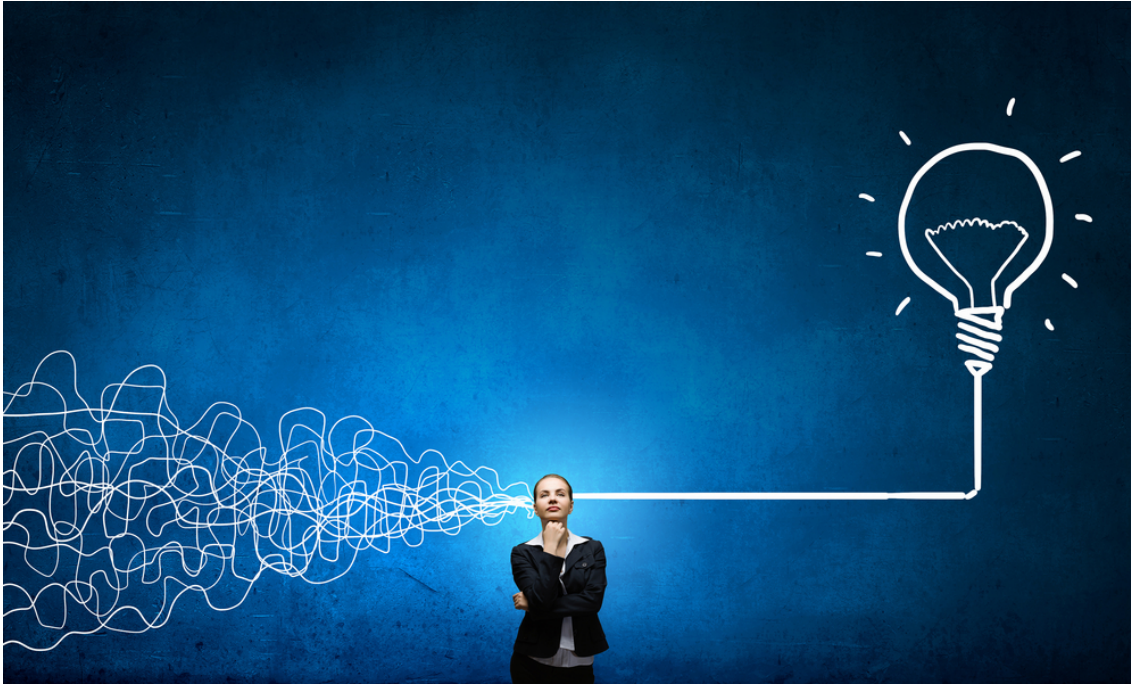




How to Ensure Your Team's Great Ideas Percolate Through Your Workforce

Whether your employees are Jeff Bezos adaptors or Elon Musk innovators, here's how to create a more cohesive and effective team that inspires others to share and give life to ideas that may be bubbling just below your company's surface.

By **Dr. Megan Seibel, Ph.D.** - September 7, 2021



Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos are great examples of how employees can have polar opposite styles when it comes to problem-solving and developing ideas, yet still achieve success to the highest magnitude.

Everything—from the way employees conceptualize problems to the way they react to them, communicate them, and implement them to resolve a problem—differs depending on their genetic makeup and personality. This, in turn, affects whether these ideas remain just that—an idea—or evolve into the next best creation for the benefit of the business and team.

Innovators vs. Adaptors

According to **Dr. Kirton's Adaption Innovation (KAI)** Theory, based on more than 40 years of academic research, there are two types of problem solvers: more innovative or more adaptive. We're either genetically more one or the other—like being left- or right-handed. Both are equally effective at enterprising. They just approach problems in a different way, which can affect if and how ideas come to fruition.

Innovators have a tendency to come up with ideas outside the “system,” doing things “differently” and preferring less structure. This is compared to those who are more adaptive; they are more prone to inside-the-box thinking, seeking to simply adapt the existing system and work within the boundaries to resolve issues. Innovators are quick to share ideas but with vague detail and an impatience to move on to the next problem, risking many ideas remaining undeveloped. Adaptors, on the other hand, can tend to hold onto an idea and miss an opportunity to execute.



For example, SpaceX revolutionized space technology and travel. Many may agree that Musk is a rebel, a rule-breaker, an envelope pusher, a pacesetter—all attributes of an innovator, which has favored him in his career.

Bezos, on the other hand, is more adaptive in comparison. He produces targeted ideas, mastering details and precision, taking existing ideas and adjusting them to make them fit better with customer demand. For example, Amazon adapted the traditional bookstore to revolutionize it at the start of the Internet boom. At Amazon, Bezos is attentive to detail, yet uses deep curiosity to reinvent systems to focus on improving the future. As an adaptor who likes structure, Bezos has been deliberate in how he has mapped his business trajectory toward success, which has worked for him and his empire.

You may relate to either of these scenarios and skills within your own personality as a leader or as an individual in your team. The danger to your own career, your employees, and your employer is that ground-breaking ideas, both revolutionary and evolutionary, that could give the company that competitive edge can so easily get lost when ideas and individuals are poorly managed.

Managing Ideas

Great leaders manage a range of adaptors and innovators in ways that are appropriate for agility and success, and in response to what is needed to address the problem at hand. It may be that a truly different “out-of-the-box” idea is needed to tackle a problem, but there needs to be a systematic approach to getting it off the ground. That means bringing innovators and adaptors together to make this happen.

We see this in how both Musk and Bezos show deference for improvement, valuing it in their work but exhibited by different approaches to generating and implementing ideas and strategies. Both agree that larger teams are not necessarily better; you need the right people in the right role to be successful. This is reinforced by the Adaption-Innovation theory. Teams with a mix of problem-solving styles generate a wider range of ideas but also can create friction when poorly managed, distracting the team from the main problem and creating new ones.

Remembering that timelines, budgets, customer demands, and organizational norms are types of structures that are enabling to some but limiting to others—depending on how defined or ambiguous they are—is important. Understanding how we each approach the defined problem and situational dynamics to generate ideas and implement them is critical to creating an environment where great ideas—sometimes the most adaptive and most innovative—have space to nurture and grow.

So, for example, what kind of structure and guidance do people need—or not need in the case of the more innovative employees—to encourage their ideas? Is it helpful to talk through all the project details for the more adaptive members of the team who favor structure? Or is it more helpful to have loose guidelines to run with before reporting back later for the more innovative?

How well leaders manage the problem-solving style gaps between themselves and others is critical. Adaptors and innovators feel stressed when working conditions don't align with their preferences. When possible, inspire them to ask for what they need to flourish, work to understand their perspective, and encourage them that they can do it when the task calls for an unpreferred approach.

Coping Behaviors

By having an idea of your employees' problem-solving style preference, as well as your own as a leader and people developer, you can adapt accordingly through “coping” behaviors—which is something we can “turn on” to operate more adaptively or more innovatively than our preferred problem-solving style. We do this by being aware of

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Learning awareness of your own and other's problem-solving style somewhere on the adaption-innovation continuum means you can help employees work within their adaptive and innovative preferences, creating a more cohesive and effective team that inspires others to share and give life to ideas that may be percolating right now just below your company's surface.

Dr. Megan Seibel, Ph.D.

Dr. Megan Seibel, Ph.D., R.N, Associate Director, Center for Cooperative Problem Solving; Extension Specialist, Leadership and Decision Making at Virginia Tech University