



This newsletter is aimed at identifying useful, practical lessons from research on creativity and innovation, and drawing out the practical lessons for those of us at work. The **focus** in this issue – getting the best from diverse teams.

**So what's new?** Let's agree that creativity is the generation of new and useful ideas, and innovation is the successful implementation of these ideas. Getting complex, non-routine work done in teams is not new. What is different today is the combination of complexity of the task, the squeeze on resources, pressures on time and high expectations of delivery from self and others. The need for ideas has truly arrived.

***Innovation is high on the performance agenda:*** "Executives certainly see innovation as an important driver of growth, with some 70% of top managers saying it is one of their top priorities." (1)

#### **The research: Diverse teams and Creativity – the Pain and the Gain**

Kurtzberg (3) looked at 145 teams across a range of situations, both experimental settings in a business school, and 'real' work teams, from the chemical/ pharmaceutical, high-tech, and consumer products sectors. The research found that:

- Diverse teams *scored better on a measure of idea-fluency*. However, working in these teams was often uncomfortable, and the team members didn't necessarily believe they were creative. What it *felt like* to be in the team *had a greater impact on their assessment of their own creativity* than did their actual creative output.
- A picture emerges of diverse teams with *some advantages* (greater diversity is related to a greater number of ideas) and *some disadvantages* (greater diversity is related to lesser degrees of positive feeling and self-rated creativity). The social and emotional context of the team had a large impact on how people rated their creativity.

*Diverse teams can produce creative results, but can also cause strain for the participants.*

#### **The research: the Leader's role in diverse teams - Accentuate the Positive, Eliminate the Negative**

Kurtzberg's results are consistent with Kirton's (3) work on individuals' differing approaches to solving problems. See [www.kaicentre.com](http://www.kaicentre.com). The greater the diversity, the broader the perspectives; however, the differences between people are likely to increase the frustration for individuals working together.

Egan (4) interviewed 13 Fortune 500 leaders who (a) led creative teams, (b) were acknowledged by their executives as producing creative contributions to organizational success, and (c) identified team diversity as a key element in the success of these teams. What had they learnt about making these teams work?

#### **1. Their experiences corroborated the advantages of diverse teams:**

- *homogeneous teams are less likely to develop creative ideas* (100%);
- representatives from multiple parts of the organization *bring different perspectives* (92%);

- a variety of knowledge and skills is often needed to make a team effective (85%); and
- *experienced people with different backgrounds* (e.g., education, race, gender, and values) *make for better creative team idea generation and outcomes* (77%).

## 2. They shared some practices:

- **Clear and shared goals:** All of the managers emphasized that the “*mix*” of the team or team dynamics were important and that they worked hard to create and monitor individual team members and the group overall to ensure that the *team worked well and positively* toward their *shared goals*. (Egan, p.213). Having **clear goals** can help individuals recognize their successes, and not get swamped by the, occasionally, negative emotions. (This echoes the message from Kurtzberg’s research: the clearer the goal and transparency of the outcome, the more able team members are to rate their performance objectively.)
- **Selecting the right people:** “...individuals who were able to engage in perspective taking, explore the assumptions of the group and problem, and engage group members in considering issues more broadly than they might otherwise.” (Egan, page 214)
- **Ensuring the diversity is known and appreciated:**

The four most common recommendations managers had for managing diverse teams were:

- Make relationship as well as task connections (85%),
- Get to know about the diversity of team members (77%),
- Reinforce successes (69%), and
- Avoid blaming for shortcomings or failures (62%).

*“They don’t have to spend time away from work or be best friends, it just works better if they at least know each other beyond just who they are at work. People seem to be more interested in taking risks with people they know and trust.”Egan: page 216*

## Summary: implications for practice

We understand little about how diverse teams, brought together to work on complex problems, actually work in practice. These teams have great performance potential, especially around the generation of new and useful ideas. However, because, by definition, people in the team have less in common, relations can become difficult, affecting members’ experience and enjoyment of working in the team. Unless action is taken to promote the virtues of team diversity, members may prefer not to subscribe to the experience again.

*Leaders have a role with these teams which is rarely acknowledged, and, in my experience, rarely discussed. They have to contain the inevitable human tensions, sufficient to carry on working productively, and exploring creative possibilities. In short leaders must work hard to need to ensure that team members value the differences between each other.*

Specifically, they should ensure

- (1) Goals are clear, shared and measurable. Also, that progress is actually being measured, as objectively as possible.
- (2) The diversity in the team is understood, valued and used.
- (3) People know each other well enough to build trust. The trust is required to take the risks needed, whenever people are working on unusual problems and acting ‘into the unknown’. This means investing in time to know each well enough, and not just focusing on the task.

To comment or start a debate, contact me:

[www.bluegreenconsulting.com](http://www.bluegreenconsulting.com)

[rob@bluegreenconsulting.com](mailto:rob@bluegreenconsulting.com)

Rob Sheffield mob: 07811 944782

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