

Preferences

Herrmann International Issue - N° 17

> MULTIFUNCTIONAL TEAMS: A COMPLEX PUZZLE IN CREATIVE CULTURES

By Erika Ratcliffe and Bert Visser

Innovation is perhaps the ultimate reason for building multifunctional teams. Bert Visser from CoThink and Erika Ratcliffe from Kepner-Tregoe offer thoughts on how such teams can be built and managed.

To survive in an increasingly competitive marketplace, many companies have identified the need to establish a sustainable culture of innovation. Organizations must increase their breakthrough ideas, generate multiple new concepts and, overall, rethink their products and services in a whole new way. Effective innovation with guaranteed results and limited risks is required to satisfy the "right" customer needs. We have seen many innovation efforts ending in disaster for one or more of the following reasons:

- > Lack of courage to explore new paradigms, so the ideas generated were not promising enough.
- > Passion and vision are insufficiently shared and therefore insufficient commitment is created company-wide.
- > Priorities are continuously shifted, through short-term thinking or lack of funding.
- > Focus is more on the successes of the past instead of the challenges for the future.

Additionally, innovation often seems more based on internal focus. It is strongly influenced by the technology driven R&D function and the existing brands, rather than final customer needs

identified through a wider input from Marketing & Sales or other external sources. Some companies do not fully understand the client and "presume" or "assume" a new product as well received, only to discover the harsh truth when it is too late. Lack of strategy can also cause the opposite effect: the clients are 'calling the shots' and companies are not always in a position to control their own destiny and soon feel out of control. Because of risk aversion, we have observed a reluctance to kill "weak" initiatives early on in the innovation process. Insufficient or unclear performance measurement means we sometimes fear to criticize current practices. If decision making is not deliberate and timely, after huge exertions it leads to a waste of efforts and will be experienced as frustration... A fatal error, given the relationship between motivation and creativity.

Creativity requires merging and managing different kinds of knowledge and complementary expertise, essential to break through the functional boundaries of the organization, or even the complete supply chain. Therefore, multifunctional teams are the heart of the innovation process. Successful innovation needs diverse teams, ownership, clear expectations and team spirit to create the right conditions to allow the collaboration required, in order to be as effective as possible.

The widespread misunderstanding is: Creativity does not need structure. But the process of innovation does not happen by itself. Successful innovation depends on good people as well as adequate processes to help them grow. These structured approaches will invite, involve, engage and mobilize good people to add their creative and critical thinking. At the right moments.

CREATING AND LEADING MULTIFUNCTIONAL TEAMS

Social interaction is a natural feature of human behaviour; yet, ensuring harmo-

nious working relations is no easy endeavour. Only strong and cohesive groups can have beneficial and creative effects, capitalize on internal synergies and achieve results above the average. The most common barriers for innovative teams are:

- > Lack of passion, common spirit and a vision of the future.
- > Departmental "silo thinking".
- > Low cohesion between members.
- > Lack of building or "solidifying" of the team.
- > Lack of communication.
- > Insufficient creativity.

By definition, an innovative and successful team requires people from different backgrounds, with different interests and points of view. We should not be too surprised that people in a team have their own view and will naturally defend their own interests. So the real question is: How then, is a team expected to "cooperate closely" if they see things so differently?

The conditions required to create a common spirit include:

- > Passion for a shared future and the objectives required to achieve that vision.
- > Acceptance of group values and norms, making them visible and keeping them updated by open discussion with enough space for agreement and disagreement.
- > Feelings of mutual trust and dependency, by giving members the chance to know each other, by assigning them with specific tasks, to build their own team.
- > Appropriate involvement in the decision making process and providing enough information to everyone about what decisions were made and why.
- > Freedom to resolve own conflicts and provision of professional help if needed. Treat "people" issues like any other point in the agenda.

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ISSN 1268-2934

DEPARTMENTAL SILO THINKING

Classically, organizations have been structured according to functional disciplines, resulting in a vertical structure. This can naturally create resistance to the effectiveness of cross-functional teams, especially when departmental objectives and goals conflict. Therefore, an organization needs to understand the multidimensional matrix needed to ensure that multifunctional teams can work across the traditional departmental silos. This matrix culture requires quite a radical change in the way people are managed. Individuals within the matrix will have more than one manager, and those managers all play a role in the coaching, mentoring and development of that individual. More specifically, the Project Manager of a cross-functional project team takes responsibility for team members who are not in their own “department.”

Organizational selection processes tend to sort people by preferred thinking styles and previous experiences, for example:

Production People are hired to reduce complexity by producing high volumes at low costs. Mostly they are selected on their competency to control concrete issues, be attentive to the practical aspects of production and increase the overall efficiency of operations. They think in terms of difficulties, they think “analytically,” they like to solve problems and “put pieces together.”

The **Research & Development** department consists mostly of highly educated inventors, scientists and technicians who are knowledgeable in specific areas. Their preferred way of thinking lies in matching “science and technology” holistically to new concepts and projects.

Marketing & Sales people have to detect new opportunities in the market place. They like to build relationships, to say “yes” rather than “no”, explore “possibilities” and “what could be” as opposed to “what is.” They are bored by the detail of procedures, forms and minute calculations, which they perceive more as barriers than as support. They are more interested in building relations, in conceiving possibilities, in launching and

“starting”, but less in “following through” systematically to the end.

THINKING PREFERENCES

We have selected and educated the best person for his regular job, but the moment we bring all the members together in one team, we have to deal with their differences in thinking preference. So what is the best way to handle that? We often use a frame to comprehend these natural thinking preferences, based on the work of the American scientist Ned Herrmann. The Herrmann Brain Dominance Inventory (HBDI®) distinguishes four categories of thinking preferences.

Once we understand the preferences of the individual team members, we can use this approach to optimize team results by taking advantage of their diversity or finding the gaps in the team, to be either aware of that deficiency or fill in the shortage with extra support.

These principles can be applied to innovation teams. Each innovation team and each phase of the innovation process asks for a combination of the four thinking preferences.

clarity around their roles. Dependent on these roles, members will fulfil important tasks during the different phases of the project. The project manager will manage the involvement of all these people at different stages of the project, to ensure continued motivation and commitment, and will clarify their roles and responsibilities during each phase.

COHESIVE AND CLEVER TEAMS

It is difficult to create cohesiveness in teams of more than 10–12 people, so we need clever organization principles to work with bigger groups. Separate the “core” project team (3–5) from the “extended” group (10–12 maximum) but care for both of them. Groups need to share interests, attitudes and values, even though they may differ greatly in personality, skills, content knowledge or interests.

Group spirit and relationships take time to develop: allow teams space, time and money to do things together, to get to know each other and even get into trouble. The only way they will “get out of their people issues” is to first “get into them”. Be prepared to provide help in whatever terms that may be: professional coaching, soft skills training, mentoring, develop their capability to be assertive, express disagreement, solve conflicts.

It is important to recognize that developing and sustaining teams will always follow a sequential and even natural process which is well described by Bruce Tuckman: after **Forming** a team, the initial excitement of the project is sufficient to overcome any “people” issues between team members. As the project progresses, these issues become more apparent and the team enters a **Storming** period, resulting

in team members and stakeholders being frustrated. Before the team can achieve **Performing** status, it is important to go through a process of careful and meticulous **Norming**. This phase asks for clear and accepted roles and responsibilities. The team discusses and develops its working style. Leadership is respected and the leader facilitates and enables participation. Agreement on approaches and processes is crucial. Once the team is ready to split up, it is healthy to allow it to enter the **Adjourning** phase. A closing process will help the individuals in the team leave one project, while maintaining their motivation for the next.

COMMUNICATION

Effective communication in the team is probably one of the biggest challenges in innovation projects. Much has been written around the subject and indeed, offerings abound in all shapes, forms and sizes.

Table I: Innovation requires a combination of the four thinking preferences.

	Focus	Role	Change
Analyser	Analyses the environment and solves issues	Tests concepts and describes results	Supports with data, completes models
Organizer	Controls the process, the time and the budgets	Manages the project and implements concepts	Keeps track of the assignment, sets out for results
Communicator	Manages involvement, deals with social dynamics	Inspires team and stakeholders, cares for feelings and human relations	Cares for social consequences and deals with resistance, communicates
Innovator	Invents the future, challenges existing paradigms	Stimulates creativity and designs new concepts	Finds creative solutions for new dilemmas

A key in setting the roles and responsibilities is to distinguish:

- > **The Sponsor:** the individual who defines and wants the solution; is willing to set the conditions for it to happen; mostly represents higher management.
- > **The Project Manager:** the person who makes things happen in a structured way, on time and within budget.
- > **The Team Members:** the people involved and committed to “delivering” the project because of their knowledge, experience or interest in ensuring successful implementation.
- > **The Stakeholders:** Those who are directly or indirectly affected by the project (have a vested interest in it); they can often influence the customers.

This distinction, at first, seems blindingly obvious. Nevertheless, in our experience, at least 80% of project teams suffer from lack of

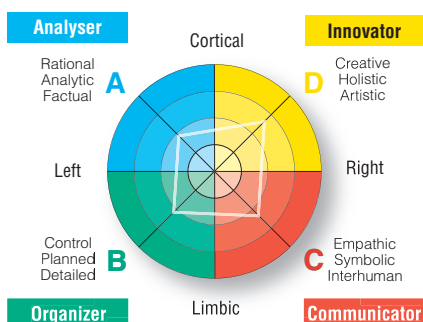


Figure 1: The Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI®)

Table II: Roles and responsibilities during the project.

	Pre-definition	Definition	Planning	Implementation	Closure
Project sponsor	Reviews project request	Signs off project definition after review link to business goals Appoints Project Manager	Approves final plan	Reviews and approves kick off meeting Monitors milestones Approves changes Resolves issues	Completes project review Provides feedback on performance of Project Manager Shares information on results Assesses benefits
Project manager	Completes a situation appraisal and makes recommendations on the project idea Fills in project request	Appoints project team Develops detailed definition Links project to business goals Obtains go ahead to plan the project	Assigns tasks Completes schedule Negotiates resources Analyses risks Obtains go ahead to implement	Organizes project kick off Schedules progress reviews Completes project status report Gets approval for changes Resolves issues	Completes project handover Captures lessons learned Closure review and evaluation with team
Project team	No direct involvement	Provides input to development of definition phase	Provides input to final plan	Attends reviews Identifies and logs changes Helps to resolve issues	Provides input to closeout

SERIOUS CREATIVITY

Organizations tend to spend more time extending lines and proposing “*me too*” products, rather than opening the possibilities to “*thinking laterally*” about their offerings. No real creativity is developed internally and the reaction of markets is ruthless.

Customers are increasingly more selective and less faithful than ever and this situation really asks for breakthrough ideas. Creativity is often assumed to be a spontaneous activity.

But serious creativity (see Edward de Bono) is not only about “*getting*” inspiration or being curious or allowing ourselves to dream. Of course, these are important conditions, but it can only be achieved in a structured way with appropriate tools and techniques, which stimulate and focus our “*out-of-the-box*” thinking. Creativity sessions follow two phases: First divergence of ideas, and secondly “*convergence*” of solutions to harvest them. The divergent phase seeks to fan out ideas, based on an open atmosphere of free thinking in a group. If one were to stop after the “*divergent phase*”, the result would be a large collection of ideas of little value. So it is necessary to go through a convergent phase, to harvest from the fan of ideas by feeling the biggest potential, by developing the most promising concept, and setting action for implementation. It allows others to engage in the value of the core ideas and concepts.

These sessions provide a physical setting where members are close to each other, meet face to face and “*under one roof*”. Important rules during this creative game are:

- Avoid judgement.
- Be open in the creative group.
- Give extra attention to naïve ideas.
- No hierarchy or arrogance.
- Hitch a ride on the ideas of other.

And, provide a fun place to be in and the possibility of visualizing project content.

TOOLBOX FOR SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS:

We often encounter the belief that disciplined processes are complex, bureaucratic and constrained. Although too much process can kill creativity, we are defenders of a structured and disciplined approach to mobilize creative and critical thinking, thorough decision making and the early anticipation of risks. It is a matter of balance.

Project Management: Project Management techniques are key to staying on track. Applying them to “*radical innovation*” projects evokes a paradoxical feeling. Often project management tools are well applied on “*incremental innovation*” projects; projects where the end result can be more or less well described and based on earlier routine. Applying these tools to innovation projects is straightforward. The challenge is to support radical innovation with project management tools, because it is essential if consistent and successful outcomes are required. They help to define objectives, scope and results, to set the scene and to define roles and responsibilities. They support communication between the sponsor, stakeholders and the team, to evaluate the project and to learn.

Stage-Gate Model: Helps phase development and promotes deliberate decision making. It helps restrict investment in a next step by giving a “*green light*” only when everyone is comfortable with the outcome of the current stage.

Performance Management: If project managers are inclined to think that their team members are the cause of performance problems in their project, they are mostly deceiving themselves. Studies reveal that 85% of problems in organizations are caused by inadequate organization, making it difficult for people to perform properly. But because people are often more visible than deficiencies within the organization, they are blamed more quickly. In any case, an employee who performs well is always discouraged in a poorly functioning system. Fortunately, concerned employees still tend to

resolve problems within the organization in a flexible and improvised manner, despite the reduced attention or recognition from their management. Our advice: set clear expectations, negotiate them and document what has been agreed and accepted: this will help create optimal working conditions; clarify and describe the desired behaviour; analyse the incentives and define timely and specific feedback. A thorough analysis by the “*Performance System*” method will support this.

Managing Involvement: Is a technique that involves and manages stakeholders and commits team members at the right moment and at the appropriate level.

ANALYSING ISSUES

C. Kepner and B. Tregoe have distinguished and developed five pragmatic approaches to find in a disciplined way solutions for issues. They are:

- **Situation Appraisal:** To understand complex situations and to sort out and prioritize manageable concerns.
- **Problem Analysis:** To solve problems by efficiently gathering facts, to avoid jumping to conclusions and to find real root causes.
- **Decision Analysis:** To make grounded and mature decisions, to choose optimal solutions or options.
- **Potential Problem Analysis:** To identify threats and risks, to reduce the number and severity of potential problems and to set preventive actions.
- **Opportunity Analysis:** To identify unforeseen opportunities and to benefit from otherwise unexploited possibilities.

ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

Project managers are very unlikely to be able to master all these approaches, for two reasons:

- They will never be able to get the needed routine and frequency to practice these approaches;
- It is often better to obtain timely support from an outsider to facilitate a group session.

This allows the Project Manager to fully participate in the group. We often advise assigning process facilitators or even hiring them from outside. Apart from understanding the approaches from the earlier mentioned toolbox, a good facilitator has at their disposal consulting, influencing and questioning skills in addition to teaching skills.

CONCLUSION

Innovation does not happen by itself. Successful innovation depends on having good people in the right organizational environment. It is about surrounding them with adequate processes to help them grow. Only structured approaches will invite, involve, engage and mobilize good people to add their creative and critical thinking, at the right moments.

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NEURO-BOOKS INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY

"The Whole Brain Business Book" by Ned Herrmann, Ed. MacGraw-Hill – Language: English – Price: 30,07 € tax included (without shipping).

In his last book, Ned Herrmann himself shows how to apply his famous four-quadrant paradigm for maximum productivity and creativity at work! It is the first book to apply the whole brain thinking preferences exclusively to business.

"The Creative Brain" by Ned Herrmann, Ed. Brain Books – Language: English – Price: 30,07 € tax included (without shipping).

A book with many examples and exercises about solving problem strategies. A time-proven resource for developing creativity through understanding our most powerful creative resource: the brain.

"Demain, je parle en public" by Thierry Destrez, Ed. Dunod – Language: French – Price: 13,19 € tax included (without shipping). How to control your voice, your gesture, your emotion and... your ideas when speaking in front of an audience. Simple and effective techniques that will allow you to structure your interventions.

"De kracht van diversiteit" by Ernst Jan Reitsma, Ed. Lemma – Language: Dutch – Price: 40 € tax included (without shipping) (www.lemma.nl). How to manage diversity within a team.

"Persönlichkeitsmodelle und Persönlichkeitstests" by Seiwert, Wagner, Schimmel-Schloo, Ed. Acquisa – Language: German – Price: 89 € tax included (without shipping). A comparative study of principal personality tools (HBDI®, MBTI, LIFO, TMS).

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