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GUEST ESSAY

The first of an occasional series in which practitioners and researchers from across Europe contribute personal perspectives and experiences of workplace innovation.

Ian's essay below reflects many of the issues explored in [EUWIN's Knowledge Bank](#) and [The Fifth Element](#), including [Learning, Reflection and Innovation](#) and [Workplace Partnership](#).

Gaining big performance benefits by developing Super Teams

Dr Ian Dodds

Companies on average only deliver 63% of the financial value their strategies promise (Mankins & Steele, HBR, Aug 2005).

A significant cause of this loss in execution is caused by ineffective teaming. Organisations that learn to team well are better able to solve complex problems, be nimbler and more innovative, and manage unexpected events. Interest in 'super teams' is growing because of the considerable pressures for organisations of all types and sizes to find innovative means of sustaining, growing and renewing themselves because of the economic downturn.



Professor Scott E. Page's 'Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem' offers a powerful key to unlocking innovation. This demonstrates that diverse teams consistently outperform expert, homogeneous teams in solving complex problems. Scott Page explains that this is because experts often share common ways of solving problems. This tends to provide an excellent *partial* view of the problem. By contrast, although members of the diverse team may possess fewer problem solving methods on average than individual experts, between them they cover them all and add several more. They offer a more *complete* view.

One essential condition for diversity to trump ability is that the diverse team members must listen to and interact with each other effectively. This involves respecting and exploring different ideas and opinions and differing points of view, and building on each other's suggestions.

This was powerfully demonstrated to me when I was made HR Director of a large chemicals factory. It had very poor employee relations and I was tasked with changing this. Initially I did what my predecessors had done and worked with the factory's managers to improve the situation. Improvements proved to be slow, and then I persuaded the Factory Director to engage the workforce

in collaborating with managers to make it the best factory in the whole of the Group. He agreed, and we set up a series of mixed task teams, each addressing a different major issue.

These task teams were led by a manager but included people from different areas and different levels of the factory, including the front line. They included women, people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, people with different educational and life experiences, and people with different thinking styles and knowledge of varied problem solving methods.

Moreover, they were trained to interact effectively - to be super teams – using *interactive behaviour methodology*. This involved me sitting in on the task teams' early meetings and training their members in the behaviours that lead to effective advocacy and enquiry. I also sat in on their discussions and generated profiles of the extent to which each task group member was effectively using the full set of interactive behaviours. I then coached them on some of the key enquiry behaviours such as:

- checking understanding;
- seeking information;
- developing suggestions;
- acknowledging opinions, ideas and feelings;
- summarising.

These are exactly the behaviours required to explore differing points of view and idea and solutions.

Five years' later, the Group Chairman came to congratulate its workforce on transforming the factory from one of the worst performers in the Group to one of the best.

In the past, the complex issues that needed to be solved in order to turn this factory round had only been addressed by its managers. They were mainly white, Anglo-Saxon males, many of whom had studied science at a small group of prestigious universities. Although they were bright and expert, their diversity of thought was very narrow.

By creating mixed task 'super teams' that were actively supported by interactive behaviour training and coaching the diversity of thought was multiplied, powering the generation of innovative solutions to long-standing problems.

Reference: Scott E. Page (2008) *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies*. Princeton University Press.

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