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Leave the Ivory Tower and widen your perspective

Agile, creative, innovative: Design Thinking instead of Groupthink

To address the challenges of the information age we need to integrate the strengths of varying disciplines on an ongoing base. Only through integration can we benefit from the knowledge and synergies of various fields. This integration requires a willingness to open up and allow inspiration from outside sources - whether as an individual expert or as a group. By Ulrike Stahl

LEAVE THE IVORY TOWER

In our global and connected world, we are constantly confronted with an abundance of information. Just as quickly as new knowledge emerges, existing knowledge becomes obsolete. The half-life of knowledge in technology-related areas is typically two to three years and only one year for IT expertise. The more specialized a knowledge area, the faster it becomes obsolete. Those who live in their ivory towers and do not exchange ideas run the risk of overlooking important trends.

EXPERT KNOWLEDGE VS. INNOVATION

Some experts find it difficult to admit that at times they lack the information needed to find viable solutions. Involving others is often seen as a waste of time. What if one receives information that radically changes one's view of the world? In the worst case, such information would require the innovation process to go in a completely different direction than planned. To avoid this situation, an expert might rely solely on his assumptions. In fact, one should find it worthwhile

to question their reality regularly. By curiously opening up, we can significantly broaden our horizons.

In this context, it is important to note that patents are based on expert knowledge and innovations on cooperation. Inventions are usually made by individuals. However, an innovation is the broad implementation of the invention on the market, which is only possible when different experts collaborate.

Hierarchical structures and result-oriented career paths create competition for budgets, targets, and performance bonuses. This competition sets individuals apart as they focus on their interests. However, in a connected world, it is not only pointless to look at things separately, but it can also lead to oversights and failures. New values should promote knowledge sharing, diversity, mutual enrichment, and inspiration, but above all modesty and appreciation: the modesty of recognizing that expert knowledge alone is of little use, and the appreciation that even unusual partners can contribute something to allow us to become better and achieve our goals.

COMPLEX VS. COMPLICATED

In many areas, solving complex tasks is part of everyday life. However, complex and complicated are not synonyms. Complicated tasks can be resolved through expert knowledge. But complex tasks are characterized by different influencing variables, high dynamics, and inscrutable connections. Solving complex tasks require a high level of information and evaluation - something impossible for an individual expert with his limited horizon. Progressive companies try to cope with complexity by implementing projects, matrix structures, and self-organization allowing people to collaborate across departments and hierarchy to achieve common goals. There is also a new perception of customers becoming partners and help to shape the future, as well as an international environment in constant contact with other cultures.

BROADENING THE PERSPECTIVE

However, all this is of little help if we are still trapped in the old paradigms of thinking. Individuals struggle to maintain several perspectives simultaneously; our brains are more efficient thinking in simple black and white. We either assert ourselves and ignore others' interests or give in and do as we are told without questioning. This creates an automatic decision-making process that saves our brain, time, and energy, but prevents us from finding win-win-solutions. To widen our perspective and consider alternatives at the same time, we have to remain soft and relaxed.

Let's try it out; find and focus on a point in our field of view. As we do this our gaze and focus immediately becomes rigid. Choose a second point that is located far from the first point and try focus on both simultaneously. If we try to do that without moving our head or eyes, we will only succeed if we relax and let our gaze soften. This exercise is also a fast and effective relaxation

The half-life of knowledge in technology-related areas is typically two to three years and only one year for IT expertise.

technique from those who often focus on phone or computer screens. A co-focused gaze widens the field of view beyond a single narrowed point of focus. This co-focused or multi-focused perspective can be a challenge, especially in groups.

GROUPTHINK:

EXCELLENT VS. CATASTROPHIC DECISIONS

Most people naturally want to belong to a social community. Once a member of a social group, we seek to identify our ourselves and maintain membership. As a result, we are less open to other groups and their point of view. There is even the possibility that we may grow so tightly together that we close off ourselves to impulses and inspirations from our environment. We may enjoy the camaraderie, but we also lose valuable inspiration. Individuals may want to make a comment in a meeting but worry about questioning the group's accomplishments and goals.

This situation was first termed 'Groupthink' in 1972 by psychologist Irving Janis. He investigated why teams can alternate between making excellent and catastrophic decisions. The poor decisions arise from a lack of conflicting or divergent views. If no member of the group brings up the issues they will not be discussed, which means that alternatives are not analyzed. This results in decisions being made without sufficient information and can lead to dire consequences.

One such example of the Groupthink mentality was the Challenger Space Shuttle accident in January 1986. The engineers knew months before the launch that there were faulty parts, but to avoid negative press or delays, everyone pushed the launch despite the risks. A mere 73 seconds after the launch, the space shuttle broke apart, killing all seven astronauts. Fortunately, Groupthink does not always cost human lives, but all too often it hinders sound decision-making and solution processes and, ultimately innovation and growth.

DESIGNING RIGID GROUP BOUNDARIES

TO BE PERMEABLE

To continually gain knowledge and experience, we need to be inspired. To let the spark of inspiration ignite, we need to make rigid personal and group boundaries permeable - a membrane instead of a hard shell. But this contradicts with how 'WE' is

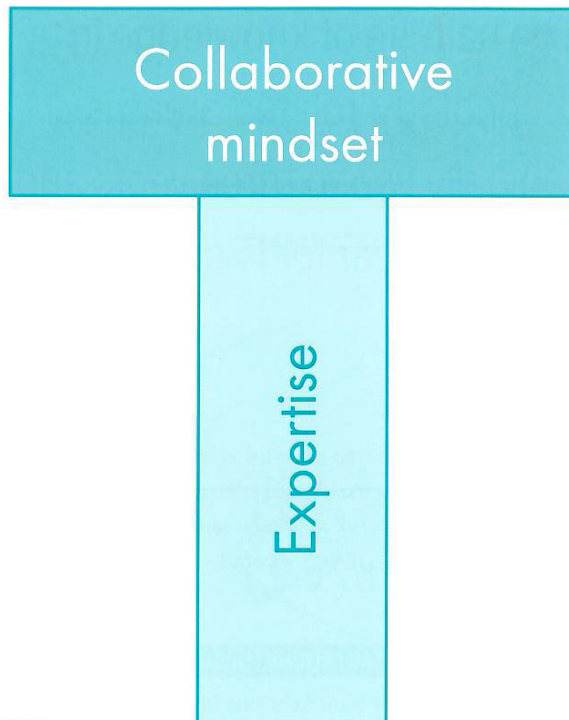


Fig.1

defined. First, the team spirit of 'WE' means standing together firmly and by putting the team before individuals. Deviators disrupt the team structure, and newcomers are expected to fit in seamlessly. The success of genuine innovation rises and falls on the readiness to leave this thinking behind and opening up to new ideas and points of view. The new understanding of 'WE' stretches much further: beyond ego, team, department, and company boundaries.

OUTSTANDING INNOVATIONS THROUGH DESIGN THINKING

Design Thinking is not only a creative method but also a process of thinking that allows creative problem-solving approaches as well as the development of future- and customer-oriented concepts. First developed by David Kelley, Terry Winograd, and Larry Leifer of Stanford University, Design Thinking is used by small and large companies to create new solutions and products. It also improves innovation and customer orientation for small and mid-sized companies, public administration, service industries, and the skilled trades.

The success comes from involving more people and perspectives than in a usual problem-solving or innovation process. As described previously, development and innovation often take place in an ivory tower by so-called expert teams. These expert teams run the risk of looking for solutions to problems that they have not thoroughly investigated. Their solutions are often driven by technological feasibility and profitability.

COMBINING DIFFERENT ASPECTS

The development departments usually initiate a new product's design. The production department typically does not see the product design until well into the process. The marketing department generates marketing strategies, and the sales department decides how it can bring the product to the customers. Production often complains about the nonsense that was developed, and the sales department has to deal with the fact that the product does not fully meet the customer's needs. Somewhere in this process, the manufacturing costs have to be cut in half.

However, the Design Thinking process assumes that innovation will only be successful if it arises from the intersection of the three factors human, technology, and economy from the start.

THE POWER OF THE T-PROFILE

One aspect that makes Design Thinking so successful is the idea that interdisciplinary teams can create real, outstanding innovations. Allowing all disciplines to be actively involved in the process from the start.

The second success factor is radical customer orientation. The Design Thinking team does not only imagine the wants of customer's derived from market research data – the team talks to potential customers at a very early stage. This means that contact with the customer expands beyond the sales department. All involved departments communicate with customers - long before even a single idea is developed.

Working in such a Design Thinking team requires a high degree of permeability, described above. People with a so-called T-profile (Figure 1) are particularly suitable for this. The vertical bar represents the expert knowledge and the specialization in a specific domain (e.g. medical technology). The horizontal bar stands for openness, interest, and curiosity towards other disciplines, the environment, and other people. It is one's ability to stretch out their hand to establish contact with other fields of knowledge and experts.

There is a plethora of knowledge available, but it is limited by our ability and willingness to collaborate that knowledge with others – and inspire. Expert knowledge is thus refined and made usable. This is the only way to create knowledge that enables innovation and allows us to grow together. ■

Ulrike Stahl, is an inspiring speaker, author, and expert on the new 'WE' in business. How does successful collaboration work in an agile and global environment? How do we develop a 'WE' mindset for ourselves, our companies, and employees? As international Design Thinking Coach and Coach for top teams she always has her finger on the pulse. She is the author of the German book "So geht WIRTSCHAFT! Kooperativ. Kollaborativ. Kokreativ," and over 100 published articles. www.ulrike-stahl.com

