

Recruit people who will challenge your views

You often hear managers say that they want to recruit people who will 'fit in' with the team. And leaders often extol the benefits of having 'alignment' - everyone heading in the same direction. Both these notions are misguided. Teams that fit well together and are fully aligned work in the same direction but the trouble is that they often think in the same direction.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Groupthink is the process whereby groups make poor decisions because they try to reach a consensus and minimise conflict. In doing so they suppress dissenting viewpoints, avoid controversial issues and isolate themselves from outside influences. The result is that they do not seriously consider alternatives to the group's view.

The phenomenon of groupthink was researched in the 1970s by Irving Janis, a research psychologist at Yale University. He identified various causes including the desire for cohesiveness, lack of impartial leadership, homogeneity of the group members and stressful external threats. In his book *Group Think* (1982), Janis recommends eight ways to prevent groupthink:

1. Leaders should assign each member the role of "critical evaluator". This allows each member to freely air objections and doubts.
2. Leaders should not express an opinion when assigning a task to a group.
3. Leaders should absent themselves from many of the group meetings to avoid excessively influencing the outcome.

4. The organisation should set up several independent groups, working on the same problem.
5. All effective alternatives should be examined.
6. Each member should discuss the group's ideas with trusted people outside of the group.
7. The group should invite outside experts into meetings. Group members should be allowed to discuss with and question the outside experts.
8. At least one group member should be assigned the role of Devil's advocate. This should be a different person for each meeting.

A prime example of groupthink is the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961. The Kennedy administration team uncritically accepted the CIA plan to invade Cuba. They ignored dissenting voices and outside opinion and underestimated the obstacles. President Kennedy learnt from this disaster. During the critical Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 he used 'vigilant appraisal' to deliberately avoid groupthink. He invited outside experts to share their viewpoints. He encouraged group members to voice opinions, ask questions and challenge assumptions. The President deliberately absented himself from some meetings to prevent his opinions dominating.

There have been countless examples of groupthink in executive teams leading to business disasters. Swissair, Kodak and Enron are salutary lessons. Business leaders can avoid similar catastrophes by learning from Janis and Kennedy in order to fight the scourge of groupthink.

Because we are all prey to the forces of group conformity, we need lateral thinking. This skill enables us to challenge the dominant assumptions and attitudes around us, and be open-minded and curious about new possibilities and fresh solutions to key business problems. For leaders, lateral thinking unlocks creativity and innovation within our teams, enabling us to sidestep the obvious and look for an alternative, less-trodden path for our organisations.

Leaders should encourage an atmosphere of constructive dissent. Anyone can challenge anything. What you need is not a lack of respect but a lack of deference. In the modern innovative organisation leaders need to earn the respect of their employees because of the values they stand for and not because of their position in the hierarchy. A lack of deference should be encouraged so that anyone can challenge anyone else's ideas regardless of their status.

'Innovation comes from angry and driven people,' says Tom Peters. The innovator is not happy with his lot. He is impatient for change. And this can be a problem for successful companies. The natural satisfaction that people derive from success can lead to complacency, which is the enemy of innovation. This is why the innovative leader always engenders a healthy dissatisfaction with the status quo. It is all very well telling shareholders that the company is making steady and satisfactory progress but the internal message needs more of an edge.

'We are doing well but there is much more to be done. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels.'

Clayton Christensen, in his book *The Innovator's Dilemma*, explains how the very characteristics that make successful companies successful lead them to eschew risky new ventures and keep improving their current products to meet customer demands. In doing so they often miss the next big thing, the new technology that kills them. Polaroid's demise at the hands of digital photography is a salutary example.

Innovators are obsessive in pursuit of their dreams. They are rebellious in opposing conventional wisdom. Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, James Dyson and Richard Branson were all seen as disruptive rebels before they achieved the success that changed their status to visionaries. They were not

aligned. They did not fit in.

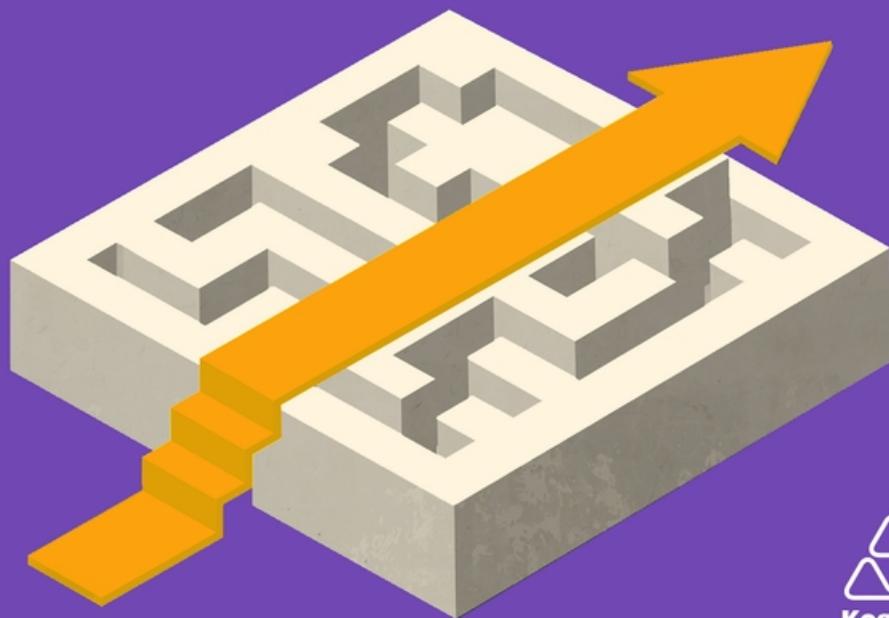
So, if you want innovators in your team do not look for people who will fit in. Look for people who will challenge your views, who are passionate about their ideas, who do not defer to authority, who are dissatisfied with the status quo and who are impatient for change.

Paul Sloane is a leading speaker and best-selling author of lateral thinking and innovation books, with his new book *Lateral Thinking for Every Day* available to purchase on January 3rd, 2023 (Kogan Page, £12.99)

Paul Sloane

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Article by Paul Sloane