

## ***The Insightful Leader* Podcast Transcript**

### Can a Little Embarrassment Make Your Team More Creative?

**Jessica LOVE:** Hi there. This is Jessica Love, from Kellogg Insight at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. We took a short break to get a better sense of what you, our listeners, want out of this show, and how we can deliver that. So with that in mind, I'm very excited to announce that we're now back, and we have a new name. Welcome to the first episode of *The Insightful Leader*. We'll still be talking to the same renowned faculty, and sharing their expertise with you. But we'll be more focused on turning that expertise into practical advice that leaders and aspiring leaders like you can implement in your careers. We'll be dropping new episodes every two weeks throughout the season. To make sure you don't miss any, subscribe to *The Insightful Leader* wherever you get your podcasts, or go to [kell.gg/podcast](http://kell.gg/podcast). Thanks, and enjoy the episode!

**[musical interlude ]**

**LOVE:** Leigh Thompson spends a lot of time working with managers and executives. And she often gets to attend offsite retreats, where a company's senior leaders all come together:

**Leigh THOMPSON:** And what I've noticed is that they sometimes get involved in what we call brag sessions, where people are congratulating one another for work that's been well done in the past year. And that's a really important thing.

**LOVE:** Obviously it's great to celebrate your accomplishments. But Thompson is a professor of management and organizations at Kellogg, who studies creativity among other things. And seeing these "brag sessions," she couldn't help but suspect that they might be keeping people from sharing their ideas. For instance, she was at this corporate retreat not long ago...

**THOMPSON:** A lot of senior leaders were talking about a lot of accomplishments in the previous year. And interestingly, I was there to talk about creativity and innovation. And it was my observation that, *hmm*, after hearing about all these great accomplishments, when I wanted people to engage in a brainstorming session and put anything out on the table, they tended to self-censor. Because they'd just heard about all the great accomplishments—anything that they would say in this rough-and-tumble brainstorming session certainly wasn't ready for prime time. And my colleagues and I started to wonder whether sharing those kind of moments of great pride and accomplishment might be limiting our ability to be creative.

**LOVE:** It was an interesting hypothesis that led to an even more fascinating question. Because if experiencing pride stifled innovation, then could the opposite of pride *spur* innovation? In other words, could feeling embarrassed actually make you more creative?

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** Welcome to *The Insightful Leader* from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. Today on the podcast, we dig into some counterintuitive new research from

Professor Leigh Thompson and colleagues—research that might make you rethink how you run your next creative session.

**THOMPSON:** *Because if you are engaging in a brag session or being prideful, you are unwittingly encouraging people to self-censor their own ideas.*

**LOVE:** On the other hand, encouraging people to share a not-so-flattering story could pay dividends for your team’s creativity—but it has to be done right. Thompson explains how, and when, leaders should try out this unconventional tactic.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** The ability to generate ideas has always been valuable. Historically, though, a lot of the creative thinking in an organization has been clustered in a few specific roles. Product designers and marketers needed to think outside the box, sure—everyone else, not so much. But Thompson points out that these days, more and more organizations are embracing design thinking, and the premise that anyone should think like a designer to solve problems creatively. As a result, the ability to innovate has taken on an entirely new value.

**THOMPSON:** If you're known as being creative, you know, you're a modern-day god or Zeus or something like that.

**LOVE:** But creativity is an elusive thing. Most people—even great leaders—don’t really know how to boost creativity, try as they might. Which was why Thompson and her colleagues wanted to see if pride and embarrassment had something to do with it.

**THOMPSON:** So we cooked up a very controlled laboratory experiment, where we had people either recall and recount a moment of pride or accomplishment, or moment of embarrassment.

**LOVE:** They had more than 100 people do this online, randomly assigning half to write down a proud memory, and half to write down an embarrassing memory. After that, they had every participant do a simple creativity exercise: spend five minutes thinking of as many unusual ways as you can to use a paper clip. Like, wearing it as an earring, or a tiny flagpost!

When they tallied the results, it turned out that the people who had recounted the embarrassing memory came up with about 30 percent more ideas than the proud memory group. But beyond just the number, the researchers also wanted to know how original people were getting with these ideas—or what Thompson and colleagues called “bandwidth.”

**THOMPSON:** Did they stay along one train of thought or did they show some bandwidth? And, lo and behold, we also found that the groups who shared the embarrassing stories had more bandwidth.

**LOVE:** The “embarrassing story” group also did significantly better than a control group, who just told a story about their commute. So, this seemed to confirm the researchers’ intuition. But the thing is, the participants in this experiment had been sitting at a computer by themselves. But that’s *not* how most ideas are generated in the real business world. Rather, brainstorming tends to involve a bunch of people all sitting together and bouncing ideas around.

So Thompson was especially interested in seeing how this experiment would play out in a team setting. Now, on an intuitive level, you might think that teams are naturally going to be *more* creative than individuals. After all, they bring in more points of view, new kinds of expertise, just more variety in general. Unfortunately, Thompson says, that's not always true: research suggests that teams can sometimes be worse at coming up with ideas than individuals. But Thompson wasn't convinced that it had to be that way.

**THOMPSON:** So what I'm always quick to do is to tell managers and executives, "Now, wait. Please don't throw the baby out with the bath water. Don't start dismantling your teams." But rather, what you want to do is, you want to minimize some of the stuff that groups do that could be dysfunctional for creativity and innovation. And so one of the dysfunctional things that we perhaps need to minimize is this tendency for people to want to present themselves in a positive light to others.

**LOVE:** So in their follow-up experiment, the researchers wanted to see if sharing an embarrassing story could reduce our need to impress people—this need that gets in the way of creativity. Once again, they recruited a bunch of participants, and assigned them to share either a proud story or an embarrassing one. But this time, there were some twists. Instead of working by themselves, the participants were now in groups of three. And these weren't just any guinea pigs.

**THOMPSON:** These were actually some executives and managers. They weren't all at the same company, so they didn't know each other. And here we foisted them into these small groups to share a potentially pretty embarrassing story, and I told them, "We're measuring you on your performance." You know, so in some sense the stakes were pretty high.

[musical interlude]

**THOMPSON:** Now, I tried not to eavesdrop too much, but sometimes it's nearly irresistible. And so one of them talked about standing in front of a thousand-person audience in her large company, thinking that she'd won a very prestigious all-company award, but it wasn't her name that was actually called up to the front of the room. There was a gentleman at another company who was on a conference call, and he thought that no one could hear him yelling at his teenage daughter about something that she'd done. And everybody heard a very extended, emotional, protracted father/teenage daughter argument. When you hear these things you want to cringe, but all of us probably can relate to these stories.

**LOVE:** Watching these groups tell their stories, Thompson says, you could watch their need to impress others begin to fade away.

**THOMPSON:** One person tells a story, and inevitably there's communal laughter. They're not laughing at the person, they're laughing and saying, "Oh, my gosh, I've pretty much done the same thing or I empathize with you." And then it in some sense liberated all the other folks in the group to share some of these stories. And again, qualitatively, I would often hear these folks saying, "I can't believe—I've never told anybody this 'til right now!" So in some sense it was a release of sorts.

**LOVE:** As before, the results of the group experiment were striking. In the brainstorming exercise that followed, teams who had shared embarrassing stories generated more ideas, and a wider range of ideas.

So what does this mean for leaders? If you want to encourage innovation, should you sign kick off every meeting with an anecdote about that time you ripped your pants at the office holiday party? Probably not.

**THOMPSON:** Certainly my advice is to not run up and down the halls of your organization, calling attention to all the harebrained things you've done in the past six months.

**LOVE:** Nor should you encourage your employees to do so. It's important to balance this finding with professional boundaries, and the fact that self-esteem matters in the workplace, too. Also, Thompson says, remember that some tasks don't necessarily call for creativity. If you're trying to land a plane, think about doing it right, not coming up with a lot of creative ideas about how to do it better.

That said, when you do need to get the creative juices flowing in a group setting, Thompson recommends starting with some version of the embarrassing story exercise. To get the most out of it, she says, encourage people to share recent memories. That time you called your teacher "mommy" in the second grade won't cut it.

**THOMPSON:** Because otherwise it's too easy to say, "Well, I'm a different person now."

**LOVE:** Thompson acknowledges that this kind of ice-breaker might take some getting used to—though you might be surprised at how much camaraderie the exercise can build. But even if you can't quite commit to a full-on embarrassment round-robin, she says, you might try some other personal story exercise. Because when it comes to creativity, anything is better than the standard, completely unstructured meeting...

**THOMPSON:** ...where you meet with your team and you say, "Gosh, we're trying to innovate today. I'm sure everybody knows how we should have this discussion. Let's get started." So I'm being a passive leader, and I'm just hoping that the group is going to take the right course.

**LOVE:** Providing too many rules or constraints might seem like it'll keep people from developing new ideas. But in fact, Thompson says, it will do the opposite.

**THOMPSON:** Anything you do in terms of providing structure, in terms of providing some architecture, even rules, even norms, is going to have a positive impact on creativity.

**[musical interlude]**

**LOVE:** This episode of *The Insightful Leader* was produced by Kevin Bailey, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Jake Smith, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone. It was written by Jake Smith, and edited by Michael Spikes. Special thanks to Leigh Thompson.

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We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of *The Insightful Leader*.