

Your Design Critique Is a Conformity Experiment

Asch built this setup on purpose in 1951. Most teams now run it by accident, every week.

by Shreyas Kalyanpad

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A design critique is a meeting where people look at work and say what they think of it.

The problem is the format. The way most teams run critique is close to the setup psychologists use to produce conformity on purpose. We run the experiment every week and then act surprised by the result.

In 1951 Solomon Asch sat one real person in a group of actors and asked which of three lines matched a reference line. The answer was obvious. The actors spoke first, and they said the wrong one.

Critique does not find the best opinion in the room. It finds the first confident one.



The only person in this picture whose opinion has not been edited yet is the one still looking at his notebook.

1. The first confident voice becomes the answer

What we do: open the floor and let whoever is quickest start.

What the research says: in Asch's task, people gave the group's wrong answer on 32% of trials, and 75% of them went along at least once. When the actors answered correctly, those same people were right 99% of the time. The eyes were fine. The room was the problem.

Do instead: collect written reactions before anyone speaks. Three minutes, everyone writes, nobody reads anyone else yet.

2. This is not a 1950s problem

What we do: assume we are too senior to be swayed by a room.

What the research says: Franzen and Mader rebuilt the experiment with 210 people and published it in 2023. The error rate was 33%, almost exactly Asch's figure. Paying people for correct answers only pulled it down to 25%. A

meta-analysis of 133 studies found the effect has drifted down over the decades, so it is weaker than the textbooks suggest. Weaker is not gone.

Do instead: change the format, not your resolve. You cannot try harder at this.

3. One person disagreeing breaks the spell

What we do: wait to see where the room lands before committing.

What the research says: when Asch gave the subject one ally who answered correctly, conformity fell to 5%. A single voice did nearly all of the work.

Do instead: name a challenger before the meeting starts. Make disagreeing a job, so nobody has to volunteer for it.

4. Speaking out loud is a poor way to gather ideas

What we do: go around the room, one person at a time.

What the research says: only one person can talk at once, so everyone else waits, gets distracted, and forgets what they had. In a small study inside one technology company, alternating short private writing with brief group reviews produced ideas at a rate 71% higher than group sharing alone.

Do instead: write, share, write again. It feels awkward the first two times. Do it anyway.

5. Seniority is a thumb on the scale

What we do: let the design director frame it first, because it saves time.

What the research says: when a senior voice sets the path early, the discussion orbits that opening statement instead of searching past it. Groups also keep repeating what everyone already knows, so the one detail only one person holds never reaches the table.

Do instead: most junior first, most senior last. Every time, not only when the stakes feel high.

The swaps, in one table

HABIT	WHAT IT ACTUALLY PRODUCES	SWAP IT FOR
Open floor	The fastest opinion wins	Three minutes of silent writing
Round the room out loud	Waiting, then forgetting	Write, share, write again
Senior person opens	Everyone edits one frame	Junior first, senior last
Dissent by volunteer	Nobody volunteers	A named challenger
Agreement in the room	No record of what was doubted	Written notes, kept and read

Run this audit on your next critique

Time the gap between the work going on screen and the first spoken opinion. Write down who spoke. At the end, compare the written notes against what the room decided.

If you have no written notes, you do not know what your team thought. You only know what it agreed to.

Checked against

Read on 26 October 2026.

- Franzen and Mader, The power of social influence: a replication and extension of the Asch experiment, PLOS ONE (2023). Reports a 33% error rate, 25% when answers were paid for, and 38% conformity on political opinions.
- FORRT, Open Social Psychology, chapter 7: Conformity. Covers Asch's original rates, the single-ally condition, and the Bond and Smith meta-analysis of 133 studies.
- Association for Psychological Science, There's a Better Way to Brainstorm. Paulus and colleagues on brainwriting, including a 71% higher idea rate for the alternating condition.
- The Decision Lab, Guiding Effective Group Decision-Making Strategies. On status anchoring, the hidden-profile trap, silent starts and nominal group technique.