

Networks of curiosity: how innovation and diversity go hand in hand

In the last 20 or so years, neuroscientists have made some astonishing discoveries about the power of the brain to regenerate and heal itself, says Jude Tavanyar. We read regularly, for example, about people who, following a stroke or head injury, recuperate from a state of speechless incapacity to their former, fully- functioning self, or treatments which stimulate brain cells to provide healthy cell tissue in people living with cancer, or severe epilepsy.

What any of us know about the power and potential of the brain is almost nothing compared to what we have yet to discover. As Professor Robert Winston¹ states, “because the human mind is all we have to enable us to understand it, it is perfectly possible that science may never quite explain everything about the remarkable mechanism that makes each of us unique”.

The paradox in this example — that we are always constrained by the frame of vision provided by our own limitations — is applicable in many different contexts. Companies urgently seeking innovation to grow their business have sometimes realised, too late, that discovery of new possibilities — products, services, ways of working — is about far more than investing in their existing “R and D” resource.

What is being ignored? Leaders in the field of corporate change speak about the starting point to successful innovation being the acknowledgement of our own limitations — that we may not know what we don’t know, and that we need to find ways to look for what we neither recognise nor understand. In other words, if we seek to innovate simply by fine-tuning, doing “more of the same” with the same people, processes and frame of reference — we will end up with only a modified version of what we already have.

Jeroen van Lawick is Managing Director of Zijn Werkt!, a Netherlands-based consultancy for breakthrough team performance and innovation². He emphasises the critical importance for any company seeking “transformative” innovation to start with a willingness to delve deeply into their understanding of the challenges ahead, and to connect widely with a broad array of stakeholders, listening to as many different perspectives as they possibly can.

“Any company, seeking innovative change on a big scale has to start with an open position of ‘not knowing’, of acknowledging and working deeply with the ‘resource’ of its own ignorance”, says Van Lawick.

The reasons for suggesting this are clear. Where transformative innovation is concerned in any business, the solution is likely to be as multi-layered as the situation which demands it — otherwise a simple process of minor change and adjustment would be adequate to make the required difference.

Van Lawick addresses this sometimes hidden complexity by beginning his approach with an intensive process of questioning individual stakeholders in order to understand in far more depth their underlying assumptions and concerns. He challenges clients to dig deep into their hopes and expectations, by taking them through a reiterative questioning process surfacing the unacknowledged hypotheses which may limit the exploration before it even starts.

“Asking multiple ‘why’ questions is often irritating and difficult for the client,” says Van Lawick. “They get impatient, thinking that it’s clear what they want, that there’s no need for further ‘drilling down’ or deepening of the issue. But breakthrough innovation — doing something that has really not been done in the past so far — requires an open position of accessing ignorance, of deep questioning and reflecting on the limitations of our individual fields of vision.”

Time and resource pressures, a drive for “expertise” and quick results — these are known obstacles to transformative innovation. So, too, is the notion of homogeneity — not only of knowledge and expertise, but also of range of interests, personality “type”, attitude to risk, creativity and change.

There is plenty of research to show that high-performing teams of all kinds depend on the diversity of their members, in different ways³. In contrast, teams which lack diversity of membership tend to

lose impetus and stagnate, their energy smothered, it seems, by the very “sameness” which constrains their view of what is possible, achievable and relevant.

This throws up some interesting issues for HR personnel involved in recruitment and selection in the context of innovation. There are now multiple tools for exploring diversity in teams — one of the most familiar being the Belbin team questionnaire⁴ which identifies that diversity of “roles” (as opposed to areas of expertise or professional “function”) within team membership play a key role in making any team successful.

Similarly, there are numerous tools available for identifying varying attitudes to risk and change, and motivational factors in working with other people. Being aware of the value of this potentially rich diversity, and working with those key differences productively is at the heart of success in innovation, as is a broad and imaginative recruitment process which trawls multiple channels rather than limiting itself to the tried and tested few.

Van Lawick, however, takes the concept of diversity further still. An engineer by background, he offers the example of a chemical plant he was formerly connected with. “We had to solve a technical problem relating to sustainability — everyone had their own view on how to solve the issue, and nothing happened.

“By bringing together people from different functions, hearing their stories, opening up, we all started to see the problem from a more complete perspective. What took place was less about aligning different views to find a single solution as about listening to and entertaining multiple versions of what could be possible, through a common process. We could collectively and openly start from a position of ignorance — companies need that initial shared status of ‘not knowing’, to allow creativity in from the very beginning of the exploration.”

Van Lawick’s consulting process involves eliciting perspectives from many networks of stakeholders, inviting “deep listening” and observation among all involved so that real examples of different ways of working and different values systems can be shared. Within this a profound level of trust and transparency are implicit — as he sees it, breakthrough innovation only happens when we are open to seeing many perspectives by temporarily suspending our own judgements and ideas, and by giving our curiosity free rein.

Liz Ryan⁵ writes about how fear of the unknown and the “different” stifles us, both professionally and personally. She describes how diversity is too often farmed out by corporations to their HR division and then ignored, or narrowly viewed as about ensuring adequate statistical representation of varying stakeholder communities.

Ryan emphasises the need for genuinely open, sometimes difficult, but usually productive conversations which occur when barriers start to drop between human beings. And those “sticky-but-fertile” conversations are the starting point for innovation. Without this ability to discuss our differences and overcome mistrust, our creativity is limited. As Ryan puts it, “how can we hope to build the tolerant, idea-rich cultures we need to power our businesses unless our employees can bring themselves fully to their work?”

References

1 Winston R, 2006, The Human Mind

2 Zijn Werkt / Jeroen Van Lawick www.zijnwerkt.nl

3 On Teams That Succeed, 2004, Harvard Business

4 Belbin Team Role Theory, www.belbin.com

5 Ryan L, 22.10.12, We Approach Diversity the Wrong Way, HBR blog

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