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When does striking out alone work best?

The case for the lone wolf and pack of wolves

Author of lauded book 'The Art of Innovation – Integrating Creativity in Organisations', Dimis Michaelides puts forth how to get the balance right with sole and group creative problem solving.



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Health professionals are well aware of the value of collaboration. The surgery and the emergency room, the care of a single patient always call for different competencies working together in an organised way. Health professionals are also well aware of the value of a single expert - a specialist diagnostician, a skilled surgeon, a researcher inventing new treatments. In an organised health establishment people will at times complain of poor collaboration, at other times of too many people meddling in their work and causing delays. They will complain that they have no help when they need it and too much interference when they want to get on with their work. We will argue that from the perspective of innovation, they are usually always right.

In the early years of the twenty-first century countless human beings are thinking up new products and services and new ways of producing and selling them. The cult of the individual thrives. The great inventors, the great marketers and the great entrepreneurs who spearhead change make great heroes in business folklore.

Yet even the most rugged individualist will admit that innovation is never a solo act. Different schools of thought, place, communities, nations or social classes are at the centre of their thinking. They argue that wealth can only be created by people working together, with know-how generated by many others before them and around them.

Notwithstanding, the star power of exceptionally creative persons, innovation is almost always

implemented by groups of people with common goals. Teams. Families. Task forces. Think tanks. Idea exchange forums. As ideas circulate, in the right environments they thrive.

Most people will work on new ideas on their own as well as with others. What proportions of solitude and togetherness works best depends on the task at hand as well as individual preferences. Acknowledging different personal styles and alternating between individual and team modes will help address organisational challenges more effectively.

Individuals: The lone wolf

The lone wolf can offer highly original ideas. Some are pretty weird. Many don't work. He loves what he does. She works odd hours, mostly alone. He hates meetings. She has unusual hobbies. Being different is high on their set of values.

“ IN A HEALTH ESTABLISHMENT,
PEOPLE WILL AT TIMES COMPLAIN
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This caricature is of a highly creative person, a radical thinker who might generate a breakthrough or two. Such people imagine new futures and open new paths. They are valuable assets for the organisations that accept them.

Many rare, game-changing ideas are generated by individuals thinking alone. Precious insights come from the mind during sleep, in the shower, under the tree, on that walk by the seaside. Such thinking is hard to reproduce at the office, in meetings or in groups. Noise, interruptions and sometimes just the physical presence of other people can impede creativity.

The lone wolf has a storm in his brain, but does not thrive in a brainstorm. The very process of group idea generation managed by a facilitator does not resonate well in her mind. He thinks meetings are time-wasting, even counter-productive. She believes too much emphasis on teamwork can lead to lower performance, social loafing, excessive conformity and groupthink. It can kill good ideas. He is convinced that not all crowds have wisdom.

The environment often seems to conspire against the lone wolf. Many people in organisations find it difficult to accept non-conformist ideas, attitudes

or lifestyles. Most managers will not tolerate behaviors that threaten their team's spirit. They are more comfortable when all people are aligned. Corporate norms are not always flexible enough to accommodate mavericks. The lone wolf has to make a huge effort to sell his methods to the pack.

But deep down the lone wolf knows her ideas will never see the light of day if she wants to go it alone all the way.

Teams: packs of wolves

In the creativity lab, people engage in innovation together. They have common goals. They brainstorm. They share ideas. They test them. They define roles and responsibilities, tasks and deadlines. They are committed. They take action. They monitor progress. They hold each other accountable. They take pride in good communication. Coordination is high on their set of values. So is camaraderie.

Organisations are born of cooperation and effective teamwork is a non-negotiable reality of organisational life. All innovation is in some ways the outcome of many minds and bodies. With this in mind Alex Osborn (1953) and Sydney Parnes (1992) published the first creative problem-solving model from the 1950s onwards. This has two key features: thinking in structured sequential stages and alternating between creative and critical thinking at each stage. The stages involve exploring the context and defining the problem, finding solutions, evaluating them and implementing the best. At each stage, people actively engage in creative thinking (stretching the mind to generate many ideas without judgment) followed by critical thinking (evaluating and choosing the best ideas).

Brainstorming is team idea generation situated firmly within this model. Its practice has been codified by Osborn, also known as the father of brainstorming. A plethora of techniques that stimulate the imagination in unconventional ways and tools to analyse ideas and guide choices further enrich brainstorming. And there are plenty of variations too. Design thinking, a contemporary refinement of creative problem-solving, adds rapid prototyping as an essential step before full-fledged implementation. Other collaborative creativity methods include TRIZ from Genrikh Altshuller (1984) and Six Thinking Hats from Edward de Bono (1985).

Like Osborn and Parnes, most practitioners of creative methods recognise that producing new ideas is only part of the story. Preparing the ground

for new ideas and following up on them are necessary too. They are best done collaboratively, because the sum of knowledge, experiences and skills of many surpasses what any person can do alone. An additional benefit is that challenges defined early on and action plans implemented later on are shared and co-owned.

Nonetheless, it is rare for truly breakthrough ideas to emerge from brainstorming. This is because breakthrough ideas are by definition rare and because the spark is more often generated by individuals working alone.

“ WHAT PROPORTIONS OF SOLITUDE AND TOGETHERNESS WORKS BEST DEPENDS ON THE TASK AT HAND AS WELL AS INDIVIDUAL PREFERENCES ”

Leadership tips

While each health establishment will have its own legacy, culture and approach to innovation, striking a balance between good individual contribution and effective teamwork will always be a key responsibility of leadership.

Tip 1

Provide time and space for creativity, to individuals. Set challenging expectations for creative ideas to all individuals and offer them time to work on their ideas. Design office space that enables each person to indulge in uninterrupted bouts of thinking, research and experimentation alone. Have flexible hours for people to organise their own creative time and place.

Tip 2

Provide time and space for creativity, to teams. Set clear innovation deliverables for expert and multi-disciplinary teams and insist on high trust and

clear accountabilities within teams. Design office spaces to facilitate good teamwork and provide good collaborative software for online idea exchange. Such software allows people to work together asynchronously, so contributing to group outcomes at times of their choice.

Tip 3

Train people, in creativity and teamwork.

Establish training programmes in both creativity and teamwork. Help people learn creative methods, tools and techniques and the basics of good collaboration.

Tip 4

Provide recognition for innovation, to individuals and to teams.

Reward both on an individual and on a team basis. Announce that:

“Our company values and rewards both individual and team achievements. We call on each and every person to constantly seek new ways of confronting our innovation challenges. We call on your teams to welcome diversity and new thinking and to make original new ideas go live. Each one of you is a creative genius. Together, we are an innovation powerhouse.”

Anonymous CEO ■

To buy a copy of The Art of Innovation contact info@dimis.org

KEY POINTS



- ✓ Successful collaboration is critical to healthcare operations
- ✓ All innovation is a result of input from multiple sources and team members
- ✓ There is creative value in both people working alone and in teams



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