

Assessing Creativity Potential: Do Judgments Vary with the Purpose of the Pitch?

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### Assessing Creativity Potential: Do Judgments Vary with the Purpose of the Pitch?

In researching the judging of creativity, Elsbach and Kramer (2003), suggested that creativity is a critical component of organizational success, but often tangible products are not available with which to assess creativity. Lacking hard evidence of creativity, judgments are formed on reputation, personality tests, or even more subjective assessments that can occur during personal interactions such as pitches. Creative endeavors where such subjective assessments are important include product design, business deals, entertainment production, and marketing, and each offers unique challenges in judging the critical creativity potential of the opportunities.

Interviewing a range of Hollywood experts, Elsbach and Kramer (2003) identified how social-judgment theory used the assessment and interaction between those promoting the creative idea and the gatekeeper or assessor to make creativity judgments. Research questions for the study were concerned with the cue or prototypes that experts employed, and how “the dynamic context of their [pitcher and catcher] interaction” (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003, p.285) affected the assessment. Within the population interviewed, Elsbach and Kramer found support for a set of prototypes that were used to judge creativity, and uncovered evidence of the influence of the interaction between pitcher and catcher in the judgment. The two judgment classifications were proposed as a “dual-model of creativity assessment” (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003, p. 297).

Since the population was limited to Hollywood experts, the Elsbach and Kramer study was limited in terms of generalizability. My study was designed to mimic the Elsbach and Kramer study in general approach and method including the use of semi-structured interviews, but to include a broad range of creative assessment experts to determine if Elsbach and Kramer’s

findings would be consistent within other populations lending support for broader generalizability of their findings.

### **Analysis**

In this abbreviated report of the research findings, the analyses section will include a brief introduction to the participant population and collection methods before exploring the methods and findings resulting from the coding and themes development.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Elsbach and Kramer (2003) employed semi-structured interviews to allow participants to guide the inquiry and more freely explore the creative judgment process. The Elsbach and Kramer interviews were conducted in two groups, the first set of participants used a series of questions within the semi-structured interview setting to explore the nature of the pitch, success factors, failure influences, cues used to assess creativity, and pitcher-catcher interactions. The second set of interviews added specific discussions related to the pitcher-catcher dynamics that may have affected the creativity judgment (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003). The semi-structured interviews for my research used a single set of participant interviews and were guided by the same research questions employed by Elsbach and Kramer.

Interview protocols included a brief introduction into the purpose of the study which was described to participants as an exploration of how creative judgments occurred as a follow up to a prior similar study that was limited to Hollywood pitches. Participants were all past personal contacts of the researcher who were known to be involved in creativity assessments and volunteered to participate in the interviews. Anonymity was assured. As sole researcher I conducted all interviews, transcription, coding, and theme development. All interviews were

conducted via telephone due to logistical constraints and all calls were digitally recorded for later analysis.

The guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews were the questions used within the Elsbach and Kramer (2003) research, and which were chosen so the survey participants would respond within the same framework as the comparative Hollywood study:

1. Describe the situation or pitch setting where you had to assess creativity without firm evidence. What was the substance, purpose, and situation of the pitch?
2. Describe a successful pitch. What made it a success?
3. Was there anything in how the pitch was presented other than content or how the pitcher presented themselves that affected the success of the pitch?
4. In an unsuccessful pitch, what made it unsuccessful?
5. Was there anything in the presentation of image of the pitch beyond the content that influenced your negative judgment of creative potential?
6. Reflecting on yourself during the pitch, was there anything in the interaction or your relationship to the pitcher that influenced your judgment?
7. Are there any other factors or elements of the pitch that are influential in whether a pitch could be viewed as successful or unsuccessful?

The questions were used only as guides to ensure the range of inquiry was covered, but most interviews quickly transgressed the specific questions as participants readily began to describe the conditions, elements, and interactions that drove their judgment of creative potential within the pitch setting. That is, the interviews were more unstructured in actuality than is typical in semi-structured qualitative interviews.

Specific participants for this follow on study were identified to encompass a broad range of creative pitch environments. Participants included:

1. A product/service senior executive from a major home improvement box store chain who was responsible for considering new external and internal product offerings.
2. An investment banker with over 20 years in merger & acquisition, business, and product “catching”. Individual currently serves on a committee that assesses student product pitches within a course on innovation at the Kellogg School (Northwestern University).
3. Chief Technology Officer (CTO) with multiple experiences with major technology companies in roles including technology strategy development and oversight as well as product management. The broad responsibilities involve participation in multiple creativity pitches related to new products or services as a member of the assessment team.
4. Tier 1 Hollywood film producer with success in delivering creative products to the market, and who has functioned as recipient of hundreds of pitches independently and in former role in the development division of a major studio.
5. Producer and creator of television products in the cable network, made for TV movie, and non-profit production segments. Catcher of dozens of pitches.
6. Business strategist, investment banker, and advisor to Yale Entrepreneurial Center where participant catches and advises on fresh entrepreneurial concepts.

### **Data Preparation, Coding and Themes**

All interviews were conducted via telephone and recorded digitally for later analysis. The audio recordings were reviewed twice by the researcher for overall familiarization before transcription. Textual records of the interview were reviewed for coding and theme development. Based on the actual experience during the interviews, responses were not captured or aligned with the specific guiding questions since participants randomly discussed the factors of success, unsuccess, and pitcher-catcher interaction as they described their experiences. That is, triggered by the early question to describe characteristics of success in the pitch, participants tended to continuously shift between success, unsuccess, and pitcher-catcher interactions as they described their experiences and preferences. Since the resulting data did not support analyses by question as is common when conducting semi-structured interviews analysis, the textual data was sorted into the natural response categories of success, unsuccess, and pitcher-catcher interaction. Often a segment of dialogue would involve all categories, but identifying the categorical associations of the key points of the narratives were possible.

Across the study participants and within the three categories, the text was analyzed, coded, and thematic trends developed. The resulting themes are presented with the corresponding and supporting rich respondent data so the critical factors used in judging creativity can be understood. The approach and data presentation reflect the inductive nature of the analyses.

**Success factors.** Comments related to factors that influence success in judging creative potential in a pitch environment were analyzed and coded revealing 6 themes. The themes and representative quotes illustrating and deepening the themes follow:

*Comprehensive idea content (6 participants).* This collection of comments refers to the completeness and organization of the idea such that it reflects an understanding of the

challenge and the critical success factors including an understanding of the needs of the consumer of the idea. It refers to a well thought out concept that has been contemplated, brainstormed, and developed. The comprehensiveness is observed in the clarity of presentation and the ability to present the idea relatively briefly due to a depth of understanding.

- "...people who demonstrates an ability to understand and connect with the customer ..."
- "It is important that they are someone who thinks creatively in problem solving not just in coming up with an idea."
- "Innovative ideas were assessed first on content. Do ideas meet the needs of customers globally ... in terms of are they scalable, reliable, and exceed customer experience targets. Content was primary."
- "...level of insight, did pitchers really understand the content of the creative product."
- "We screen by phone and insist on materials being sent ... to see if they have developed the idea. Then at the pitch, are they well prepared with supporting materials?"
- "... must capture our attention in 5 minutes. That requires the idea be well thought out and organized."
- "...really understand the mission and vision of the idea, what is the real crux."

***Play well with others (5 participants).*** For all participants, part of the success of an idea pitch was in looking forward toward transforming the idea to outcome. For all but one participant, a key element of the forward looking process was whether the pitcher could

be expected to work with the team necessary to actualize a creative project. This theme reflect the importance of being a team play, open to others input, and capable of engaging in team based creativity going forward in order to overcome obstacles.

- "... does it seem they can connect with all constituents, can they play well with others?"
- "... were they open to partners or others, and not shackled by the need for creative control?"
- "... open to discussion and recognize what they may not know already",
- "... how will they adjust and adapt and deliver in a relationship with others when under stress?"
- "... at the pitch they must bring their team ... they are packaging a team... Success of an idea takes a team!"
- "Do presenters welcome questions, are they open to others' questions ... if they continue to ask themselves questions, they will then eventually get it right"

***Realistic dreamers (4 participants)***. The theme refers to the necessary combination of creative dreaming with realism. Was the idea deliverable, realistic, purposeful and focused? The catchers all recognize there will be unforeseen challenges should the idea be actualized, but was the idea inherently doable and was the pitcher fundamentally realistic in terms of just how challenging it would be to transform an idea into reality.

- "We want to know are the resources actually committed in terms of money, talent, etc.? Is the project realistic?"
- "Is the pitcher driven by ONE idea, not lots of different ideas? Those with lots of ideas don't appreciate the focus necessary to deliver ..."



- “Was the solution creative ... How did they visualize the idea being delivered? Were the creative ideas "winnowed" down to the realistic?”
- “... insight into the needs, understanding or empathy for the customer.”
- “Creativity shows realism and understanding, can you believe they are realists?”
- “... must have confidence in their ability to deliver creativity...”

**Adaptable (3 participants).** Recognizing that delivering an idea requires the ability to adjust to the unexpected, this theme was identified by half of the participants as key. It refers to flexibility in responding to unexpected change. Two participants even described how they intentionally created diversions during the pitch to assess how the pitcher responded to the unexpected.

- “... can they think when drawn off script... allow me to see creative thought processes, I intentionally create tension or a challenge ... to introduce stress! You see true values and character when under stress.”
- "I would present new, unexpected information or questions. Some would be nimble in responding to change, others became flustered.”
- “...easily ‘tipped’ off balance, it suggests they would not able to deliver or to solve problems.”

**Fresh idea (3 participants).** Surprisingly the originality or freshness of the idea was identified by only half of the participants as an important element in judging potential creative success. Truly new ideas are extremely rare and participants were more impressed by the ability to see new patterns or perspectives of old ideas.

- “Innovative ideas were assessed on content... considered the level of insight... Was solution creative?”

- “... is it fresh? New ideas are extremely rare, so did they present material in a new way?”
- “... not lots of different ideas. Is the idea and the subject not just creative, but truly focused?”
- “I judge uniqueness – have some patterns of behavior or products been rearranged in ways that are "disruptive"? Do they rearranging old patterns of information?”

*Passion (2 participants).* The passion displayed by the pitcher was a characteristic that was identified by only 2 participants, but for those two it was one of the most important. Also, the two who identified passion were both from the entertainment industry indicating there may be a difference either in the traditional evaluation of creative potential within the entertainment industry, or a difference in the passion driven tenacity required to really deliver creativity to the marketplace in the segment. Representative quotes illustrate the intensity of the characteristics for those who identified the need.

- “... probably the first thing I look for is whether they have passion or is it just another deal?”
- “After the idea, do they have passion, enthusiasm, is it not just another idea?”
- “... will get it done or die trying because they are so driven by this one idea! They are not talking about lots of different ideas...”
- “... creative people really display passion! Nothing will stop them ... when they leave they are going to go to Fox, Paramount, whoever and they won’t stop ...”

The participants generally described capability, competence, the ability to play on a team, adjust to changing challenges, and to be realistic as more important than the raw creativity of the idea or the passion behind it (with the exception of the entertainment industry respondents). The

locus of comments appeared to elevate trust of delivery, the ability to see a project through to a successful end as a larger measure of creative potential than judging raw innovation.

**Unsuccess factors.** The factors that influence unsuccess in the process of experts judging creative potential reflected a lack of those characteristics identified as necessary for success, but when pressed, participants were able to describe particular key themes that led to failure in the pitch. Coding revealing 3 specific themes related to unsuccess:

*Ill-prepared (4 participants).* Failure often resulted from pitchers who were out of their depth in terms of preparing a well thought out presentation that illustrated an appreciation for the magnitude of the difficulties in operationalizing an idea. This rarely reflected the quality of the PowerPoints, but rather the depth of consideration of the idea, practical commercialization, and the follow on effort that would be required.

- “.. not comprehensively thought through idea coupled with buzzword dropping indicates a lack of depth.”
- “They demonstrated in their pitch that they were not very nimble in responding to change...”.
- “Sometimes they don’t appreciate the practical aspects of the project. They need to know that we are not just cleaning up the barn and having a show ...”
- “I get concerned if they are hemming and hawing and don’t have well thought out ideas.”

*Self-centered (3 participants).* The creative narcissist who was overly focused on their idea, protecting the creative, and having all the answers typically led to a quick no from the experts. For the creative idea to realize its potential, a team of imaginative and practical contributors would be needed, and any indication that teamwork and

cooperation would be lacking was a major red-flag. Most creative implementations take months or years, and experts had to imagine what it would be like to work with someone for an extended period. They did not relish working with unpleasant creators.

- "... more focused on their needs and what they may have to say than any feedback."
- "... if they display arrogance, who would want to work with them for months?"
- "If they lack humility and realism ..."
- "... not open to working with a team which will be needed to turn the idea into output. They appear incapable of compromise."
- "the creative process is so personal, but if they are not able to compromise the risks get higher ..."

*Self-limited (3 participants)*. The pitcher who displayed poor listening, could not engage in creative dialogue, and often did not follow the discussion of challenges and alternatives revealed that they would be limited in their creativity going forward, whether due to limits on intellect, interpersonal communication, or nimble thinking.

- "... lack of active listening or the ability to react to what they learned from listening."
- "... became flustered with new, unexpected information. They were easily 'tipped' off balance which suggests they would not be able to deliver creativity to the needs of the problem.
- "I watch out for over-zealous, exaggerated, unrealistic, or over-confident ..."
- "... if they claim their idea to be the greatest next thing instead of 'if done right, this could be' ..."

- "...when they are passionate and state, 'I will get this done', is it realistic and can they deliver?"

The participants identified factors indicating failure as primarily personal characteristics of narcissism, creative inflexibility, lack of depth or thought about the idea, or inability to engage with a creative team. While success themes included the actual idea as a primary hurdle, once the idea was judged to have some potential, personal characteristics were identified as the likely predecessors to failure.

**Pitcher-catcher interrelationships.** In considering how interrelationships between those pitching the concepts and the experts catching might have affected judgments of creative potential, the participants mostly described personal characteristics and preferences that affected their objectivity. Interview participants described personality and character characteristics of the pitchers as important decision factors that resulted from the pitch. The 3 themes that resulted from coding included:

***Personal characteristics (4 participants).*** Expert catchers were drawn to positive, ethical, appealing characteristics including authenticity, humility, integrity, and trustworthiness. Since success in the pitch may lead to an ongoing relationship between pitcher and catcher, participants admitted that it mattered in judging the success of the pitch on whether they liked the pitcher:

- "During the presentations, I tend to sense authenticity and transparency in pitchers. Authenticity creates trust between us ..."
- "I look for personality issues that show we will not be able to dialogue and work together"

- "... nice to see someone who is self-deprecating, it is almost an honor to work with someone like that because it will be fun and relaxed under stress."
- "I sensed character and looked for arrogance, a lack of humility, if they're not authentic or trustworthy, if they won't work with others, with teams ... open to team effort ... lack of confidence in self ..."
- "Is this someone who follows through, on time, telling the truth? Do they have integrity, are they honest?"
- "... exaggeration is a killer, I watch for hype or something untrue. If I sense they are not telling me the truth, it's over ..."
- "Are they a team player or dictator?"
- "Do they have humility, confidence, and passion? Basically, do I like them...personally?"
- "Character trumps content! Even if it is the best idea ever ... "
- "The personal backstory of the creator is important to me. It speaks to why they are motivated, it tells whether they are truly attached and passionate ..."
- "I look out for the overly slick"

***Engaging (3 participants).*** Experts described the importance of the pitcher being open to engage with the catcher over alternatives, development ideas, or challenges. The characteristic of the pitcher to engage demonstrated not only their creative thinking, but the interpersonal characteristics vital to future development. There was also an element of personal relationship that developed from the engagement that created a social bond.

- "I appreciate those who accept and value my input. It indicates they will be open to working in a team or cooperative environment."

- “My assessment involved more ‘interaction’ to test creativity as a process...”
- “I offered to work with the innovators even during preparation for the pitch. Those who took advantage were better prepared. I admit, I am biased toward those who take advantage of all available resources and who would find my input valuable.”

*Intentionally benign modeling (2 participants).* The theme described an attempt to be neutral so as to introduce greater objectivity. Part of the observation included modeling interaction, openness, and active listening to evaluate similar characteristics in the pitchers.

- "As I gained experience, I have become more benign so the pitchers creativity can be assess more objectively.”
- “I try to model the kind of active listening that is needed to work creative problems together and look for pitchers who reflect the practice.”
- “My questioning always reflects a search for the kind of person that will find a way to success.”

The relationship aspect of the pitcher-catcher interaction reflected not only attempts to assess the pitchers’ core values, but to determine whether they respect the catcher’s input, and whether they are likable. Each participant approached the character and personality assessment differently, but they all attempted to know the pitcher more completely.

**Model of creativity assessment.** Elsbach and Kramer (2003) suggested in their research on Hollywood pitches that creativity was assessed using a dual-process model with categorization of the person the first process and relationship categorization the second. In developing a similar overall model of creativity judgment for the more diverse participant base

of my inquiry, the success, unsuccess, and pitcher-catcher interrelationship themes were analyzed for overall categories of judgment factors. Three judgment categories were identified:

***Content and capable.*** This category of assessments was an evaluation of the quality of the idea, the comprehensive consideration of the idea in the context of actualizing, and whether the pitcher had developed and considered the idea in a realistic sense. Themes in this assessment category included:

- Comprehensive idea content
- Realistic dreamers
- Fresh idea
- Ill-prepared
- Intentionally benign model

***Character.*** The second major process involved in judging creative ideas in the broad range of pitches environments was an evaluation of the character and characteristics of the pitcher. The exploration involved not only underlying principles and values, but whether they were passionate and flexible enough to see the project through. Themes included in assessing character included:

- Play well with others
- Adaptable
- Passion
- Self-centered
- Self-limited
- Engaging



*Intuition or intrinsics.* The final major process observed in judging creative ideas across the variety of pitch settings was a subjective likability or sense of the personhood of the pitcher. The exploration involved not only underlying principles and values, but whether they were passionate and flexible enough to see the project through. Themes included in assessing character included:

- Play well with others

### **Discussion**

The purpose of my research was to consider whether the research findings by Elsbach and Kramer (2003) that described creativity judgments within the entertainment industry as involving two processes or a “dual-model of creativity assessment” (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003, p. 297); categorizing of the person, and categorization of the relationship which reflected a socio-emotive interaction, were generalizable to other similar creativity judgment settings such as venture capital funding, merger and acquisitions, or product or service ideas. The Elsbach and Kramer study population was limited to Hollywood experts, so my study was designed to imitate the Elsbach and Kramer research in overall approach by using semi-structured interviews using the same guiding questions, but to include creative assessment experts from a broader set of creative assessment situations. Many similarities were found between the 6 study participants’ perspectives and the Elsbach and Kramer findings, but there were some meaningful differences in emphasis, priorities, and how the creative assessments were made.

The participants in this current study described the practical considerations and factors concerned with operationalizing as more important in determining the success or potential for success of the creative pitches than the creative or relationship prototyping discovered by

Elsbach and Kramer (2003). Responses in the interviews emphasized aspects of capability, competence, the ability to play on a team, adjust to changing challenges, and be realistic as more important than the raw creativity of the idea or the passion behind it (with the exception of the entertainment industry respondents). Those characteristics reflect a greater concern for more forward looking, anticipated characteristics than for the considering of the actual creative product. The locus of the various comments appeared to elevate trust of delivery, the ability to see a project through to a successful end as a larger measure of creative potential than judging raw innovation.

While Elsbach and Kramer (2003) found evidence for two processes involved in assessing creativity in the Hollywood pitch environment, data developed within this smaller but more diverse qualitative inquiry suggested that evaluating creative potential in similar pitch conditions was comprised of assessing three categories of characteristics; content and capable, character, and intuition or intrinsics. While Elsbach and Kramer's two processes encompassed some similar assessment perspectives as those found in my study, their work in the Hollywood pitch situation identified greater pitcher-catcher interaction influences, and a more interactive, socially influenced assessment. The current findings confirmed that the evaluation of personal characteristics was important, but the methods used in the wider population, while still subjective, involved a more general sensing evaluation beyond the prototyping model of Elsbach and Kramer. Participants described the assessment of personal characteristics as a mostly objective process that was only modestly influenced by personal social-interactive engagement except for during exchanges related to the intellectual, implementation considerations of the pitch.

Differences are theorized to be due to the far more diverse pitch settings and objectives which vary from the nature of creativity assessments in the exclusively Hollywood setting used by Elsbach and Kramer (2003). These findings were supported by the fact that the entertainment industry participants within the current study differed from other subjects and were generally more concerned with passion of the pitcher, the focus on the single idea, and whether the pitchers were genuine, authentic, or slick. While participants from all segments appeared to be cautious about truth, the concern appeared more frequently within the entertainment participants' responses.

Results of the 6 interviews spanning a variety of creative judgment settings suggested that creativity potential in the pitch environment involved judging not only the creativity of the idea, but the likelihood of success going forward based on the depth of the idea, and the flexibility, character, and personality of the pitcher. This study confirmed many of the general assessment attributes identified by Elsbach and Kramer (2003), but also discovered differences in prioritization and importance of the judgment factors between the different environments within which pitches are assessed. Future research should expand the participant pool even further to capture adequate data to support an assessment of those finer differences across the varying settings. The current study did not involve any direct observation of the pitches unlike the Elsbach and Kramer research, and that limited the validity of the findings. Elsbach and Kramer used actual pitch observations to further ground their interview findings, and any future studies of broader populations should similarly use observation of the events or other triangulation methods to more completely understand the assessment methods and differences between pitch assessments across the various settings.

## Reference

- Elsbach, K. D., & Kramer, R. M. (2003). Assessing creativity in Hollywood pitch meetings: Evidence for a dual-process model of creativity judgments. *Academy of Management Journal*, 46(3), 283-301.