Why Deadlines Aren’t as Great as You’d Think for Creative Work

Do you ever find yourself staring down at a deadline and just freeze? There is something to be said for setting a schedule for yourself and following through, especially when you are first starting a business, but recent research from Harvard finds that when you are dealing with creative pursuits, you need to give yourself enough time to breathe, otherwise you’ll just be doing busy work instead of actually building something that is truly innovative.

In an interview with *Harvard Business Review’s* Working Knowledge podcast, Professor Teresa Amabile said that during a hectic day, it’s possible to get a mistaken sense of creative energy powered by adrenaline simply because things were being crossed off a checklist.

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“People who are under a lot of time pressure on a given day, actually feel very productive, they tend to feel very creative,” she said. “But, here’s the interesting thing; they were actually significantly less likely to come up with creative ideas, or solve problems creatively on those days. They got a lot of stuff done, but they weren’t necessarily creative.”

She noted that in her research, people came up with the most creative solutions when they were working under low to moderate time pressure. So the next time you think about imposing an arbitrary deadline on developing new ideas, you might want to go easier on yourself.

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Because feeling like you’re on a treadmill doesn’t only make your thinking more fractured, Amabile says that it also makes it tougher to find meaning in your work. So what can managers do to make sure that their employees always have time to innovate? Start with providing spaces where they can be quiet, focused and away from distractions.

“Let them understand the importance of what they’re doing, their own individual actions, and how that translates into something that will contribute to a customer need, to a societal need, to something that the company really needs to move forward,” Amabile said. “Try to give people enough time for projects so that they can explore, so they can do that background research to get the information they need, and then so they can play with it somewhat. That doesn’t mean indefinite time frames, but it probably means longer time frames than people are usually given in most companies for most projects.”

What sort of deadlines make you feel most creative? Let us know in the comments sections.

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