

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a yellow square peg over a blue round hole. The background is blurred, showing a person's face. The text 'Square pegs: Take two!' is overlaid on the bottom right of the image.

Square pegs: Take two!

Forcing your square pegs to fit into round holes is not always the answer, says Ed Bernacki. Innovative organisations need to harness the power of these people and make the most of different problem-solving styles.

The December issue of *Employment Today* showed you how to eliminate the incompatible employee—those annoying staff who don't think like you or fit in. Perhaps the real problem, in many instances, is not the employee's incompatibility, but your inability as a manager to manage people who don't think like you. Eliminating such people—or forcing the square pegs to fit round holes—is not always the answer. By doing this, you eliminate the diversity needed to tackle today's challenges.

As one who was once fired for something like "being incompatible", it's time to tell the other side of the story. A few years ago, I was hired by a large professional service

firm for my international experience. I found a ready market for my ideas among the professionals I worked with. I questioned older policies and suggested new approaches. All was fine until I noticed that my Auckland-based position started to sputter as I continually had to get approvals from a Wellington-based director. It was clear. My style of problem solving was drastically different. I asked lots of questions. I looked broadly for potential ideas. I began to ask: *why do we do it like this?* There was a problem. I was the problem.

Eventually all approvals stopped. Left in limbo, I continued to create a new strategic approach for the senior partners who appreciated my insights. But Wellington built a case against me. I went into a job performance review to be told the job was restructured to a junior position. I confided in the HR manager about my frustration while she worked with Wellington to eliminate me.

This firing was one of the last jobs I was to get. Instead, I pursued a passion I had for ideas and innovative thinking and turned this into an international business. I was to learn that my story was not uncommon amongst innovative thinkers.

Think twice before eliminating the square pegs

By eliminating the square pegs (or by beating them into submission to fit in a round hole), your organisation will:

1. Concede that it can't harvest the full potential of diversity in terms of people who think differently to the style of the manager;
2. Concede that it can't harness the creative potential and capacity it needs to solve the challenges facing every organisation;
3. Concede that it may limit future decisions to a single style of problem-solving thinking.

From the perspective of my innovation work, here are some suggestions for harnessing the power of the square pegs.

What exactly is "incompatible behaviour"?

When I ask this question, I am not finding excuses for people who are incompetent. I am referring to people who question and challenge things in different ways from the boss. You can say that their *style* is different.

To provide context, it is worthwhile considering the work of Dr Michael Kirton. In the 1960s, Kirton began his studies on how large organisations select new initiatives for change—for example, the launch of a new product, an organisational restructure, or acquiring a new business. He developed case studies to look at the personality style of the executives, and the type of change undertaken. Kirton also tried to assess whether the change initiative was actually useful. He found something curious.

The style of the change closely paralleled the style of the execu-

tives, sometimes at the expense of making the right decision for the organisation's future. He researched this further for 15 years and created a model to prompt our understanding of the notion of problem-solving styles.

When an individual is faced with a problem, Kirton calls this 'Problem A'. Problem A can be any problem we face. When we work on a problem without anyone judging or overseeing our work, we tend to work in a style that is most comfortable to us. This is our own particular style of problem solving.

However, we rarely work completely alone on Problem A and must enrol others. This could be a partner, other specialists or a team. This now creates a second problem, 'Problem B'. Problem B is the problem of *how* we will manage people when working together to get the results needed to solve Problem A. The issue is that we will need to manage a variety of different problem solving styles.

What is intriguing about this model of the A and B problems is its simple elegance and how quickly front-line people understand the difference.

Kirton suggests that you never start to solve a problem in a group without defining how the group will work together.* This includes recognition of the skills, expertise and experience of each member, and one other important element—their style of problem solving. He suggests that you prevent Problem B by dealing with it to create the potential for a more effective solution to Problem A. In the words of creativity guru Edward de Bono, you must "think about the thinking before thinking" to get the most effective result.

Adapting or innovating ideas?

Everyone has a preferred way of problem solving. The frustration is often that the style of the person in charge becomes the de facto style for the group. The 'boss' only recognises ideas that come from his or her own style as this makes most sense.

In brief, Kirton created a framework along a continuum to highlight two distinct styles (with knowing that the majority of people are somewhere in the middle). In practice with thousands of people in many countries, this understanding (as measured by an instrument) provides valuable insights and the occasional epiphany such as, "Now I understand why I did not fit in to that group."

At one end of the scale are 'adaptors' whose style of problem is looking for minor improvements to make it slightly better. Their goal is to be prudent, using tried-and-tested approaches to find solutions. The emphasis is on 'better'. They will research and be analytical, often using scorecards and benchmarks to find those ideas that lead to making something better. Adaptors

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are also concerned with team cohesion and ensuring everyone participates in a solution. They put a lot of focus on Problem B.

At the other end of the scale are the 'innovators' whose style is to make improvements by doing something differently (as opposed to finding solutions that focus on doing things better). High innovators have little concern for tradition. They question everything. They focus on finding the 'great idea', often with little regard to others on a team. Why? They focus on Problem A, as this is the stated goal. They are not concerned with Problem B. They may not be aware of the Problem B issues. If there is more than one high innovator in a group, they often challenge each other (as they are having fun).

Adaptors often view this as negative behaviour.

If the high innovator is alone, they are the outsider and often seen as a dissenter. They will seem to be someone who is frustrated and who fails to fit in (or even try to fit in). In the end, they are forced to fit in or withdraw. From research, a lone high innovator may say, "If the objective was to find the best solution to the problem, I could have found it faster on my own."

If the high adaptor is alone, they will likely feel frustrated in many ways. They will see innovators finding ideas from all perspectives yet feel frustrated as they do not focus on the immediate issues. They will be even more frustrated by the lack of interest or concern about deadlines and timetables.

Most people will have some of both traits. These people are bridgers as they can see it both ways.

Strategically, you harness these different styles of problem-solving capacity based on the type of problem to be solved. Use this expertise this way:

- High adaptors love structure, rules and precise instruction. If the challenge requires a solution, they will seek to fix a problem within the structure or the general ways something is done. For example, the rescue of the Apollo 13 astronauts is a classic illustration of adaptors in action. The NASA scientists were required to create a carbon monoxide filter from materials inside the box (the space craft). They created a simulation using the materials the astronauts had with them. These were gathered in a box and then spread out on a table. Adaptors are very comfortable thinking inside the box to get the result. This is very useful if the best result comes from thinking inside the box, and often it does. The NASA scientists built a solution using the parts in the space ship. Any time invested from an innovator's perspective such as, "Why didn't we include this ..." would have been wasted, and potential deadly.

When you can manage people with different problem-solving styles, you are managing diversity. You allow your square pegs to tackle problems that square pegs do best.



- High innovators hate structure and existing processes. They are happiest if their challenge starts with the premise, “We have never done this before. We need to find a new solution. What do you think?”. They can look at a situation from many perspectives and find an original solution. Rules and structure simply get in the way of getting the best result for Problem A. They may try ten ideas knowing that nine are poor or mediocre. They simply see this as the process of finding a great solution.

Leverage the diversity

As managers your job is to look at the challenges in your organisation and match the type of problem with the style of innovative thinking needed to solve it.

It is useless to criticise innovators for being “good at finding ideas but lousy at making them happen”. It’s true. By the time it comes to execution, they are bored and already planning their next challenge. But don’t criticise them. Provide them with people who are more adaptive, who can take that checklist created by the innovators and tick off every box until the job is done. Adaptors love checklists.

It is equally useless to criticise adaptors because they are not very good at finding new and original solutions. They may find an original solution but this is not comfortable for them. Harness their expertise to improve effectiveness and efficiency. High adaptors thrive on structuring, simplifying and organising (skills that innovators often lack but appreciate).

When you can manage people with different problem-solving styles, you are managing diversity. You allow your square pegs to tackle problems that square pegs do best. A little empathy to recognise that their style is different and their questioning of everything is acceptable will pay dividends. Provide them with some tactics for fitting in and a person to talk to when they believe the ideas being developed by the team are just not good enough.

Any organisation driven by too many of one style is in trouble. Too many innovators will make you bankrupt as too many ideas are launched at the expense of the basics. Too many adaptors will bankrupt you more slowly as the business misses the signs of change in its focus on perfecting the systems.

Perhaps it is time to revisit the issue of the incompatible employee by recognising that you are building your capacity to innovate. This is a big challenge for leadership. But by definition, leaders must have foresight. This foresight could be develop and harness the full range of problem solving capabilities to tackle today’s and tomorrow’s challenges.



** For those who think brainstorming is a useful tool, keep in mind that Alex Osborne who originally conceived this tool in the 1930s stated that you never brainstorm with people who are not trained in the formal use of the technique. For a fascinating read, see Applied Imagination, written in 1953.*

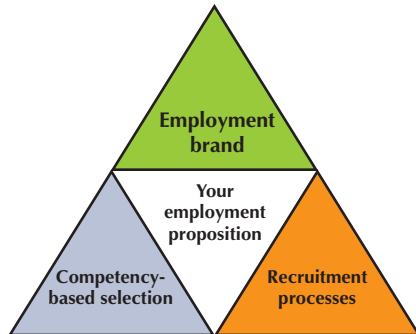
Ed Bernacki created the Idea Factory in New Zealand. He is now based in Canada but works periodically in New Zealand. He created the conference navigator guide called Wow! That’s a Great Idea! used at several HRINZ conferences (see www.wowgreatidea.com). For more information on the issue of style, see www.kaicentre.com



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