BUSINESS

Conformists Boost Creativity

The ideal team needs both creatives and conformists.

By Jessica Ruvinsky | Spring 2012

A large Israeli defense contractor hosted a “creativity forum” so that all of the smartest and most innovative people at the company could get together once a month. As expected, the ideas flew. But after two years, not one of them had been implemented, and the forum disbanded. A top human resource manager explains the problem with creative types: They prefer to invent. The most creative teams, then, have fewer creative members. It’s the conformists who promote innovation. Recent research confirms that although rule-following, conflict-avoiding people “usually don’t generate radical or breakthrough ideas, as team members they have a very important role,” says Ella Miron-Spektor, a psychologist and assistant professor in the faculty of industrial engineering and management at Technion-Israel Institute of Technology.

Twenty R&D and 21 manufacturing teams at the defense company—a pioneer in microelectronics, communications, acoustics, and electromagnetism—participated in Miron-Spektor’s research. Employees answered questions about how they think, and Miron-Spektor and her colleagues identified people who scored high on one of three different cognitive styles: creative, conformist, and attentive to detail.

People who pay close attention to detail are precise and methodical, usually avoid risks, and don’t like ambiguity—and it turns out that having a lot of them on a team impedes innovation. Conformists, though often equated with attentive-to-detail types as good implementers, have a very different effect on the team. They reduce conflict and boost confidence, helping the team overcome obstacles. “They also make sure that the ideas, radical as they are, get implemented.”

These cognitive styles matter more than surface characteristics like age, gender, education, and expertise that managers tend to consider when hiring. To maximize innovation, “managers should look not just at what they need and what this person knows, but also how this person’s personality can affect the dynamic on the team,” says Miron-Spektor. “The ideal team should include a relatively large proportion of creative members, a lower proportion of conformists, and not more than one or two members who pay attention to detail.”

Of course, “we’re not all extreme in our cognitive style,” says Teresa Amabile, professor of business administration and director of research at Harvard Business School. Some people are more moderate; a few combine the styles. “It might make sense for people who are putting together radical innovation teams to use this test and look at people’s scores to be sure that they have a good combination.”

And don’t short the conformists, she adds. “They’re the ones who can make the difference between a great idea and a great
idea that actually gets implemented."


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