To Drive Creativity, Add Some Conformity

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When you’re building an innovation team, it’s a given that you need creative people. But they’re not enough. Our research shows that groups with a variety of cognitive types produce higher levels of innovation. And getting the right balance of types is key.

We studied 41 radical-innovation teams in R&D and manufacturing units of a large defense contractor. The groups had varying proportions of three types of people—extremely creative, detail-oriented, and highly conformist—along with more-general thinkers, typically the largest component. Our most surprising finding: Conformists, though they may be useless at generating breakthrough ideas, dramatically increase a team’s radical innovations.

Few managers spend much time thinking about cognitive styles or their influence on groups. Moreover, in an effort to meet strict timetables, companies such as Intel and Toyota have started placing quality and reliability engineers—detail-oriented types, to be sure—on innovation teams. They should beware of overdoing it: Large numbers of detail-oriented people can suppress creativity in their eagerness for precision. It’s important to ensure that the other cognitive styles are properly represented, too.

WHAT’S THE OPTIMAL BALANCE?

About 50% of people have a mix of thought patterns, but the rest fall into one of three distinct cognitive types. The best radical-innovation teams have a sprinkling of the three.

CONFORMISTS support the creatives, boosting cooperation and improving a team’s confidence. On the most innovative teams we studied, conformists accounted for 10% to 20%.

CRÉATIVES are the source of radical-innovation ideas, but they’re not always attentive to usefulness, may initiate conflict, and don’t care much about rules, so teams too heavily weighted with them may have trouble with implementation. On the most innovative teams we studied, creatives accounted for 20% to 30%.

DETAIL-ORIENTED PEOPLE may strengthen functions such as budgetary control, but they’re skittish about taking risks. On the most innovative teams we studied, detail-oriented people accounted for up to 10%.