



Breakthrough ideas

Why is it that some groups continue to explore creative ideas while other groups reduce risk-taking and revert to habit?

A survey of 519 organisations from 12 industry sectors, between 2009–2012, found increased levels of risk-aversion and product line extensions, as opposed to breakthrough thinking. This was despite a high commitment to and increased investment in innovation¹. One of my earlier articles, *The Innovation Bind*, explains why this increased need for innovation can mean we get less of it,

The research described here was the basis for the author's doctorate, completed in 2012. It gives some insights into why groups continue to explore creative ideas while other groups reduce risk-taking and revert to habit. An important aspect of the research was that it involved working 'live' with groups while they were doing their work, with this author as a member of the each team.

On the 'upside' this gave depth of insight into their working processes. The down side is that it lacks breadth – the research covers three teams: two from the health sector and one from education. I make no claims that my observations are transferable to other contexts, but there are interesting, provocative patterns.

The context of the research

The most common definition of creativity is the generation of ideas that are novel and useful. Without creativity, there can be no innovation,

¹ http://www.accenture.com/us-en/Pages/insight-low-risk-innovation-costly.aspx?c=mc_pposts_10000040&n=otc_1013



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though, of course, creative ideas can be developed without them being implemented and deriving value for people.

Too little creativity research looks at real teams who are expected to produce creative ideas in real work contexts, and where they are expected to implement as well as generate ideas. In these three cases, all the teams were expected to generate and implement creative ideas.

In case 1, a team was asked to generate and implement creative ideas for their organisation, within the context of a management development programme. The group was given the promise of funding for their ideas, so that these could be implemented in the workplace during the current financial year.

Case 2 referred to a team in a UK university that was developing new executive education services to complement its existing teaching and research activities. The degree of co-ordination and effort required made this novel work for this university.

Case 3 involved the formation of a new work team, which was brought together when three previously separate teams were simplified into one. The team looked after healthcare for children and young people in their region. The new team's task included forming policies to cover the whole of their new territory, as well as generating ongoing process and service improvements to make better the lives of staff and service users. The manager of this team gave them access to support from a leadership development programme, the timing of which coincided with the start of their structural change.

What we found

Case 1: This group struggled to generate creative ideas. There was a fundamental lack of trust between group members and with some wider programme stakeholders during this exercise. Doubts and suspicions grew for course participants as to senior people's leaders' intentions in introducing this "Ideas Exercise". Consequently, people with-held their willingness for risk-taking. The overwhelming pattern was of incremental, safe ideas, which often extended what already existed within the organisation. When the programme ended, there was a palpable relief that the tension had ended.

Case 2: This group produced an initial stream of ideas, both incremental and more radical that formed of a series of new service offerings to the market. Growth was rapid, as the team worked together well, based on a measure of trust in each other's competence, and differences, and a shared sense of excitement about being part of 'making something happen' together.

This growth brought the team to the attention of the wider university faculty. Up to this point, the team had been working largely under-the-radar – performing a type of "guerilla creativity". Now, this greater attention from senior leadership put the group under an uncomfortable spotlight. There was disagreement on how to proceed and whether to support the group to strive for more growth. Team members began to feel isolated from the wider organisation. They perceived that they



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had brought unwelcome and uncomfortable issues to the attention of senior leaders. As these conversations prevailed in the wider organisation, so their own energies, propensity for risk-taking and ideas stagnated within the core team, resulting in a severe drop in new services and sales stagnation.

Case 3: Over a 21 month period, this team produced a stream of creative ideas – both incremental and more radical - resulting in new organisational processes and service user improvements. They developed coherence, sufficient trust, and a sense of team purpose inside and outside of the formal leadership development sessions. The team also had explicit senior leadership support, beyond the team boundaries – in this example, from the Managing Director, and other organisational directors.

Developing a theory: what is this really telling us?



Step 1: shows that sufficient trust was the initial step required in all cases. Without trust, ideas were simply not shared. Trust, in these contexts means:

- I trust you enough to tell you my ideas;
- to develop them with you;
- that you won't laugh at my thoughts, or steal them, or belittle me.

The group in case 1 didn't develop sufficient trust. By and large, novel and useful ideas were not developed, and the group reverted to a 'safe' zone. In case 2 the team had known each other for some time, and had built up trust through working together. In case 3, the formation of a new team meant that some knew each other better than others. Trust took time to develop – in fact, around 3 months. For cases 2 and 3, trust was absolutely necessary for idea generation and idea development.

Step 2: Once sufficient trust is in place, people in cases 2 and 3 went on to make use of the diversity on their teams. The creativity literature demonstrates that diversity aids debate. With enough trust, team members began to explore their differences, as well as what held them together. These conversations helped people generate and develop their ideas further, and seemed to give the excitement needed to fuel the start of implementation efforts.

However, the difference between cases 2 and 3 was that in case 2, the team's efforts hit the proverbial brick wall after around 12 months. Energy and willingness for risk-taking dried up; morale fell, service and process improvement ideas ceased. With team 3, risk-taking, team morale and level of ideas continued to be high up to 18 months



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after our work together. The next step explains what made the difference.

Step 3: Team 3 had explicit senior leadership support, whereas team 2 did not. (Team 1 did, but didn't have the in-team trust for wider leadership support to matter!). The initial success of team 2 raised their profile in the organisation to the extent where they could not operate 'below the radar'. The growth of executive education services through this team brought their efforts to the level of faculty leadership and raised uncomfortable questions about how to support the next stage of growth. These questions were unresolved and agreement could not be reached. By contrast, the team in case 3 had the explicit and public support of directors in the organisation, including the Managing Director.

Why did this support help to sustain innovation efforts over time? I believe that this 'support' combined the need for innovation – the challenge - as well as the personal encouragement and permission-giving of the leader to the group.

As Goleman describes², leaders with empathic concern create a "secure base," the sense that your boss has your back, will support and protect you as needed, and gives you the security to take risks and try new ways of operating – the key to innovation. In this research, step 3 was essential for the ongoing implementation of ideas.

The prescription: what teams can do to generate and implement breakthrough ideas

1. This piece of research gives insights about the sequence as to how these teams progressed, or stopped exploring ideas. Interestingly, in all of them, building enough trust was the first hurdle. In my experience with organisations trying to build capacity for innovation, people often under-estimate the importance of trust-building. They shouldn't - it is an essential step. Organisations should allow enough conversation time, both formal and informal, between team members so that people come to understand each other's intentions and wishes, and build up enough trust between themselves, focused on the purpose of the work they are doing. In this research, where sufficient trust was most clearly developed – in case 3 - it took around 3 months.

2. However, trust is not enough for idea generation and development. Diversity of perspectives is also needed, and teams should ensure they give enough time for debates to incorporate the different opinions of team members, as they discuss various means of doing their work.

3. Trust and diversity helped idea generation and development in this research. They also fuelled the start of implementation, but were not enough to sustain implementation efforts through the inevitable obstacles. Innovation will alter power dynamics in organisations, bringing different views about whether and how to progress efforts.

² <http://www.linkedin.com/today/post/article/20130929085735-117825785-empathy-101>



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The role of senior leadership was crucial in supporting ongoing innovation, so that agreement was reached and ideas were given the go-ahead for implementation.

What this research shows is that 'success' in this study depended on a combination of in-team factors and senior leadership support beyond the team.

As the work shifted from generating and developing ideas into implementation, so senior leadership support became more critical. This is not surprising as implementation will disrupt working patterns, roles and power bases. Senior leaders should be mindful of this shift and what it requires from them: challenge-framing, permission-giving and enough autonomy to the team in the early stages; and more frequent, more visible senior leadership support through implementation.