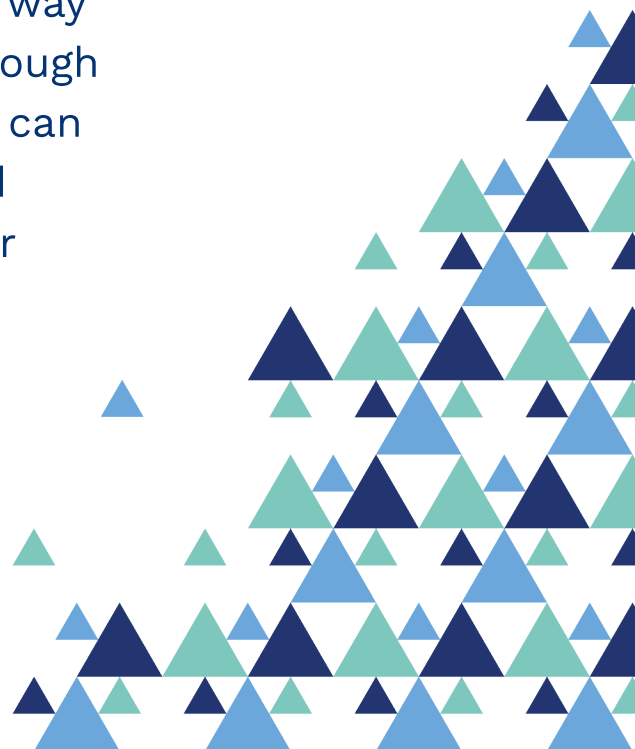
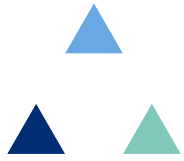


HOW THE SUPPORT INNOVATORS RECEIVE CAN MAKE OR BREAK THEIR IDEAS

Innovation efforts often falter when innovators hit obstacles that generate frustration, doubt, and emotional strain. New research shows the way colleagues respond in these moments, through a process known as interpersonal holding, can determine whether innovators persist, find alternative paths forward, or abandon their efforts entirely.

FEATURING
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Summary

Innovators frequently encounter setbacks that feel personally destabilizing and threaten progress. A qualitative study of employees in a large U.S. hospital system finds colleagues' responses in these moments—described as interpersonal holding—follow three distinct patterns: tight, loose, or denied. Each pattern shapes innovators' emotions, sense of identity, and ultimately their response to obstacles, and the outcomes of innovation efforts.

When obstacles feel personal

The ongoing process of innovation is essential to organizational success, yet pursuing new ideas inside established systems is inherently difficult. Innovators routinely encounter delays, resistance, or outright rejection—experiences that can feel destabilizing not only for a project, but for the individual too. Such setbacks may threaten the innovators' sense of control, perceptions of job security, and even their identity as someone capable of driving meaningful change.

Naturally then, innovators seek out trusted colleagues to share these burdens and challenges with. The response they receive in these interactions often goes beyond routine encouragement or advice. Colleagues may help calm emotional distress, help reinterpret or reframe what the setback means, and shape decisions about how to proceed. Researchers describe this deeper form of support as **interpersonal holding**, a process that guides individuals through moments of uncertainty and disruption at work.

Understanding how this support unfolds is critical, because the fate of many innovations depends less on the initial idea than on whether innovators can navigate the obstacles that follow and reach the conditions necessary to achieve positive outcomes.

Studying support in real-world innovation

To explore how interpersonal holding operates in practice, Ned Wellman, an Associate Professor of Management and Entrepreneurship at Arizona State University and an Affiliate of the Center for Innovative Leadership at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School, and his co-authors, conducted a qualitative study of innovators within a large hospital system.

The researchers conducted 91 interviews with 74 employees engaged in innovation efforts, alongside field observations and grounded-theory analysis.

A striking insight emerged from the data: not all support is experienced the same way. Rather, it follows three distinct trajectories, each shaping what innovators do next in different ways.

Tight holding: Support that sustains persistence

In the first pattern of interpersonal holding the researchers observed, termed **tight holding**, colleagues respond with strong empathy and active involvement. They validate the innovator's frustration, help them process emotions, and work alongside them to address the obstacle.

This combination reduces distress and creates a sense of partnership. Innovators feel anchored rather than isolated, and their identity as capable change-makers is reinforced. With emotional stability restored, they are more likely to persist through formal organizational processes, continuing to push the original idea forward despite delays or resistance.

Such persistence often leads to eventual implementation, albeit typically through slow, effortful progress rather than rapid breakthroughs.

Loose holding: Support that redirects momentum

A second pattern, **loose holding**, presents as supportive too, but operates differently. Here colleagues are also encouraging and non-judgmental, yet the focus is less on validating emotions and more on suggesting or facilitating new directions or solutions. They offer advice and energy without becoming deeply involved in the work itself.

Instead of calming distress, this response transforms frustration into motivation. Innovators feel endorsed and energized, prompting them to rethink constraints, pursue workarounds, or try alternative approaches.

Rather than promoting persistence along the original path, the result here is circumvention of obstacles, often enabling faster movement, albeit sometimes outside of standard processes.



Denied holding: Support that shuts innovation down

The third pattern, **denied holding**, emerges when colleagues dismiss concerns, ignore requests for help, or disparage the idea itself.

Rather than containing distress, these responses amplify it. Innovators feel isolated, unsupported, and increasingly doubtful of their role as innovators.

This erosion of identity frequently leads to conceding to the obstacle altogether, causing projects to stall and potentially valuable innovations to disappear before reaching implementation.

Why these differences matter for leaders

Taken together these findings shift attention from individual resilience in innovation efforts, toward relational dynamics. Thriving innovation depends not only on ideas, resources, processes, or strategy, but also on the everyday interpersonal responses surrounding setbacks and how they manifest.

For leaders and organizations, several practical implications follow:

1. Emotional containment is a critical leadership behavior

Moments of frustration are pivotal turning points. Responses that acknowledge and steady emotions create the psychological space required for persistence.

2. Different kinds of support produce different innovation paths

Deep partnership encourages sustained effort within formal systems, while lighter encouragement may spark creative workarounds. Both can be useful, but they lead to distinct trajectories.

3. Dismissal carries hidden organizational costs

Ignoring distress or undermining ideas does more than discourage individuals; it can quietly extinguish innovative ideas before they have the chance to prove its value.

4. Innovation is socially sustained, not purely individual

Rather than viewing perseverance as a personal trait alone, organizations should recognize that colleagues collectively shape whether innovators keep going, pivot, or stop.



Rethinking how organizations support innovation

Innovation is often framed as a function of strategy, technology, or talent. This research highlights a more immediate and human reality: what happens in a single conversation after a setback can determine the future of an idea.

Cultivating environments where distress is acknowledged, guidance is constructive, and dismissal is avoided is critical. In this sense, sustaining innovation is not only a strategic or technical challenge, but also a relational one.

Recognizing and strengthening the everyday practices of interpersonal support may offer leaders a practical and often underappreciated lever for ensuring that promising ideas survive long enough to make a difference to the organization.



Access the full research paper here: Hedden, L. N., Schinoff, B. S., Wellman, N., & Blanchard, R. (2025). Tight, loose, or denied holding: How interpersonal holding shapes innovators' responses to innovation obstacles. *Organization Science*.

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