



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H00Z8G
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
SEPTEMBER 09, 2014

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In a past life, I used to be required to participate in quarterly sales meetings. These meetings followed a typical format: fly everyone in the company to an amazing destination, then lock them inside a hotel ballroom for 10 hours a day and force them to listen to speeches from sales leadership, as well as marketing, research, and legal departments (usually with a motivational speaker to close it all out). Try as they might, these meetings were boring. The real shame was that they were intended to rally troops and get the sales organization excited about new initiatives, as well as inspire them to think up new and better ways to increase sales in the field. The only saving grace: the late-night dinners. After 10 hours of being talked *at*, my colleagues and I would escape the hotel, find a local restaurant and talk to each other. Despite our best efforts, these dinner conversations were always about work – and good thing too. These chats were filled with new ideas for dealing with problem clients or increasing sales of new products. Late-night dinners became the source of the new and exciting our meetings were supposed to elicit.

Boredom at work (and meetings) is something nearly all of us feel at times, but admitting that boredom to coworkers or managers is likely something few of us have ever done. It turns out, however, that a certain level of boredom might actually *enhance* the creative quality of our work. That's the implications of two recently published papers focused on the link between feeling bored and getting creative.

In [the first paper](#), researchers [Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman](#), both at the University of Central Lancashire, explained the creativity-boosting power of boredom in two rounds of studies. In both rounds, participants were either assigned the boring task of copying numbers from a phone book or assigned to a control group, which skipped the phone book assignment. All participants were then asked to generate as many uses as they could for a pair of plastic cups. This is a common test of *divergent* thinking—a vital element for creative output that concerns one's ability to generate lots of

ideas. Mann and Cadman found that the participants who had intentionally led to boredom through the phone book task had generated significantly more uses for the pair of plastic cups.

Next, Mann and Cadman wanted to see what would happen when they *really* bored people out of their minds. So in a second round of their study, they created three groups—one control group, one phone-number-copying group, and a third group given the even duller task of simply reading the phone book. All three groups completed another task requiring creativity. In this case, the most bored group – the completely passive group of phone-book-readers – scored as the most creative, even out-scoring those assigned to the same phone book copying task from the first study. The findings suggest that boredom felt during passive activities, like reading reports or attending tedious meetings, heightens the “daydreaming effect” on creativity—the more passive the boredom, the more likely the daydreaming and the more creative you could be afterward.

In [another paper, this one from Karen Gasper and Brianna Middlewood](#) at Penn State University, founding a similar effect using a different mundane task and a different type of creativity test. In their study, Gasper and Middlewood assigned participants to watch a video clip designed to “prime” participants by eliciting feelings of relaxation, elation, distress, or boredom—depending on which video was watched. (Participants were told, however, that the clip was random.) They then had their subjects take what’s known as a remote associates test, where participants are given three seemingly unrelated words (for example: string, cottage, and goat) and asked to think of a fourth word that links the three (in this example: cheese). Remote associates tests are commonly used to measure *convergent* thinking, a different but complimentary element of the creative process that concerns one’s ability to figure out the single, correct idea for a situation.

Just as in the Mann and Cadman study, participants in the bored category of this study outperformed the participants in the other three categories. Gasper and Middlewood suggest that boredom boosts creativity because of *how* people prefer to alleviate it. Boredom, they suggest, motivates people to approach new and rewarding activities. In other words, an idle mind will seek a toy. (Anyone who has taken a long car ride with a young child has surely experienced some version of this phenomenon.)

Taken together, these studies suggest that the boredom so commonly felt at work could actually be leveraged to help us get our work done better...or at least get work that requires creativity done better. When we need to dream up new projects or programs (divergent thinking), perhaps we should start by spending some focused time on humdrum activities such as answering emails, making copies, or entering data. Afterward, as in the Mann and Cadman study, we may be better able to think up more (and more creative) possibilities to explore. Likewise, if we need to closely examine a problem and produce a concise, effective solution (convergent thinking), perhaps we should schedule that task after a [particularly lifeless staff meeting](#). By engaging in uninteresting activities before problem-solving ones, we may be able to elicit the type of thinking we need to find creative solutions.

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