

Cognitive Diversity and Creative Abrasion

David J. Brunarski, DC, MSc, FCCS(C)

Do you find it easier to work with people who think like you? [Bernacki says](#) "people have different preferred ways of thinking that are consistent and predictable."¹ Matching the correct style of thinking to the problem at hand should improve the chances of an innovative outcome and include more partners in the decision-making process.

Styles of Thinking

Martin examined how leaders make decisions and developed a model that identifies two very different styles of thinkers: conventional and integrative. According to Martin, conventional thinkers "focus only on obviously relevant features; consider one-way linear relationships between variables; break problems into pieces and work on themes separately or sequentially; and make either-or choices and settle for the best available option," whereas integrative thinkers "seek less obvious but potentially more relevant factors; consider multidimensional and non-linear relationships among variables; see problems as a whole, examining how the parts fit together and how decisions affect one another; and creatively resolve tensions among opposing ideas that often generate innovative outcomes."²

Some charge that conventional thinkers overlook apparent answers to difficult or contentious problems because they really don't believe new or creative solutions actually exist. This attitude labels them as overly structured and rigid.

Paths to New Knowledge

[Mitchell contends that](#) "new knowledge is created through interactive processes based on the sharing and integration of previously unshared knowledge. In particular, knowledge is dependent upon the existence of disparate perspectives."³ To gain a competitive advantage or improve performance, [some believe organizations must create new knowledge.](#)⁴

Research into knowledge generation may be represented by four group processes. The first is accumulation of tacit or shared knowledge, while the second is group interaction. Language and a unique set of symbols are used to define and incorporate the tacit knowledge among members of the group. The intent during group interactions is to more fully share and expand the boundaries of understanding between individuals.

Cognitive diversity is "the extent to which [a] group reflects differences in knowledge, including beliefs, preferences and perspectives."⁵ Boundary-spanning occurs when people with diverse work-related experiences and perspectives bridge those divides and [learn to work cooperatively toward a common objective.](#)⁶

Analysis is the third process and involves intense debate and analytical challenges to faulty logic or unsupported arguments.⁷ The result is a higher-order reasoning by the group that facilitates

creative solutions and consensus otherwise impossible to achieve in groups working in isolation or by one individual working alone.

Creation is the fourth and final process in the cascade of knowledge generation and is the most elusive of all because of the threat of creative abrasion.

Turning Creative Conflict Into Solutions

Creative abrasion involves the clashing of ideas that acutely focuses the individual or group's attention, thereby disrupting the established mental models. Hirshberg states that "in many organizations and cultures, conflict is viewed as being negative and counterproductive to team spirit and harmony ... too often everyone edits their real thoughts in order to reduce conflict and maintain harmony. As a result, there is less likelihood of innovation ... the bureaucratic need for predictability, structure and conformance, is in fact more likely to be conducive to killing ideas."⁸

Truly creative solutions integrate and incorporate the totality of best practices in the decision-making process. The outcomes comprise some of our most valuable solutions and have already withstood debate, bargaining and agreement.

References

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