

IN THE PAGES

(A Book Review)



Group Genius

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If you need to build better teams to take your organization to new levels of performance then **Group Genius** may be of interest to you.

Sawyer acknowledges that it is not news that collaboration is powerful; however, he suggests that research into how to maximize creativity and results has largely taken a “black-box” approach of looking at overall team characteristics – such as personality traits - instead of investigating what goes on inside the box. His time consuming research strongly suggests that the secret to understanding what makes collaboration successful is the moment-to-moment interactional dynamics. Over twelve years, Sawyer video-taped groups and for every minute of tape that captured verbal gestures, body language and conversation during collaborative group interactions, he spent about an hour analyzing the tape to understand what was going on.

The main thrust of the book is that group genius is how truth and breakthrough discoveries are uncovered, even when a famous name is given credit for the finding.

Another myth that is challenged – and research quoted to substantiate the claim – is the fact that while Brainstorming is a popular technique it is usually a waste of time. Why? Because for the technique to generate useful ideas, it needs to be led by a trained facilitator and this is not often the reality. (Think of the time that the lead manager asked for brainstorming ideas and then critiqued the first one, then wondered why no more ideas of merit were forthcoming. Also, if one looks at the desired outcome of brainstorming – to generate as many ideas as possible - research has consistently shown that brainstorming groups think of far fewer ideas than the same number of people who work alone and then pool their ideas. To salvage the utility of the technique, studies have shown that giving group members specific instructions or frameworks to work within improves the quality, because the group does not spend too much time evaluating the “bad” ideas.

Sawyer has identified seven key characteristics of effective creative teams:

1. Innovation Emerges Over Time

- Successful innovations happen when organizations combine just the right ideas in just the right structure

2. Successful Collaborative Teams Practice Deep Listening

- A skill of balancing the intake of ideas while creating ones own ideas

3. Team Members Build On Their Collaborators Ideas

- Each new idea is an extension of the ideas that have come before

4. Only Afterwards Does The Meaning Of Each Idea Come Clear

- Even a single idea can't be contributed to one person because ideas don't take on their full importance until they are taken up, reinterpreted, and applied by others

5. Surprising Questions Emerge

- Transformative creativity results when a group either thinks of a new way to frame a problem or finds a new problem that no one had noticed before. This often transforms ideas into questions and problems that can then be processed

6. Innovation Is Inefficient

- Improvised innovation make more mistakes and has as many misses as hits. But the hits can be phenomenal; they'll make up for the inefficiency and the failures

7. Innovation Emerges From The Bottom Up

- Improvisational performances are self-organizing. Most innovative teams restructure themselves in response to change and don't need a strong leader to tell them what to do. N.B. allowing space for this self-organizing emergence to occur is difficult for many managers because there is less control and the results are less predictable

Sawyer carefully organizes his material within three Parts: The Collaborative Team (Chapters 1-4), The Collaborative Mind (Chapters 5-7), and The Collaborative Organization (Chapters 8-11). One of Sawyer's most valuable insights, examined with both rigor and eloquence, is that people who are steadfastly convinced that they are not "creative" can nonetheless work effectively together to generate (albeit eventually) profoundly innovative ideas.

There are some "ifs," of course. First, senior managers must provide full support (including sufficient resources, especially time) of a collaborative team. Next, they must be patient rather than committing the common mistake of "ripping out a seedling to see how well it's growing." Also, they must understand - really understand - the meaning and especially the implications of the aforementioned seven key characteristics of effective creative teams. Finally, they must recognize that each "failure" (however defined) is a unique learning opportunity for them as well as for team members.

The book is an interesting read as it is based on solid research and uncovers a new look at the way organizations can embrace creativity and innovation if they can stand the risk!

Book Review by Gary Mankellow, VP of Community Activities and President of Dynamic Adult Learning, a certified LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY™ partner.