Cognitive diversity, learning and team performance

The problem

This Head of UK Operations in this global services business is a strong innovator, with a preference for less structure, and for change situations that open up, rather than limit possibilities. She was struggling to get the message across to her team: The market gave many opportunities for technology-enabled growth. And the business wanted growth, and quickly. But others seemed not to think at the same scale, and with the same urgency.

> "We talked frequently at our planning and strategy meetings around the future and where we needed to get to. We'd allocate tasks, but it still felt like they'd stare at me, a bit blankly. I was concerned that it was about my communication: am I getting this across well enough? Were they excited? Did they 'get' it? When I tested that with them, they said, yes, they were excited, we can see where the business is going to grow. But the reality of getting there was a real challenge."

And I was struggling to bring the team with me. I always felt that I was running ahead of them, and I was finding that frustrating.

What we did

We were invited by the business leader to work with her and the team, and we used Adaption-Innovation to uncover team similarities and differences in approach.

As the KAI Foundation explains, the more adaptive prefer more structure, rules and detail, while the more innovative prefer less structure, fewer constraints and to take a big picture view. The majority of us want a moderate amount of structure and information, but the differences between us are important, And a person's preference seems to be fixed through life, although our behaviour, of course, isn't. We learn coping mechanisms for stretching from our preference when we need to do so.

We know these points as a result of decades of research and development. Adaption-Innovation theory is measured through its associated inventory, called the KAI. More adaptive scores are shown with lower numbers, and more innovative scores with higher. These differences in problem solving preference can lead to big implications around:

- Finding work that suits your preferred style.
- Understanding how pressure causes us stress, and building resilience methods.
- Understanding how different problem styles can use these differences to improve collaboaration and innovation.

Having given an overview of Adaption-Innovation, we shared individual results with team members, then presented the distribution of team scores:

Team	Mean score	Range	Leader score
Business team (n=7)	98	82-123	120

The leader's score was highly innovative, and was a long way from the team's average. Most team members were considerably more adaptive, but the average was raised by two high innovators, including the leader. There was learning and reflecting to be done.

The gap between me and most of them was significant. It was an eye-opening moment. What was interesting about it was that they were grouped together closely, with one of them being nearer to the mid-point. I realised I was getting these people to make a leap. I was saying 'just make the change now and we'll deal later with the fallout'. And they didn't see that could possibly be achieved.

Learning outcomes

The leader re-calibrated her expectations of her team. She realised that some people felt the current rate of change was already significant and demanding. While others wanted more rapid and more radical change. And that these perceptions reflected people's different styles.

She also learnt to check her emotional responses: "My frustrations would come out as: 'what am I doing wrong here?' But then I'd rethink and say to myself: 'Hold on - for these guys, we are making change. Which is different to my view of what change really means.' "

But the business opportunities were still present and urgent. The leader made a couple of resourcing decisions:

> "Where we needed most change was in client servicing, where the more adaptive people were located…I recruited someone into the client services part of the business. - joined the business early in 2017, with the role of making sure our service proposition delivered brilliant client experience; engaging and bringing our people with us; and developing our people so that they were able to deliver the service."

> "The other thing we've done is to have clearer vision on the transformation projects we need to implement in order to get there. I've recruited a transformation lead, to help us get where we need… and digitally enable our business and help with the integration with our acquisitions."

Business outcomes

The learning that came from the Adaption-Innovation team exercise fed a number of decisions. The leader has realised her own strengths and limitations, and refined her role, while resourcing the wider team; and defined a transformation programme, all while allocating work to people, as far as possible, to match their problem-solving preferences.

And through this period staff turnover remained low. People are engaged with their work, change projects are part of everyday work, and more people have contributed to business growth, in ways they can manage.

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I learnt that the more adaptive people are good at managing people, workloads, and making sure that clients are renewed and reviewed: our traditional business. With that at the core, it gives us a platform of stability to both transform the business and make sure we're still delivering what we need.

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