

The Wrong Environment Can Destroy Your Creativity and Self-Belief – Here's How to Find One That Fuels You.

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What happens when you realize that where you are is stifling your growth? This question comes up often in two areas: job environments and places where people live – cities, towns and communities. I've experienced both personally, and making a major change requires incredible courage and determination. It's not for the faint of heart.

It's easy to fall into complacency, mistaking familiarity for comfort. But if we are aware that a job or place isn't right for us, can we ever truly feel at ease knowing that truth? And more importantly, what is the cost of staying somewhere that stifles our growth?

Over Christmas, a family friend gifted me an air plant. They told me it needed no water, just a little sunlight, to bloom. Skeptical, I placed it on my windowsill. Over two weeks, that little plant fought like hell and produced two beautiful flowers. But within 48 hours, the petals wilted, and the plant died.

That air plant reminded me of times in my life when I stayed in places that weren't right for me. I survived against the odds, managing to bloom in small ways, only to quickly wither. The lesson is clear: Like that plant, people can't thrive in the wrong environment. We might survive for a while, but

eventually, being in the wrong space drains the life out of us.

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The role of environment in creativity and innovation

While pursuing my Ph.D., I focused my research on creative personalities and innovation in the workforce. I wanted to understand the dreamers and the doers. My research led me to recognize that innovation is not a singular event but a multi-stage process: spotting an opportunity, developing an idea, championing it, securing support and ultimately implementing it so others can benefit.

I suspected that environment played a key role in this process. Specifically, I hypothesized that workplaces that discouraged risk-taking and punished mistakes would stifle innovation. I was right – but in a deeper way than I expected.

When an environment doesn't openly encourage problem-solving, tackling tough issues and asking for help, innovation suffers. Anyone who has worked in a toxic environment knows this instinctively. But why does this happen? What about our self-concept gets shaken when we're in the wrong place?

My research pointed to self-efficacy – the belief in our ability to perform and create. Self-efficacy is deeply tied to innovation. If we don't believe we can generate new ideas, we won't. And our environment significantly shapes this belief system.

We may enter a new job or community feeling confident and capable, but if the energy around us doesn't support creative efforts, we internalize that resistance. Over time, we begin to doubt our own abilities. Once we stop believing in

ourselves – and when those around us reinforce our limitations – we stop creating. This isn't just a personal loss; it's a loss to society. We need creators to keep creating, especially when their work contributes positively to the world.

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Why self-efficacy matters – and how environment shapes It

Self-efficacy influences how we feel, think, motivate ourselves and behave. People with high self-efficacy are more likely to take on challenges, persist through setbacks and bring new ideas to life. Research supports this: Individuals with higher self-efficacy are more likely to improve work processes, tackle complex tasks and engage in innovative behavior. Since innovation often involves overcoming obstacles, the role of self-efficacy in pushing through challenges makes sense.

While it's clear that self-efficacy fuels innovation, the role of a supportive environment in sustaining self-efficacy is less widely understood. This was a key finding in my doctoral research: Psychologically supportive environments create the conditions necessary for innovation. When people believe they are capable creators, they continue to operate with that mindset. This belief system is essential to having the courage to pursue big ideas. Without it, just like the air plant, even the most creative individuals will eventually stop fighting – and become a shadow of who they once were.

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What to do when you realize you're

in the wrong environment

What do we do when we recognize that we've become the air plant – fighting for survival in the wrong space? Whether it's our workplace or our community, realizing that our environment is limiting us can be both eye-opening and daunting. I have close friends who are professional artists and have slowly come to understand that their current town lacks the supportive, creative energy they need. They're trying to figure out their next move – but that's no simple task. Here's what I've learned from my own experience:

1. Awareness is the first step: Highly driven people often stay too long in the wrong place. Over time, they begin to internalize negativity, blaming themselves rather than recognizing that the environment is a poor fit. The first step is acknowledging that you are in the wrong space.

2. Get clear on your values: Understanding where you thrive versus where you feel drained is a critical part of self-discovery. This is highly individualized – some people need collaborative, fast-paced environments, while others flourish in solitude and stillness. Identifying where and with whom you create your best work is essential.

3. Take action: Transitioning to a more supportive environment takes time, courage and determination. It's easy to slip back into old patterns, so create a plan with clear next steps. Sharing your intentions with trusted friends or mentors can help keep you accountable and provide much-needed support as you navigate the change.

Moving forward isn't always easy, but recognizing the need for change and taking deliberate steps toward a better environment is how we ensure we don't just survive – we thrive.

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