

No More Camels: Harnessing the Creative Power of Groups

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You know the old saying, "A camel looks like a horse that was planned by a committee" (Issigonis, 1958). I don't mean any disrespect to camels, but this is quite often the way we feel about and approach committee collaboration, with some distaste and disbelief that a group or committee can accomplish anything of worth.

Sometimes we are right to believe this, but does it have to be that way? By studying innovation through the years, we learn that most innovation happens as a result of collaboration. In *Where Good Ideas Come From*, Stephen Johnson (2010) reveals "a strong correlation exists between those dense settlements and the dramatic surge in the societal innovation rate [that occurred a few millennia after the first true cities formed]" (p. 54).

Truth be told, in the history of the world, very few innovations and creations have come about from one single person, working alone, holed up in his or her office, garage, or workshop. Too often, "we cling to the myth of the Lone Ranger, the romantic idea that great things are usually accomplished by a larger-than-life individual working alone" (Bennis & Biederman, 1997, p. 2). Thinking "small" in this manner robs us of opportunities to collaborate, and to use the power of groups to create a better future for ourselves, our communities, and the world. With this in mind, why then, do we generally shy away from collaboration in our professional lives? Why is it something we have to push our students and their organizations to do? How can we make collaboration worth everyone's time?

Think about what makes you happy and focused at work. There is probably some mixture of pride in what you do, enjoyment of the flexibility your work allows you (both in your life and in the type of work you are doing), and an amusement of the problem-solving that seems to arise day after day. Now think about the average group, rarely do these conditions exist. It is no wonder we do not enjoy groups and fail to use them to their fullest.

A psychology professor at Chicago, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes a state of mind called "flow" (Sawyer, 2007). This is a state of heightened focus. It can be likened to being "in the zone" or lost in one's work. Essentially, "flow" is about all our actions and thoughts working together as we work at a task. It does not always happen, but when it does, it provides insights and creativity well above the norm.

How does this concept apply to groups? Obviously, this sense of flow would be ideal in a creative group, and it is attainable. In his book *Group Genius*, Keith Sawyer (2007) offers several ways to create group flow, building off the characteristics Csikszentmihalyi found.

First, a group must have a focused goal but not just any goal. This goal must "provide focus for the team, but [also be] open-ended enough for problem-finding creativity to emerge" (Sawyer, 2007, p. 45). Much of what happens in group work does revolve around a goal, but the openness for solution is often questionable. Think about a group tasked with decreasing fraternity risk; if they are of the mindset it must be achieved through programming, the creativity is stunted.

Second, a group needs to have some control over its actions. Just as you value the ability to pursue projects and act with some autonomy so do groups. This is much easier said than done, as we all report to someone. However, it relates to the openness of the creative process; if a group is restrained, much like above, it loses the impetus to be creative.

Finally, a group is no better than its participants. Groups should heighten and enhance participants' abilities, but this only occurs if two things happen: egos are checked and everyone participates. These are both heavily related. Creativity in groups ought to involve building off each member's ideas, skills, and abilities. If a member lets their ego get in the way, it will harm the group process. This means it is essential to form groups wisely.

In a similar manner, everyone needs to be at the same level in both participation and ability. As Sawyer (2007) explains, "Group flow is more likely to occur when all participants play an equal role in the collective creation of the final performance" (p. 50). You do not want your group to be overrun by one person; this kills creativity and frustrates the other members. Thus, take care to find people who share the same levels of knowledge, ability, and passion for the topic at hand.

Groups do not have to be a frustrating experience. Try removing some structure from the groups you are a part of; keep things open-ended and allow every person a role in the experience. Plan out the group membership carefully to make sure everyone will have a part to play and the ability to contribute. You may be pleasantly surprised with both the process and the results.

Henry James offers possibly the most relevant comment on the need for group collaboration, stating, "Every man works better when he has companions working in the same line, and yielding to the stimulus of suggestion, comparison, and emulation. Great things have of course been done by solitary workers; but they have usually been done with double the pains they would have cost if they had been produced in more genial circumstances" (as quoted in Bennis & Biederman, 1997, p. 6-7). In our work we are fortunate to have many opportunities to form groups, serve in groups, and empower other groups to do more. Knowing the power they have, let us not waste their creative power.

References

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