

CASE STUDY: THE BEST TEAMS EXHIBIT COGNITIVE DIVERSITY

Background

The concept of young geniuses and old masters dates back to the ancient art world, but has equal application in the business world. The best teams exhibit cognitive diversity. Aside from choosing team members with superficially different backgrounds (physical diversity), including at least one young genius and one old master may be key to establishing a rich discourse. The young genius isn't bound by preconceptions and a lifetime of experiences. Revolutionary insights may be the norm but consistency is only likely if procedures are established and followed. The old master has a more strategic perspective and is willing to take longer to identify and implement a solution. "Gut feeling" sounds unregulated and poorly quantified but is more likely to represent a lifetime of experiences and an intuitive sense of the right approach.

Example

The world of cooking presents an easy way to understand how to manage a young genius vs. an old master. Someone who is new to cooking must follow a recipe or they'll make many mistakes. Their potential for innovation is high though, as they will always be asking why and experimenting. An experienced cook might be offended if they were asked to follow a recipe as they just "know what to do". Their product will be consistently good and may be refined in subsequent versions, but they will seldom ask why or innovate (don't fix it if it's not broken). When I put the two cooks together, if they can work together well, I end up with the best of both....a consistently good product and an occasional game-changing innovation.

Bottom Line

The bottom line is that the best teams exhibit considerable cognitive diversity. It is critical to distinguish this from physical diversity, which is an indicator but not a guarantee of cognitive diversity. Most people are familiar with the Apollo 13 disaster and the amazing recovery engineered by Mission Control. The gentlemen in Mission Control looked virtually identical...it is easy to recall the white shirts, ties, and pocket protectors. They succeeded because members came from different industries so, when confronted with a significant challenge they were able to draw on a very rich experience base.

Assemble a team of individuals who are different from you; an introvert and an extrovert, an engineer and HR professional, a PhD Molecular Biology and BA English, an innovative recent college grad and deeply experienced manager. There is clear value in assembling a superficially diverse team (gender, race, nationality, religion) but the true richness arises from different thinking styles.

Keys to success:

- Demonstrating vulnerability is important and should be initiated by the leader. Individuals should listen more than they speak and everyone should have the opportunity to provide input.
- A cognitively diverse team will not come together naturally or comfortably. It is incumbent upon the leader to create a "safe environment", where all speak up and argue passionately for their point of view. It is equally important that the team is 100% aligned around one path forward.
- Consensus often generates suboptimal decisions, which is why it's important that all viewpoints be heard. The goal is identify the best solution not just the one that more than half the team supports.
- It is critical to consider the other person's perspective. How differently would I react if I knew that someone who seemed to be an aggressor had not intended to hurt me?
- Managing multiple generations can be challenging but handled correctly, all will gain. Experienced (older) team members can serve as mentors to younger members and the younger members can open doors and recognize possibilities that others can no longer access. It all comes back to everyone having a voice.