

## DIALOGUE

### THE PROMISE AND PERILS OF CO-CONSTRUCTION: A REPLY TO “CO-CONSTRUCTIVE START-UP ILLUSIONS”

Pidduck (2025) offers an intriguing extension to my theory of the start-up workforce (Bort, 2025). My original work positions early-stage employees as influential co-constructors who help founders shape abstract ideas into tangible realities. The conceptual model builds on the constructivist lens of entrepreneurial opportunities and explores how firm-level entrepreneurial opportunity narratives and employee-level career fit narratives interact and evolve over time. Central to the framework is the concept of “narrative fidelity,” which describes the completeness and coherence of a story. Narratives solidify over time, requiring employees to synchronize their efforts (entrain) around them as the ability for further co-construction diminishes. Pidduck identifies a risk that my framework underemphasizes: the possibility of co-constructive illusions.

Drawing on the entrepreneurial hype and hustle literature, Pidduck argues that the mechanisms enabling productive co-construction can generate illusory consensus. In such situations, early-stage employees and founders appear to converge on unified narratives while actually holding divergent assumptions about the venture’s direction. The hype and hustle culture common in high-growth start-ups may pressure employees to performatively align with dominant narratives rather than challenge them, creating a superficial coherence that masks potential disagreements.

In response, I address three interconnected issues Pidduck raises. First, I examine the conditions under which false opportunities emerge and why sustained illusory consensus represents an outlier case. Second, I introduce the concept of bounded autonomy to explain structural constraints on employee co-construction. Third, I explore the ethical implications when employees become complicit in constructing narratives of questionable substance. Together, these clarifications extend both Pidduck’s critique and my original framework.

### FALSE OPPORTUNITIES

Pidduck’s (2025) core thesis is that the “hustle and hype” (Burnell, Neubert, Fisher, Marvel, Stevenson & Kuratko, 2024; Logue & Grimes, 2022) culture present in many start-ups greatly increases the propensity for the collective to fall into an illusory consensus, a state wherein employees and founders appear to agree on the venture’s direction while actually holding divergent assumptions about core objectives or the viability of the opportunity itself. Central to Pidduck’s concern is “entrepreneurial swagger,” which creates a workplace environment characterized by urgency and unorthodoxy. These environments can pressure employees to performatively align with dominant narratives, rather than actually believing in them. As such, the very speed and urgency that can drive legitimate opportunity development can also accelerate the creation and continuous pursuit of “false opportunities” in the form of unrealistic goals or resources that appear viable but ultimately lack substance (Bort, Wiklund, Crawford, Lerner & Hunt, 2023). The lens of hustle and hype is particularly insightful because it reveals how the same mechanisms that enable productive co-construction can become pathologically unproductive. When early-stage employees are pressured to “keep the hype moving forward” in an effort to maintain the momentum of the start-up, the deliberative processes that might normally catch false opportunities are systematically undermined.

While false opportunities are pervasive, either because the founders are initially misguided in their market perceptions (Dimov, 2011) or they succumb to reductivism due to the complexity of the problem they hope to solve (Gras, Conger, Jenkins & Gras, 2020), the notion that a growing team of stakeholders will fall into the illusory trap over long periods of time is a distinctly outlier case. Such ventures are likely to fail as they pursue worthless opportunities (Bort et al., 2023), become exposed when the illusion confronts market realities (McMullen, 2025), or struggle to maintain consensus as the stakeholder group expands to a less entrained audience (Wood & McKinley, 2017). That is not to suggest that outliers are not theoretically valuable; outliers are critical to a robust theoretical understanding of a phenomenon (Ruef & Birkhead, 2024). Indeed, entrepreneurs like Adam Neumann are high-profile and exemplary cases of convincing stakeholders to entrain around

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such an illusion. Start-ups that can sustain an illusory narrative for long periods of time can begin to embody cult-like dynamics, where deviation from the prevailing narratives is not tolerated.

As the ability to deviate from the prevailing narrative diminishes, so does the ability for start-up employees to participate in the co-construction process. In turn, there is value in acknowledging the question of how and whether co-construction is actually happening within the start-up. Trusted employees are still likely to add new pieces to the now illusory narrative, but the degree to which the illusion can still be “shaped” is an important consideration. Instead, employees may simply subscribe to the illusion because their alternative choices are worse. When theorizing and empirically examining co-constructed start-up illusions, and co-construction processes more generally, it will be crucial to determine the extent to which start-up employees remain genuine co-constructors as ventures progress.

### BOUNDED AUTONOMY

Pidduck’s (2025) extension raises important questions about employee agency and responsibility in co-constructing start-up illusions. While my conceptual model emphasizes the inherent autonomy and influence enjoyed by early-stage start-up employees, these features are constrained by the fact that founders remain the ultimate decision-makers within the venture. Bounded autonomy represents a structural constraint that helps explain Pidduck’s assertions about illusory consensus. Even when early-stage employees possess critical information that contradicts the prevailing narrative, they may lack sufficient influence to initiate meaningful course correction.

The start-up workforce simultaneously experiences empowerment to shape the entrepreneurial opportunity narrative while facing constraints they cannot fully see or control. Such tension means that low-fidelity entrepreneurial opportunity narratives may appear to offer unlimited space for employee influence, yet the boundaries of acceptable co-construction are often implicit and discovered only when crossed.

Beyond the social pressures that Pidduck highlights, employees may recognize problems with the emerging narrative but find themselves structurally unable to redirect the venture’s trajectory, even when their concerns are well-founded. The Theranos case provides a compelling illustration of how bounded autonomy operates in practice. Erika Cheung and Tyler Shultz, both early-stage employees with direct access to laboratory operations, repeatedly attempted to raise concerns with superiors about inconsistent

test results that contradicted the company’s claims of revolutionary blood testing capabilities. Despite their technical expertise and legitimate concerns about product functionality, precisely the type of co-constructive input that might have pivoted the entrepreneurial opportunity narrative toward a more realistic version, their bounded autonomy rendered them unable to challenge the fundamental premises of the venture’s story. Only after exhausting internal channels did they resort to external whistleblowing, revealing how structural power dynamics can render even well-founded employee concerns ineffective.

### PERFORMANCE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Pidduck (2025) concludes his extension by focusing on the performance implications of co-constructed start-up illusions, pointing out that they are costly to stakeholders. Here, it is also important to consider the ethical challenges commonly associated with an often-problematic form of hype: the subset of entrepreneurs who follow the “fake it until you make it” approach. McMullen (2025) recently offered a “fake it until you make it” typology centered on social validation, illustrating that social consensus and actual results are not necessarily correlated. The complicity of early-stage employees is a notable consideration for Pidduck’s extension.

Although the pursuit of false opportunities can be done with good intention, as Gras et al.’s (2020) framework suggests, McMullen (2025) offers a different take: entrepreneurs who are essentially confidence artists, excelling at getting individuals excited about possibilities but offering very little (if any) substance. The ethical dilemma becomes particularly concerning when viewed through the lens of co-construction. On one hand, employees might unwittingly participate in constructing narratives around opportunities with no real substance. On the other, early-stage employees might know that the opportunity narratives are a stretch. As a means of self-preservation, employees become complicit in what Theoharakis, Voliotis, and Pollack (2021) describe as “legitimacy lies.”

The co-constructive process thus creates a unique form of distributed moral responsibility that differs fundamentally from traditional entrepreneurial deception. Unlike cases in which founders alone mislead stakeholders, co-constructed illusions blur the lines of accountability across the workforce. Co-constructed illusions raise interesting questions about the ethical obligations of start-up employees when they suspect their contributions support false opportunities,

particularly given their bounded autonomy within the venture's power structure.

### CONCLUSION

I am grateful for the opportunity to continue this conversation and am excited to see my original theory (Bort, 2025), Pidduck's (2025) extension, and this reply spark further research and debate. Understanding when co-construction generates genuine opportunity development versus illusory consensus will require careful empirical attention to the structural constraints, social pressures, and ethical dimensions that shape employee participation in nascent ventures.

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