

CHALLENGE
AWARENESS DIFFERENT JUDGEMENT
CROSS-PROFESSIONAL
ADVANTAGE
CREATIVITY
INNOVATION
TENSION
PERSPECTIVE
EXPERTISE
VALUE THINK
VIEW
DIVERSITY
COMMUNICATION
IDEA LEARN
BETTER
APPRECIATE
TRUST
NEW
TEAM
PERCEPTION
LEADER
COOPERATION
PARADOX
Innovation

MAKING INNOVATION WORK

THE INNOVATIVE POTENTIAL OF CROSS-PROFESSIONAL TEAMS

By Danaë Huijser

INNOVATION MATTERS

Innovation is a fundamental driver in today's economyⁱ. From a strategic point of view, it can be addressed as an aspect of business level strategy or as a direction for corporate growth. Innovation is no longer a competitive advantage, but a critical success factor for organisations in the current dynamic business world, where highly innovative companies are more profitable than their less innovative counterpartsⁱⁱ.

As different views help to generate new ideas, sharing information between business units seems a logical step. This commonsensical thought, however, does not always pay off. Many organisations have put cross-professional teams in place, yet these teams often fail to deliver innovative results. How come?

In my experience in working with multinationals such as 3M, IKEA, Canon and Shimano, I found that teams that experience miscommunication, dissatisfaction or low productivity often suffer from a lack of trust between their members. This inhibits the

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This article is based on her Master Thesis of International Business for TiasNimbas Business School. The research addresses the issue of how cross-professional teams can take advantage of their diversity to create innovative solutions.

Four teams in four multinational organisations were interviewed in 2009, using the Appreciative Inquiry method*, to unravel how cross-professional teams can create the conditions that will allow them to capitalise on their diversity.

These teams are: a team in the medical branch of an American technology company, a team in the private banking branch of a Dutch bank, a staff team in a Dutch HR service company, and a staff team in a Japanese manufacturing company. (Names cannot be disclosed due to confidentiality agreements.)

team's ability to constructively use their tensions. Trust becomes especially important in diverse teams such as cross-professional teams: yet the more diverse a team is, the more difficult it is to find a common ground. My research reveals that the role of the team leader is crucial in creating an innovative cross-professional team, as this requires trust building in a diverse team. One can imagine that not all good leaders are also good cross-professional team leaders, as additional management skills are required.

“Cultural diversity can lead to innovation... but often does not.”

Business is not only influenced by national cultures, but also by organisational and professional cultures. Conflicting cultural values can result in stress, dissatisfaction and energy drain. Yet if well managed, diversity can be a strategic resource to encourage innovativeness. However:

*“Differences within a group do not automatically lead to new thinking. Whether they do, depends heavily on how the group members experience and handle their cultural differences.”***

Based on extensive research, Amabile and her colleaguesⁱⁱⁱ found management practices to be vital in making innovation work. An important management practice that is supportive of innovation includes the formation of work-groups. As innovation is heavily dependent on knowledge, organisations should be able to learn and manage their intellectual capital^{iv} in order to create tacit organisational knowledge^v. Work-group characteristics are vital in this process.

INNOVATION THROUGH GROUP DIVERSITY

A group of people from different professions can come up with more and better ideas than a group of - say - financial experts. Cross-professional teams therefore have potential advantages in terms of productivity over homogeneous groups. When people with different professional backgrounds and different expectations meet, there is a valuable tension that can be used constructively if people are able to see the advantages of being different^{vi}. This is where the potential for innovation lies.

“Together, we can make a better product: based on all the different perspectives, we create something we could have never created by ourselves.” – Business controller in cross-professional team of Dutch HR service company

Yet diverse groups also encounter more challenges in terms of communication and cooperation, as group members may not share the same values, and have different expectations of 'normal' behaviour. Cross-professional teams often do not succeed in reaching the innovative potential that is embedded in their diversity.

Especially in the earliest phase of cross-professional teamwork, the teams' productivity is hindered by a lack of trust, inhibiting their ability to share information and

exchanging ideas. When trust is established, team members can come up with ideas, stemming from their different professional views, to create new and better ideas, maybe even innovative ones.

Creativity is about more and better ideas; innovation is about using these ideas to put a new product, process or service into use. Diversity helps the creative process, yet often hinders the innovative process, as consensus is more difficult to achieve.

Group stage	Process	Diversity makes the process..
Entry: group formation	Trust building	More difficult
Work: problem description and analysis	Creativity (ideation)	Easier
Action: decision making and implementation	Innovation (consensus building, agreeing and acting)	More difficult

Adapted from "The influence of group diversity on the process of innovation"^{vii}

BUILDING TRUST IN CROSS-PROFESSIONAL TEAMS

Team members can only learn to acknowledge and appreciate perspectives that differ from their own, if they trust each other's professional expertise. To build that trust, team members first need to become aware of their own mental frames and biases and their operational consequences.

"From a financial perspective, I have the tendency to look at the current returns of a specific client, but marketing approaches clients more based on their potential returns." – Business controller in cross-professional team of Dutch HR service company

The team leader or an external consultant can help team members to become aware of their own professional values, and enable discussion to establish trust. This can be achieved by asking questions that enable team members to make their professional values - and operational consequences - explicit. This is the first step in building a team culture of trust, in which professional differences are used as an advantage. Acknowledgement of the advantages of diversity can become the norm in the team's culture.

“I try to make sure that cooperation works the best possible way. I do not want to get involved in the execution. That is the job of the experts. But the more expert you are, the stronger your opinion. And if you put several experts in one room, you might need some moderation every once in a while.” – Team leader in a cross-professional team of an American technology company

One of the four teams that participated in the research did not have a formal leader. Its project never really took off:

“We remain stuck in the analysing phase. It never became concrete, as no one took the role as a team leader.” - Marketeer in a cross-professional team of a Dutch bank

A self-steering team may sound appealing to some organisations, yet if the team is diverse and innovation is the goal, the absence of a team leader to facilitate the process of trust building highly increases the chance of failure to innovate.

INNOVATION IN CROSS-PROFESSIONAL TEAMS

When trust is established, and team members are ready to listen to each other's perspectives, the constructive interaction that generates ideation has become possible. Teams can use their diversity to generate different problem definitions, ideas, action alternatives, and solutions.

Only if team members appreciate their differences, they can learn from each other's different points of view, as innovation is a learning process. Some problems cannot be solved by making an either-or choice, as both choices have advantages. Tensions between different teams, departments or business units can be used to find better solutions.

“When the sales department was thinking about redesigning their sales processes, [...] the finance department started asking question [...] and these questions led to a better integrated system”. - Team leader in a cross-professional team of a Japanese manufacturer

There will never be 'one best solution' as one person's solution is often another person's problem. Different ideas should not be seen as conflicting, but as complementary and interdependent.

"We give everyone the opportunity to give their input from their own discipline, then we take a helicopter view, summarise what the different views are, and see if we need to make a choice for one or the other, or if we may be able to acknowledge the value of both and use them both. It is really like solving a puzzle, trying to see if we can make the pieces fit."

Product manager in a cross-professional team of a Dutch HR service organisation

Dealing with professional differences in a constructive way can be achieved by trying to understand what lies beneath someone's professional opinion, in order to move towards a process of picking, choosing and combining ideas to come to an innovative solution. Discussion between team members should be based on explanations on why something is important; making explicit why something matters, selling the arguments.

"I always say we have two groups, the business part - the sales and marketing organisation, that always wants to do it as fast as possible - and the technical side - that is making things more difficult... But the technical side has to do the necessary tests, approve the data, and for the sales department this can never go fast enough. We want the sales department to have a bit more patience, so that the technicians can get it done right and offer the sales people the right selling story as well."

– Team leader in a cross-professional team of an American technology company

The underlying assumptions of different professional values are usually taken for granted. Without someone who facilitates the process of uncovering these assumptions, the advantages of the diversity will remain untouched. Teams then run the risk to remain stuck in the ideation phase, in which creative ideas are shared, yet without ever agreeing on the implementation it might result into a pointless brain exercise.

MAKING IT WORK

The innovative capability of cross-professional teams turns out to be heavily influenced by personal competences. *Creative perception* and *postponing judgement*^{viii} are two key competences for cross-professional team members and leaders.

Creative perception is the ability to recognise the tendencies and biases in our own perception, and to learn to observe differently. When confronted with a new idea that does not fit existing mental maps, team members and leaders should be able to postpone judgement and ask for more explanation.

To benefit from other professional perspectives, it is key that different views are not automatically labelled as wrong, but are welcomed without judgement.

Reframing differences in a way that allows for the opportunity for further cooperation is challenging. A team leader therefore is crucial for a cross-professional team to be effective in its communication, by facilitating the process of dealing with differences and creating a safe environment, based on trust. The interviewees in my research mentioned the following leadership attributes, listed in the table below, as essential for team success.

A CPT leader should be able to:	A CPT leader should avoid:
Facilitate trust building by creating awareness for team members' own professional values and enable discussion to create the conditions to establish trust.	Pushing the team towards his or her dominant cultural preference: being a team leader and chairman is difficult and holds the risk of dominating the group process and no longer facilitating it.
Facilitate creativity through postponing judgement and creative perception: the team leader should facilitate team members' ability to stop or postpone automatic reactions and reframe information without judging, acknowledging and appreciating other perspectives.	Giving solutions: managers are used to finding solutions for problems all day long, but in a CPT, this will never lead to innovation. The team leader should ask questions, facilitating the discussion of various ideas, and avoid jumping to solutions.
Facilitate innovation through paradox management: the team leader should create and facilitate a dialogue that stays away from polarities, not making an either/or choice, but looking at all different options and their advantages. ^{ix}	

Managing a cross-professional team requires a leader that is able to facilitate the process without dominating it, who welcomes ideas without judging them or jumping to solutions, and who looks at seemingly incompatible ideas not as conflicts or problems, but as complementary or paradoxes.

Creating and facilitating an innovative cross-professional team involves special skills that organisations cannot expect from all their

managers; if they do, this may result in teams that only cost time and energy, and are unable to deliver innovative results. Using an external facilitator who gives feedback and steers the process can compensate for the fact that not every leader or manager is a very good cross-professional team leader. The people side of managing can be more complex than the technical side; in the end it is about capabilities, and not only those we learn in business schools.

* Cooperrider, D.L. et al. (2005). *Appreciative Inquiry. A positive revolution in change*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.

** In Plum, E. et al. (2008). *Cultural Intelligence: the art of leading cultural complexity*. London: Middlesex University Press, pp. 72.

ⁱ Johnson, G. (2008). *Exploring corporate strategy*. 8th ed. Harlow: Prentice Hall.

ⁱⁱ Greenberg, J. (2008). *Behaviour in organisations*. 9th ed. Harlow: Prentice Hall.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amabile, T.M. et al. (1996). Assessing the work environment for creativity. *Academy of management Journal*, Vol. 39, pp. 1154-1184. Amabile, T.M. et al. (1998). How to kill creativity. *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1998.

^{iv} Edwards, R. W. et al. (2002). *Understanding Organisation Culture and Innovation: A Case Study Approach*. Monash University Department of Management.

^v Glor, E.D. (1998). What Do We Know About Enhancing Creativity and Innovation? A Review of Literature. *The Innovation Journal*. 1998.

^{vi} Please refer to Huijser, M. (2008). *The Cultural Advantage: a new model for succeeding with global teams*. 2nd ed. Boston: Intercultural Press. to read more about the advantages of diversity.

^{vii} Adler, N.J. (1991). *International dimensions of organisational behaviour*. 2nd ed. Boston: PWS-KENT Publishing Company., pp. 137.

^{viii} Read more in Byttemier, I. et al. (2007). *Creativity today*. Amsterdam: BIS Publishers.

^{ix} Further reading: Johnson, B. (1996). *Polarity Management; Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems*. Massachusetts: HRD Press, Inc. & Wit, B. de and Meyer, R. (2004). *Strategy: process, content, context. An international Perspective*. 3rd ed. London: Thomson.