Key Elements of Awesome Innovative Teams

Teamwork on projects and new initiatives can be complex, often with simultaneous interdependent actions being conducted by several teammates. Challenges can occur in many areas including: Sharing and managing expectations to accomplish organizational goals; timing and quality of hand-offs of internal work products; and timely interactive dialogue between team members.

If senior management does not clearly communicate what is expected regarding costs, schedule and quality of the product/service being provided, or if the team does not understand project parameters/requirements, it can lead to confusion, frustration, and disappointment. Timely interactive communications are critical to clarify requirements, understand resource availability and schedules, respond to questions, and adapt to changing circumstances. This is particularly true on innovative teams composed of creative out-of-the-box thinkers with new ideas which might encounter unanticipated issues. The earlier these issues are identified and addressed the greater the opportunity for success.

Another issue, management sometimes imposes ‘aggressive timelines’ versus what the team may consider more realistic and necessary for project implementation. While this may spur the team to find innovative solutions and process improvements, if carried to an extreme it can result in frustration, low morale, and a sense of hopelessness. It is critical to have honest, candid discussions about product/service quality, cost, and scheduling within the team and with senior management.

#1 Factor for High-Performing Teams: Google conducted an extensive study of their best performing teams producing innovation solutions and determined the #1 factor for their success was having “psychological safety” - where every team member knew they could speak up, voice concerns, debate ideas and professionally disagree without fear of retribution, reprisal, or ridicule. Working in this environment allowed all team members to fully share their experience, skills and insights and leverage their complete collective knowledge to achieve team goals. On lower performing teams, psychological safety was found to be less present as people sometimes held back what they knew, were afraid to voice their concerns or debate others’ ideas.

What the Most Effective Managers Do Differently: A study by Gallup found the most highly effective managers focus on leveraging people’s strengths rather than fixing weaknesses. By concentrating on team members’ strengths, employees are highly motivated, use their most successful skills, and are encouraged to find solutions – very desirable qualities for a team of innovators. Managers compensate for weaknesses by carefully selecting team members whose strengths offset individual weaknesses.

The Flight of the Buffalo: Soaring to Excellence, Learning to Let Employees Lead by James Belasco and Ralph Stayer compares the dynamics of a herd of buffalo to a flock of Canadian geese. Hunters slaughtered large numbers of buffaloes from bison herds by identifying a herd leader and shooting it. The bison would scurry around for a few minutes, but leaderless, they would soon settle down in the same general area and the hunters would shoot another, and another, and another, decimating the herd.
In contrast, a flock of geese flies in a v-formation with the lead goose absorbing the greatest air resistance but creating a draft that reduces resistance for the two following geese on either side. In turn these geese create a draft for the geese behind them, and so forth throughout the V-formation. To fly long distances the flock adapts its formation. When the lead goose tires, it removes itself from the lead and goes to the back of the formation, making room for a new leader. The leader position continually rotates to avoid fatigue and provide fresh energy to lead the flock.

The authors explain similarities between a flock of geese and high-performing, innovative teams in the workplace that often evolve, change, and dissolve as situations dictate. Changing roles results in a variety of experiences for team members, creates opportunities to lead, and prepares members for future leadership succession opportunities. By empowering the team and providing a safe space for robust discussion and debate about the best approaches, creative and innovative solutions are often developed by experienced, capable, and talented staff.

Team Roles: Research shows every team needs five fundamental roles to function effectively - Creator, Refiner, Advancer, Executor and Flexer. Learn more here. Most people lean towards one or two of these roles. Assessments can help people learn their predominant team roles, build on their strengths, address weaknesses, and modify their behavior to improve working relationships and, ultimately their effectiveness as a team member. High-performing, innovative teams have members who collectively perform all these roles well and flex to cover gaps as needed.

Awesome Innovative Team Results: I had the privilege of leading a truly innovative and exceptional team while serving as commanding officer of Coast Guard Civil Engineering Unit Providence (CEUPROV). Our team worked on facility planning; real property; environmental; facility design, repairs, and construction; and eventual disposal of all Coast Guard facilities in the Northeast. As described in The Flight of the Buffalo, our construction projects typically evolved with multiple leaders for key project phases. A Design Team supervisor led the design phase, then handed the completed design package over to the Contracting Officer who led the bids and contracting phase, and then the Construction Chief took the lead for inspection and acceptance of the final construction results.

CEUPROV’s innovative project solutions included: Complex design and construction of the new $2 million Leadership Development Center at the Coast Guard Academy (our project limit prior to that time was $500,000); transferring ownership and maintenance/repair responsibilities for 28 Maine lighthouses (the Coast Guard continued to maintain lighthouse equipment for mariners) creating a tourist ‘lighthouse trail’; using NASA technology and rail design used for moving tall rockets to safely move a Cape Cod lighthouse away from an eroding bluff; leveraging Army and Navy dive teams to recover discarded navigational batteries from underwater locations (at one fourth the cost of contractors in one third the time); first-ever approach to auction individual units of aging Coast Guard housing in Boston with GSA – huge success with proceeds returned to the U.S. Treasury; creation of the nation’s largest temporary heliport literally overnight to support search and rescue, FBI counter-terrorist investigators, and National Transportation Safety Board helicopters, when TWA Flight 800 exploded and crashed in Long Island Sound; and many others.
We also innovated for fun, creating our own CEU-Brew (after hours & shared with customers!); and two Lieutenants getting up at 3:00 am to drive to Maine to buy authentic Maine lobsters for our summer picnic at a lighthouse!

Our team’s results did not go unnoticed by others and team recognitions included: Receiving the Vice-President’s Hammer Award (for teams of pioneers who create an innovative and unique process or program to make government work better); a GSA national award; Society of American Military Engineers recognizing CEUROV as the best civil engineering component in the Coast Guard; receiving the Coast Guard Unit Commendation Medal; and being the runner-up (Silver Medal) for the Commandant’s Quality Award (unprecedented for a first-time application).

Summary: As leaders of teams, empower them, but also watch out for them, and protect them. Innovative teams and individuals take risks and not everything works the first time. My experience is about 3 out of 5 ideas worked, and for those that didn’t, we didn’t point blame, but rather determined why and what we could learn from the experience – this in turn gave our people the confidence to try again, and not shy away from innovation.

I hope this article provides helpful insights into how you and your organization can encourage and inspire amazing innovation teams that produce great results with high morale!

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