm an organizational psychologist and Stanford professor..

And this is the FRICTION podcast.. (upbeat chill jazz) On today's episode, we're joined by Henning Piezunka.. Henning is an assistant professor at INSEAD in France and and alumni of Stanford's Department of Management Science and Engineering.. Henning is a prolific and very sharp researcher.. We invited him to the podcast because his research challenges the way many of us think about brainstorming, and shows how fewer ideas can actually help organizations focus to go faster and to go farther.. (upbeat urban jazz) When you think of friction, organizational friction, what words come to mind, how would you define it? - The first word which comes to mind is organizational waste.. - Ooh! - Right, how much time and effort, kind of, people in organizations devote to things that doesn't help them or the organization in any way.. So one example of organizational waste that I've observed is that sometimes you have these cat fights within organizations - Uh-huh.. - Right, so, sometimes this can be healthy competition but it can actually turn into conflict, where people start sabotaging each other, hindering one another and hindering the organization.. - So, let's talk about organizational waste and, do you wanna talk about your Formula One paper? That's like a fascinating paper! - So, the paper basically tries to examine why do you sometimes see these collisions? And at first sight you might think of these collisions between Formula One drivers, right, when two Formula One cars hit one another, simply as some kind of random event, or as an accident or twos are just kind of very close in space..

And we had a hunch, that there might actually be some systematic behind those patterns.. And the hunch we had, built on a book by the late Roger Gould, a Chicago sociologist.. And the idea was that you have two actors which are status ambiguous.. So it's unclear who of the two has higher status.. - Ah! - And that's a very uncomfortable state to be in, right? - Sort of like you got two cats fighting for dominance.. - Right, I like your cat analogy.. The favorite analogy we use is people running to the same bathroom.. (Bob laughs hysterically) So if you actually have, you see, if I and the dean run to the same bathroom, it's very clear who's gonna defer to whom, right? I let the dean go to the bathroom first.. However, if the status is a little bit unclear, right? Me and another assistant professor running to the same bathroom, we might just collide, right? - So you looked at collisions that were bad enough that people couldn't finish, right? These weren't just little bumps.. - So we only looked at race-ending collisions..

The criterion we used was, that at least one car of the two involved in the collision, does not finish the race.. So this must have a sufficient power, where it's actually dangerous for the people and the material involved.. So what we found is, if two drivers are status ambiguous, or they are structural equivalent, that means they have beaten the same kind of people and they have been beaten by the same kind of people, then they have a higher tendency to collide with one another.. So these drivers, you can actually isolate and see they are more likely to collide with one another.. - So you can kind of see why they do it, but it's bad for everybody involved, right? Everybody suffers.. - It's bad for the two drivers; it's bad for everyone involved..

It's horrible for the health of the drivers, material gets destroyed.. Yeah, thinking about organizational waste, there you have it.. - In this situation it honestly seems especially stupid (laughing).. I mean it's really clearly stupid, because you're destroying hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of equipment; you're getting rid of the opportunity to get an incentive for winning..

You could lose your sponsor.. Why do they do it anyway? - Well you see actually, I think the drivers in that moment are incredibly involved, and it really bothers them, it really bothers them to give in to somebody where the status is already not clear and where they're competing for status.. You just don't want to give in in such a situation.. - So you just smash into him and you just can't help yourself.. - And then there can be a little bit, almost like a misunderstanding or just an unwillingness to give up, right? So think back to the bathroom example.. We are running to the bathroom; it's not as if I want to run into you, but I might just not be willing to give up.. - So, I mean from an organizational friction standpoint and thinking about it in more subtle ways, what it reminds me of, although it's so much more spectacular, because you have a collision and it's exciting, but in organizations a lot of times you have situations where units that actually need to cooperate, you'll have people who build little fiefdoms and compete against one other.. So, let's talk about how you would get rid of friction.. So let's start with the Formula One.. So if you wanted to change the incentives or the design to get rid of the waste, do you have any ideas how you might change things? - So, it turns out if you actually make clear to people that something bigger is on the line, then they are less focused on these kind of conflicts..

The other thing you can do is that you actually kind of point people to other ways how they are different, so more similar actors who are more similar in terms of age, are more inclined to run into these conflicts.. The moment you are competing, you should be aware, "Oh, I am inclined to be very aggressive, "as well as the people around me "are very inclined to be very aggressive." - So you're in a situation where you realize it's going to bring out bad behavior, essentially.. - Right, so you basically anticipate it.. - Okay well that's interesting.. Because from a leadership standpoint, to me you're implying that there's two different things you can do: one is you can emphasize the common goal and how we're all in it together and all that sort of stuff, so that's sort of the "Kumbayah," but the other thing they're doing, since leaders have authority, and I'd imagine some regulatory agencies have authority in racing, is that they are firing and giving warnings and demotions to people who engage in destructive internal competition.. - So you see, I'm not sure if I fully agree with the "Kumbayah" line, because the fact that it's just kind of, that you say like "Kumbayah," does not mean that suddenly everybody is "Kumbayah." - Right.. - In a funny way it can almost mean the opposite.. If you say like, "Listen, the house is really burning; "this is not the time to have status fights," then the inclination is much more to forgo those fights.. Because if you feel that the life of the company or the survival of the company is on the line, then it would be terribly inappropriate to suddenly kind of have status fights.. - So you find a common enemy: outgroup threat breeds ingroup solidarity..

So that's a good kind of "Kumbayah." Because we're all going to die if we don't get together and fight.. - Right.. (contemporary chill jazz) - So, Henning is here visiting Stanford and actually he's going to present this paper to a group of scholars tomorrow, right? - That's correct, yeah.. So the paper has a really interesting kind of history of emergence.. I had written one paper on crowdsourcing, where we discussed why do some organizations succeed in raising ideas, and why do most organizations fail.. And then we had written up a followup paper in if you succeed in accumulating ideas, which one you should select.. And on a sunny day on the Stanford campus, I actually kind of saw David Kelly-- - Of IDEO fame, and d.school fame.. - Right; sitting there munching his salad.. And I thought, this is my once in a lifetime chance to talk with David Kelly about my research.. (Bob laughs) So I directly went to David Kelly and tell him about these two papers and say like, "David, I hope I don't disturb you; "Here are two papers I've written, "one about how you raise ideas "and one how you select ideas." And in a very kind way, David basically said, "You know Henning, I know this fairly well; "I know how to raise ideas and I know how to select ideas..

"So I'm not particularly interested." (Bob laughs) So I go to David and say like, "Okay, what are you interested in?" - What can I learn from you (laughing)? - Right; and David said, "I'm really interested in how you reject ideas." Because the way he pointed out, he had every day 10 people coming to him with very good ideas.. And he needed to tell nine people no.. But he needed to have the same people come back the next day with another set of good ideas.. - He's terrible at saying no too, so this is really interesting.. - And there was my question, right? How do you deal with ideas that you do not respond to? You will enjoy, there's another encounter I had with, I talked with Jim March about the paper.. - Uh-huh; Jim March is a retired professor on campus, possibly the most famous living organizational theorist.. - And Jim Marsh told me this wonderful anecdote he experienced with his son.. So he was looking at a cabin fire together with his son, and his son said the following: "Look Dad, the fire is so beautiful; "I wonder how it tastes." (Bob laughs) And you see, this is of course, I have a nine-month-old son sitting at home and this is of course an extremely scary idea.. - Yeah they will taste a fire, that's true (laughs).. - But the idea is, at first it's kind of an interesting idea, right? You see like, how would fire actually taste? And so the challenge the way Jim described it was that he said like, "You know, I don't want you to do that idea, "but I want you to have more of those kind of ideas." And so I got very interested in this problem, how can you say no to an idea, but actually foster the creativity and maintain the relationship with an individual? - The Jim March fire one's really a classic idea to reject because it's a terrible idea but it might lead to insights that are great..

- Right.. - Like, I don't know, smoke-flavored food, barbecue (laughs).. - Yeah but you see how this is how it often starts; where you start off with one idea which might be a little bit weird, but if you tuned it a little bit, right? But so, you see, the precondition for that is that you keep the conversation going, and most conversations which start, fail initially, right? If a date fails, a second date doesn't happen.. - Right, right.. - So you need to have a way, even if the first conversation or the first

interaction did not go the way you had hoped for, that you keep on going in some way.. - So, with that in mind, what are some of your main findings about how to keep such a system going? - So, the problem is what most managers do is they don't say anything.. Because they don't want to offend anyone and they want to keep the option open to work on the idea at some point.. So they get these ideas and basically just nod and don't do anything.. In dating you call this ghosting, right? If however you do reject, it has a very positive effect on people's tendency to submit more ideas.. Because what a rejection does, even if a rejection is just purely no, you don't even give an explanation, all you say like, no I'm not going to do it..

It sends a signal to the person who has submitted the ideas that you actually have listened to the ideas and that you care.. Of course, if you take the time to explain why you don't do it, the effect is even bigger.. The person is even more likely, because you see, if you take the time to explain somebody why you don't work on an idea, in that moment you really invest in the relationship.. Because you have already decided that you are not going to work on the idea.. So every second or minute you invest in this, you really devote to the relationship.. The effect which we found most surprising is if you reject somebody in the same linguistic style as that person has reached out to you, it has an enormous effect on the person's tendency to continue to interact with you.. - So your model is, you at least say no, and an even better one would be to have a discussion about why? - The key thing you need to do, is you need to form a relationship.. You maintain that interaction despite saying no to the idea.. (upbeat chill jazz) The other big thing we found in terms of, kind of friction and organizational waste, is that most organizations, at least among those who succeed, actually end up raising way too many ideas.. So the idea is that they say, "Hey we want to be creative, so we are going "to generate an enormous amount of ideas." So you can see this in crowdsourcing but you can also do this in brainstorming and so on, right? Very often what organizations try to do, is they maximize the number of ideas which they get in the beginning..

And what organizations, what we've found, tend to neglect, is that once all these ideas are generated, they actually need to select from those ideas.. - Right.. - So they're sitting on all these ideas which they've generated, and then they run out of capacity in the follow-up selection stage.. Suddenly you don't have enough time to really carefully consider each of those ideas, and what then happens is that you then work on those ideas which you basically already know, which are very familiar to you.. So, the very fact that you create a lot of ideas narrows your attention the moment you need to select those ideas; you run out of cognitive capacity-- - And so you get tired and you go to what the tried and true is.. So how do you navigate around that dilemma? - So, a very simple way is you simply generate less ideas.. Rather, kind of in investing times and saying like, "Hey let's have a thousand ideas," you could just say, "Okay we're just going to want to have 10 or 100 ideas." So there's no need to have thousands of ideas.. - So just from in the old days watching product development, sometimes some of the coolest teams did the worst work because they would just get, I remember one that they did a bunch of laptop prototypes for a famous computer maker, and it was so cool because they did, at the IDEO Monday morning meeting they had 20 prototypes of every crazy kind of laptop.. But they put so much energy into it that they ran out of money and no laptop ever got developed by the company! (laughing) Because they just bombarded them with too many different choices.. - You see, I think one of the mistakes we make is that we take the numbers of ideas as an indicator of creativity..

- Right, right, right.. - And that is something you really don't want to do.. Bizarrely what can happen is that having more ideas can actually make you less creative.. Very often all you need is to have one good idea.. - Well so this is actually heresy if you look at research on the effectiveness of brainstorming groups; the main thing that psychologists use is the number of ideas that the groups develop.. So you're taking down one of my favorite bad academic literatures, so thank you.. - Right, you have this beautiful book, Weird Ideas That Work.. But just getting a weird idea is not enough.. - No it is not enough.. - You actually need to look at this weird idea, and say, "Okay, why and how could this weird idea work?" But the reason why most weird ideas get missed is exactly because they are weird, right? So you need to take the necessary time for that..

- I love this example, because one of the things that we think a lot about, friction, when you hit the brakes, and when you hit the gas, and what you're saying is at least for most companies, that there's a certain percentage, let's just make up 10%, that if they want to hedge their bets and come up with something strange so they don't get disrupted, to use that horrible word, by a competitor, and if you're going to do that, you're going to have to realize you're going to see things that upset you, things that take longer to develop.. And it is interesting, so one of my friends and kind of a hero is a woman named Claudia Kotchka, she led the design thinking movement at Procter & Gamble.. And they figured out something about their Stage-Gate System, at Procter & Gamble, which was that if something was new and creative, it would get killed or destroyed by the Stage-Gate System because it was too weird.. And if it was incremental it would just shoot right through.. And the famous one is Crest White Strips, which is now a huge product.. It took something like five or six years to get through the system because it was too weird.. And to her point, they kind of figured out that they needed a different system for things that weren't incremental products, things that were a fundamental change in some product line.. (relaxed contemporary jazz) If you had a magic wand and you could do one thing that every organization, to get them to slow down, to make something harder to do, what would it be? - I think it should be way harder to start certain things.. - Ooh! For example? - We're always talking about how do you kind of, lower entry barriers, but you see the problem is really not that not enough stuff gets started; the problem is that not enough stuff gets finished.. (Bob laughs) Right? I almost think there might be like an opposite effect; imagine you would say like, we kind of increase the price a little bit for starting stuff, then you would be much more careful about starting stuff and then you say like "I put a certain commitment down here to start this; "now I'm going to think that through." You see I'm not saying there should not be like, of course you need to be able to resolve such a commitment and stuff like this, but I think sometimes increasing the cost of starting stuff actually makes you focus much more..

- I like that; that's a great constraint.. - You see, Kathleen Eisenhardt, I remember she was at an academic conference and she said to the audience, "Everybody in this room "has the talent to start a scientific paper." (Bob laughs) "I'm not sure how many are able to finish one," right? - That's tough love, man! (laughing) - But I always loved this saying, because it makes very evident that the very first stage of a process is the easy one.. Before I entered academia I had a small web design company, and we always differentiated work into are you actually doing real work, or are you just doing work which feels good but will actually require a lot of follow up on? - (laughing) Right, right, right.. - And you see, we had all these business development managers who would be like, "Oh I'm kind of filling up "the first part of the sales funnel," and like, "Okay, who's going to see those leads "through the whole funnel?" "Oh yeah, probably no one." "Okay, then please stop working on "the first part of the funnel," right? If nobody takes the football and kind of leads this the whole way through, then there's no point actually in generating a lot of leads in the beginning.. - So a lot of what we're talking about is essentially symbolic entertaining activity that leads to nothing.. Which is really fun in the short term, and in the long term leaves everybody discouraged and depressed and actually broke, too.. - True.. - Is that dark enough? (laughing) (upbeat urban chill) Henning, it's been a delight to have you; boy have you got some crazy ideas! And they're evidence-based, so it's a delight.. And thank you so much.. - Thank you so much, Bob..

(contemporary urban chill) - I hope that you'll take two lessons from Henning's interview.. First, investing in relationships almost always pays off.. Second, saying no to an idea is better than saying nothing at all.. We may fear rejecting another person's idea in order to avoid conflict, but this fear is often counterproductive.. Communicating your reasons for saying no can build and strengthen relationships with both your customers and your employees.. (contemporary urban chill) Please spread the word about the FRICTION podcast.. Rate and review us on iTunes and share your favorite episodes with your colleagues, your family, and even your therapist.. On the next episode, we'll be joined by my friend and colleague, Kathy Eisenhardt.. Kathy is one of the leading researchers on organizational strategy, and Kathy is going to talk about how to reduce friction by adding and inventing simple rules.. And now, for the final tangent..

- An organization I've always been fascinated, and teach the corresponding case, is Walth.. Walth is a videogaming company, and the very idea is that it's basically an internal market where people have an enormous freedom which kind of projects they actually work on.. So everybody self-commits and can also resolve this commitment if they do not want to work on a project anymore.. And so what you basically end up having is like an internal marketplace of employees where people devote their time to the most promising project.. So it has a very nice effect if you think about it, the moment a project is not performing, it immediately kind of falls apart, just because nobody wants to work on it.. Whereas things which actually go really well automatically scale because you easily attract more people.. (midtempo urban chill) - We can't do this without you.. Tell us, what's driving you crazy and what are you doing to make life better in your organization for yourself and for the people that you work with? Please send us your friction stories, tips, and tricks.. We'd love to hear from you via Twitter @ECorner, or please send us an email at stvp-ecorner@stanford.edu.. (contemporary urban chill) The FRICTION podcast is a Stanford eCorner original series brought to you by Stanford Technology Ventures Program and Designing Organizational Change..

FRICTION is produced by Rachel Julkowski and Allie Rico.. Jake Smith and Stife Studios are our editor and audio engineers.. Susie Allen and Victoria Johnson are our writing and marketing team.. Danielle Stussey is our designer and digital products manager.. And I'm Bob Sutton.. Thanks for joining us.. This is the FRICTION podcast...