

Expertise is required to generate the insights that lead to innovation. Never underestimate the importance of individual experts to drive innovation. But teams also play an important role. Because innovation is the creation of the new and different, innovation activities are big. They require creativity, problem solving, and execution. This is typically way more than one individual can handle.

We can't innovate without technical expertise. We won't innovate without effective innovation teams. The composition of the team, an environment of threat-free urgency, and a team leader who can create that environment are all critical to innovation.

Team Composition

An innovation team needs the right players. And if you ask ten people what makes the more effective team, a diverse team or a homogenous team, nine times out of ten (or more), the response will be the diverse team. That's not correct. At least not totally correct.

Diversity is an enabler of creativity when the diversity is related to experience and areas of specialty, but diversity in values leads to dysfunction. The most effective and easiest to manage innovation teams are comprised of deep experts with shared values and who genuinely like and respect each other. If you want dysfunction in a team, just throw a bunch of people together who have different values and see what happens. The different values and related perspectives might – might – lead to great creativity. But innovation is more than creativity. You also need constructive and productive debate, and that's difficult to achieve when values are far apart. If you want evidence of this, just consider our current political climate.

The most effective innovation teams are comprised of deep experts with shared values, varied but complementary specialties, and each with enough perspective to connect with the others. They benefit from diversity of expertise, different specialties. And it's where those specialties intersect that the magic happens. When deep experts connect, innovation follows.

Threat-Free Urgency

We need reflective thinking and the executive brain function to innovate, but our brain doesn't work that way when sensing threat and experiencing high levels of stress. When the brain perceives a threat, the sympathetic nervous system is activated to initiate what is often referred to as a "fight or flight" response. In that state we think and behave reflexively. When experiencing threat and associated stress, the reflective and executive brain functions used in making tough decisions and solving complex problems are hijacked.

What's important for leaders to realize is that the brain perceives all manner of threats, not just physical threats. For example:

- Because the brain seeks certainty, it values autonomy, a sense of being in control of circumstances and our destiny. Circumstances that are beyond our control are perceived as a threat.
- Humans are social animals, and our ability to survive depends on our ability to live and work effectively with other humans. Social acceptance and status are beneficial to our survival and health, and the brain recognizes that by viewing a wide variety of psychological and social states as threatening. Examples include ambiguity and a loss of control, loss of social standing and exclusion from one's in-group, and actions taken by others that create a personal disadvantage.
- Remember that experts, those who staff our innovation teams, are very often motivated by the status of being an expert. Innovation teams are especially susceptible to status threats.

The dilemma for the innovation team leader is how to minimize threats while maximizing a sense of urgency. Urgency is important. Urgency motivates. Urgency gives purpose. Urgency is an accelerator. We need goals. We need deadlines. And we need a sense of urgency to avoid missing opportunities and being eclipsed by the competition.

The problem is that urgency is often accompanied by implied, if not explicit, threats. And, as noted above, threats can activate the sympathetic nervous system to such an extent that we have problems with our decision making, our relationships, and even our health.

The optimum environment for an innovation team is one in which there is a palpable sense of urgency that is embraced by the team and an absence of threats that elevate stress to harmful level.

What are the indicators of threat-free urgency?

- **Safety.** The team environment is a safe place to take risks, to experiment, and to make mistakes. Team members are not embarrassed or punished for these things.
- **Acceptance.** Team members are accepted and respected for who they are and for their unique experience and the expertise they contribute.
- **Playfulness.** There's a sense of fun in pursuing shared goals, even when at the same time feeling the sense of urgency. This might be compared to a sports team that feels a sense of urgency to win the championship but is able to celebrate and have fun while pursuing wins.
- **Empathy.** Team members look out for each other and empathize with each other. They willingly help out when a teammate needs help.
- **Energy.** The energy level in the team is contagious and very high.
- **Participation.** All team members contribute equally. There is no social loafing.

Recommendations for Innovation Team Leaders

- Become familiar with the wide range of potential psychological and social threats that create avoidance behaviors in others. Learn to spot threats early. Become sensitive to them so you're less likely to unintentionally create threats that demotivate others.
- Practice self-reflection to understand yourself and the source of your emotions. Learn to recognize your emotional responses and what causes them so you can better manage them. This is the essence of emotional intelligence, an important enabler of leadership success. Lack of emotional intelligence is also a primary cause for derailment.
- Get to know, on a personal level, the people you lead and with whom you work so you better understand what they find rewarding and threatening. For instance, asking someone to make a public presentation may be seen as rewarding by one person but as threatening by another. Treat people as individuals. Equal treatment isn't necessarily fair treatment.
- Learn how to lighten the mood when things become tense and stressful. Start by learning to relax. Your tension can be contagious. Likewise, your comfort. So don't take yourself too seriously.
- Guard against sending messages that will create a social threat for others. Be inclusive and help others to feel they are part of the team.

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