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Is Creativity a Foreign Concept?

A brief synopsis of **Cultural Barriers and Mental Borders: Multicultural Learning Experiences Facilitate Creativity** (working paper, 2006) by William W. Maddux and Adam D. Galinsky

HUMAN RESOURCES

Is Creativity a Foreign Concept?

Multicultural experience tends to facilitate creative thinking and problem solving.

William W. Maddux, assistant professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD and Adam D. Galinsky, associate professor of management and organization at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, conducted four studies of students placed in situations requiring creative insights. The first two studies revealed that graduate students were more likely to find innovative solutions to tricky problems and negotiations if they had lived abroad for some time.

"It's not enough to go backpacking around Europe for a week or two," explains Galinsky. "You really need to immerse yourself in the culture to get this serendipitous boost in creativity." In fact, it took about six to 12 months of overseas living to get any benefit. Thereafter, a bigger boost came from students who had lived abroad at least two or three years. The studies also confirmed that overseas living experience made a difference, even when controlling for important personality traits, such as "openness to new experiences."

These findings imply that companies can get the most out of their teams by rotating employees to new regions or by emphasizing foreign-living experiences in the hiring process. It is also likely that immersion in different cultures, not necessarily different nations, is the important factor; the more diverse the culture, the better. "If you think of culture as a continuum,"

Maddux speculates, "the farther you get from your own particular culture, the more creative you're more likely to get."

In two further studies, discussed in their 2006 working paper, "Cultural Barriers and Mental Borders: Multicultural Learning

Experiences Facilitate Creativity," Maddux and Galinsky look at why living abroad affects creativity and how this effect can be emulated. The studies focused on multicultural learning rather than travel *per se*. In one study, a group of participants first had to think and write about an occasion during which they learned the reason behind a specific cultural difference they had encountered. In this way, the researchers sought to "prime" the participants' memories with multicultural learning experiences. Subsequently, that group was more likely than others to come up with a creative solution.

Maddux and Galinsky use the metaphor of form and function to explain how multicultural learning might affect creative insights. In both situations, the same form potentially has more than one function. So, for example, in countries such as France, if a dinner party guest finishes a meal without cleaning his or her plate, it might be taken as an insult, suggesting that the food wasn't good. In other countries, such as China, leaving food on the plate might be taken as a compliment suggesting that the guest has had more than enough to eat. The same form — leaving food on the plate — has more than one function or meaning. Living in a different country could help spark the realization that every form — from gestures to vocal tones to a simple smile — could convey different meanings depending on the cultural context.

That realization is important for creative thinking. In one of their studies, Maddux and Galinsky used a creativity test known as the *Dunker candle problem*, which challenged participants to come up with the insight that a box of tacks could be used as a candleholder rather than a receptacle for tacks. In other words, the same form — a box of tacks — can have more than one function. Those who were first primed to think about a multicultural learning experience were more likely to come up with that solution than others.

For more information, contact William W. Maddux at william.maddux@insead.edu or Adam D. Galinsky at agalinsky@kellogg.northwestern.edu.

— Larry Yu

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