



Ed Bernacki created the Idea Factory to help people be more innovative in their organisations. He has advised a wide range of organisations to develop their capacity to innovate and has written and spoken extensively. One of his innovations is the Conference Navigator Guide called, 'Wow! That's a Great Idea!' used by HRINZ at its annual conferences. www.wowgreatidea.com

stop killing ideas and the people who create them!

creativity + diversity = productivity

The Harvard Business Review ran a cartoon showing an employee dropping an idea into a suggestion box. His manager smirks. He knows that all ideas fall through the 'suggestion' box and drop into a 'resignation' box. The thought that we kill ideas and the people who create them (metaphorically speaking) may sound odd but it's a reality for many employees.

I have been pushed out of an organisation for raising too many ideas that differed from the ideas my boss came up with. This was a problem. I was the problem. And here lies the paradox: while it's easy to manage people who think like you, how effective are you in managing people who do not think like you?

This one issue alone, if resolved, would result in more success within our organisations. If we define the issue in its most basic terms, productivity is allowing for people who do not think alike to work together and maximise their contribution to the organisation.

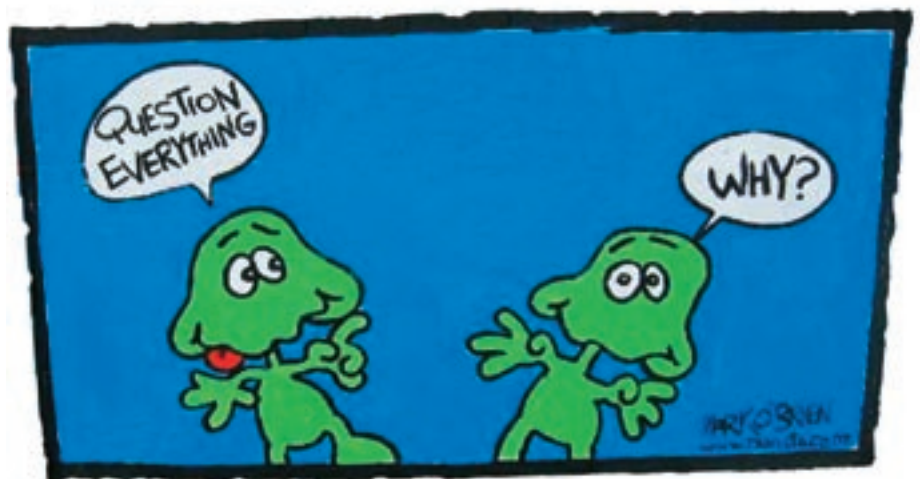
Making a distinction between the two fundamental processes of any organisation would be the first step in defining a model for productivity:

1. Design of the service to be delivered

This involves all aspects of the design of your service that gives customers value. For the sake of this article, consider these to be the 'A' challenges. A useful analogy can be made to the construction of a new building. Architects research the needs of the potential users, shape ideas for the building and then make decisions that lead to its design. Their product is the idea for a building.

2. The delivery of the service

With the building design in place, now a wider number of specialists take this vision (as defined by blueprints) and create it. These could be considered



the 'B' challenges: how people work together to achieve the result.

This analogy of 'A' and 'B' challenges creates a useful framework for two activities of every organisation.

- 'A' challenges: defining the design of the service and how it should be delivered. We must think like architects to design solutions that creates value. This involves the management of insights and ideas which is an expertise, much like that of an architect, researcher or innovator.
- 'B' challenges: focusing on how people will work together to deliver the vision of the service to be delivered. This is the domain of the more pragmatic who focus on the specifics of getting the job done efficiently.

This now allows you to create you own formula to deliver this productivity in both 'A' design challenges and 'B' delivery challenges. While skills and knowledge are important, also consider:

1. **Diversity:** We often define diversity in terms of what we 'see'. There is another aspect of diversity – cognitive diversity – in terms of how we solve problems.

2. **Creativity:** Creativity in organisations is our capacity to solve problems and create new initiatives.

Diversity: a new perspective

Our working definition of diversity reflects what we 'see'. We define it in terms of someone's skin colour, gender, handicap, race and so on. This begs a question: if you have a perfectly balanced team of gender, handicap and race who have the same thinking style, do you have diversity or people who think alike?

People solve problems in different ways and this diversity is largely ignored. In fact, if we discriminated more in terms of the different way people think and then allow each to solve the type of problems that matches their expertise, the research says they stay more engaged. This difference is captured well by some graffiti art that showed two cartoon characters. One said, "Question everything!" The other asked, "Why?"

You have people in your organisation who clash over this difference in problem solving style rather than harness these

differences. Research tells us that some people solve problems by questioning everything as this makes sense to them. They see the best ideas as being 'different' to the current solution. Others don't question every possible assumption and seek ideas by improving the current solution with something 'better'.

One style may be better suited to a particular challenge but both styles are needed for the variety of challenges our organisations face today. There is great value in understanding this concept of how people solve problems differently to improve our understanding of individual and team effectiveness.

Creativity for decision making

People make decisions every day. What should be common is a thoroughness to explore available options and the conviction to allow people to move forward and do the job. This sounds good in theory but research on decision making is revealing. Bernard Bass found we:

1. Are slower to react to opportunities than the alarm bells of problems.
2. Often pick the first alternative that minimally meets the standards of acceptability. This 'satisfying' option

ignores the ideal and settles for compromise.

We can assume that our organisations are full of educated and experienced people. Despite this abundance, why does this often lead to organisations that fail to make consistently good decisions?

Staff need to develop their skills to focus on two types of thinking:

- Creative thinking involving the production of new ideas, and
- Critical thinking involving the reaction to others' ideas or to one's own previous ideas.

The context for both may be different. If we link this back to our cartoon characters, those who prefer to question everything can be very good at creative thinking to shape new ideas. Those who take existing ideas and focus on improving them (and not question everything) are well suited for critical thinking.

Leadership of ideas

When we harness the ideas already inside our organisations then we would nurture a tremendous capacity to innovate and this builds productivity. This takes two types of leadership:

- 1. Leadership of people:** People must be managed to allow each to contribute

to the success of the organisation, recognising that we contribute differently.

- 2. Leadership of ideas:** Not all ideas are equal, nor are they all good. Sometimes the idea that gets dropped into the suggestion box is poor. Provide skills in generating and developing ideas to help people take more leadership of their ideas.

The concept of idea leadership may be new. If we strive for creativity, the product we create is an idea. Some are for 'A' challenges while others are for 'B' challenges. The success of our ideas depends entirely on how we develop them, nurture them and judge their readiness for action.

Peter Drucker said, "We spend a lot of time teaching leaders what to do. We don't spend enough time teaching leaders what to stop. Half the leaders I have met don't need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop."

To shape more productive organisations we need to stop killing the ideas that already exist and the people most capable of creating them. We can then shape organisational cultures that nurture both the ideas and the people who create them, and provide the leadership to define where new innovative ideas are needed most. ■



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cognitive diversity:

a case where informed discrimination may be useful



Most management recommendations implicitly assume that people think alike. Yet we know that is not true. Ignoring cognitive diversity is the equivalent to any other form of bigotry, be it racial, ethnic or gender.

Have you ever thought, 'Why can't you think more like me?'

Some people question everything as this is the way they solve their challenges. Others see less need to challenge everything and prefer to accept many things as they are. The trouble is that most of us assume that others think like us.

When I learned about cognitive diversity I was fascinated by the idea that people have different preferred ways of thinking

that are consistent and predictable. My 'aha' moment happened when the implications of cognitive diversity explained why I got along with some managers and not with others. We had different thinking styles and therefore solved problems in ways that were foreign to the other.

I studied with Dr Kirton who spent his early career at the University of Victoria. His work reflects cognitive style rather

than behaviour differences. He developed an instrument and a body of work focused on cognitive or problem solving style. Our individual style is likely best shown when we work on our own and can complete a project any way we choose. If you like, the way we think while in the privacy of our own head is most likely the way we prefer to think. If you question most things, you will. If you accept most things as they are, you will.

We do a disservice to people if we ignore cognitive diversity. We should see these differences as a starting platform and then develop new ideas that are applied in practical ways to people who think in different ways. This is far better than having writers produce books or papers that reflect their personal style of seeing the world. In other words, their recommendations become a version of 'one size – which is my size – fits all' style

of management. Ignoring this difference is much like a right-handed golf instructor encouraging people to play golf by only providing right-hand golf clubs. What if half of the group is left handed? Should we be critical of their inability to grasp the game of right-handed golf or do we recognise that we failed to see the obvious difference?

I will provide a brief overview of this diversity and one example. Consider how articles such as this could be more effective had they considered cognitive diversity. At the very core of my argument are these observations:

- Most people find it easy to work with people who think like them. They also find it more challenging to work with people who do not think like them.
- Most management recommendations can be applied broadly as they implicitly assume that people think alike. As such, recommendations apply equally

to those who question everything and those who do not.

Adaption Innovation side by side

Kirton studied how people in organisations solve problems and create change. He has a large body of work that many others have contributed to. He also created an assessment model, the KAI (Kirton Adaptor Innovator). As with all indicators that follow a continuum, every population has distribution that reflects the bell curve, that is, most people fall between the extremes. Fewer people are found toward the extremes that he labelled as the adaptive style and the innovative style of thinking. The key to understand the design of this approach is to recognise that our personal assessment provides a useful snapshot of our style but our style is relative to those we work with.

For example, someone with a mid range score will be seen as having two behaviours – depending on who is making the judgment. Imagine we assess three people, A, B and C. A is the high adaptor, B is in the mid range and C is the high innovator:

- Person A – who is high adaptor – will view B with a mid score as behaving like an innovator.
- Person C – who is high innovator – will view B as an adaptor as they are relative to their style of problem solving.

If B is a smart manager, he or she will recognise the implication of this: each person needs to be managed differently to allow them to maximise their effectiveness to the organisation. If A and C understand the issues highlighted in the chart (left), both will have a better way of managing their contribution and dealing with people who think very differently to them. A little understanding can help them from thinking the other is from some alien planet.

Recognising the problem with management recommendations

Here is one example of many; Roger Martin, a high profile lecturer at the University of Toronto wrote an article for the June 2007 issue of Harvard Business

Attributes of Adaptive style of thinking	Attributes of Innovative style of thinking
How they see each other	
Adaptors are seen by Innovators as sound, conforming, safe, predictable, inflexible, wedded to the system and intolerant of ambiguity.	Innovators are seen by Adaptors as glamorous, exciting, unsound, impractical, risky, abrasive, threatening the established system and causing dissonance.
In solving problems	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adaptors tend to accept the problems as defined. ■ Early resolution of problems, limiting disruption and immediate increased efficiency are important to them. ■ They challenge rules rarely, cautiously, when assured of strong support and problem solving within consensus. ■ They are sensitive to people, maintain group cohesion and cooperation; can be slow to overhaul a rule. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Innovators tend to reject the generally accepted perception of problems and redefine them. Their view of the problem may be hard to get across. ■ They seem less concerned with immediate efficiency, looking to possible long-term gains. ■ They often challenge rules. They may have little respect for past approaches. ■ They may appear insensitive to people when in pursuit of solutions, so they often threaten group cohesion and cooperation.
In generating solutions	
Adaptors prefer to generate a few novel, relevant and acceptable solutions aimed at doing things better. These solutions are relatively easier to implement.	Innovators generally produce numerous ideas, some of which may not appear relevant to others. Such Ideas often contain solutions which result in doing things differently.
In times of change	
Adaptors are essential for ongoing functions, but in times of unexpected change may have some difficulty moving out of their established role.	Innovators are essential in times of change or crisis, but may have trouble applying themselves to ongoing organisational demands.

(Source: www.kaicentre.com)

Review, 'How Successful Leaders Think.' It is also the core of his new book, *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win Through Integrative Thinking*. He looked at the decision making process and conceived a model of two thinking styles, conventional and integrative. He refers to four stages in the decision making process and how each type of leader differs in their approach:

He suggests conventional thinkers...

- 1 Focus only on obviously relevant features.
- 2 Consider one-way linear relationships between variables, in which more of A produces more of B.
- 3 Break problems into pieces and work on them separately or sequentially.
- 4 Make either or choices: settle for best available option.

He suggests integrative thinkers...

- 1 Seek less obvious but potentially relevant factors.
- 2 Consider multidimensional and non linear relationships among variables.
- 3 See problems as a whole, examining how the parts fit together and how decisions affect one another.
- 4 Creatively resolve tensions among opposing ideas: generate innovative outcomes.

He also says integrative is better for leaders of tomorrow. To quote: "When responding to problems or challenges, leaders work through four steps. Those who are conventional thinkers seek simplicity along the way and are often forced to make unattractive trade offs. By contrast, integrative thinkers welcome complexity – even it means repeating one or more of these steps – and this allows them to craft innovative solutions."

Martin says integrative thinking is an ability everyone can hone. He also judges those who are not integrative thinkers: "Conventional thinking glosses over potential solutions and fosters the illusion that creative solutions don't actually exist.... Fundamentally, the conventional thinker prefers to accept the world just as it is, whereas the integrative thinkers welcome the challenge of shaping the world for the better."

This is a highly abridged version of

his article and it proposes an interesting model. His conclusions seem to resemble the distinctions between adaptive and

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innovative thinking styles. His notion of integrative thinking reflects those of innovators. I can only imagine how much more useful his effort could have been if he had used an underlying model of adaption – innovation. His comments on leadership thinking styles could have been put in context with 30 years of similar research. Then two sets of recommendations could have been provided:

- 1 Recommendations to those who are more adaptive: perhaps framed around the idea of noticing when you are being conventional to question if the solution needs a more integrative approach.
- 2 Recommendation to those who are more innovative: again recognising the value of noticing both styles of problem solving which can be applied to solve the problem.

In other words, the recommendations for people who question everything should be different to those for people who do not see the need to question things as much.

The lack of awareness can create a type of negative discrimination which works both ways. Adaptors are unfairly accused of being too structured and unable to change while innovators are labeled as undisciplined, unrealistic and skeptical.

I have long thought that we should discriminate more in terms of identifying the types of challenges we have and then recognising the people with the right cognitive style to solve the problem most effectively. You could say, does the lie of the ball suggest a right handed golfer or a left handed golfer would be best to take the shot?

The bottom line for managers and the people who forward advice in the form of books, presentations or consulting is

to provide ideas and concepts that lead to decisions that make our organisations more effective. There is ample research

that finds vast numbers of people in our organisations are not engaged in their job. To quote Dr Kirton: "Our problems have become so complex, and the penalty for not solving them so high, that we need to study the problem solver and the problems we need to solve."

We must develop our skills to understand the 'problem solver' in more sophisticated ways. As such, a little cognitive discrimination to match the right thinking style for the right problem could greatly enhance your capacity to innovate by engaging people in a way that best suits their style of thinking. That's a bottom line difference. ■