



Featured Articles

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Using Teams More Effectively

Why is teamwork often at the forefront of a successful workplace? How do individuals create a successful team environment? Three recently published books, listed below, provide some answers to these questions.

- *Hot Spots: Why Some Teams, Workplaces, and Organizations Buzz with Energy – and Others Don't*, by Lynda Gratton (Berrett-Koehler, 2007)
- *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win through Integrative Thinking*, by Roger Martin (Harvard Business School Press, 2007), and
- *Making Questions Work: A Guide to What and How to Ask for Facilitators, Consultants, Managers, Coaches, and Educators*, by Dorothy Strachan (Jossey-Bass/John Wiley and Sons, 2007)

In her book *Hot Spots*, Gratton highlights how teamwork can be the focal point of innovation and creativity. Termed “hot spots,” a positive team environment creates an energy that “fuel[s] innovation” which is “the core capability for organizational success” (p. 5). Gratton acknowledges four specific factors that influence how these “hot spots” occur: cooperative mindset, boundary spanning, igniting purpose and productive capacity.

A *cooperative mindset* considers the culture of the unit or organization. In order for successful teams to happen, a successful team culture must be fostered from the beginning to the end. This includes an environment that embraces learning through its language, practices, and behaviors. Gratton points out that most important is the acknowledgement of both unwritten and written rules. While the written values of the workplace may emphasize learning and shared cooperation, these values must also be practiced and sought out by all individuals.

Boundary spanning is described by Gratton as the ability to communicate across differences. She presents two scenarios:

- The right mix of acquaintances, associates, and friends can quickly create the type of bonds and innovation that is necessary for a team to be successful. Many friends on a team can result in similar minds working together. This may be productive, but it may also minimize innovation, as a result of “groupthink”, in which individuals on the team fear challenging each other or are quick to agree with one another (Janis, 1982). To create opportunities for “hot spots” in teams made up of colleagues, Gratton emphasizes the importance of challenging each other and planning on methods for continuous improvement.
- Cross-functional, cross-unit, or geographically dispersed teams may take more time to coalesce and thus can be less productive at first. However, the likelihood of having innovative and new ideas is much higher. This is due to differences that occur through culture, personality, distance and in-group/out-group thinking. Differences can lead to change and challenges that result in a “hot spot.” For this type of group to succeed, there must be a flexible environment of feedback and reflection. Again, Gratton emphasizes that the success of these groups is determined through an environment of open communication, purposeful conversation, and cooperative challenge.

The third component of a “hot spot” is creating an *igniting purpose*. This can be done in three ways: provide a vision, ask a question, or define a task. An igniting purpose should always be challenging, taking the next step, and changing for the better.

The last and final piece of a “hot spot” is the idea of *productive capability*. This leads to output and results. Gratton establishes five important points for a productive workplace: appreciating talent, making commitments, resolving conflicts, synchronizing timing, and establishing rhythm. The ability to pull these five pieces together allows for the workplace to be more productive so that teams can thrive and be innovative.

If Gratton has described the environment needed for innovative ideas, Martin, in describing the process of integrative thinking in *The Opposable Mind*, has described a process. Martin defines *integrative thinking* as “[t]he ability to face constructively the tension of opposing ideas and, instead of choosing one at the expense of the other, generate a creative resolution of the tension in the form of a new idea that contains elements of the opposing ideas but is superior to each” (p. 15). Opposition is not something to be afraid of but can be used as an advantage. Opposition allows for insight into whether or not change can be or should be appropriate.

Martin presents a four step model for thinking and deciding (p. 29):

1. Saliency: What features do I see as important?
2. Causality: What are the relationships? How do I make sense of what I see?
3. Architecture: What tasks will I do and in what order?
4. Resolution: How will I know when I am done?

Martin proposes that integrative thinkers, as compared to conventional thinkers, have a broader view of important or salient features; consider nonlinear as well as linear relationships; maintain a view of the whole issue or the system as well as its components; and are willing to take the time to find positive resolution rather than quickly accept compromises and complete the task. An individual’s degree of integrative thinking is impacted by that person’s perspective of him- or herself and the world, tools they are ready to use in analysis, and their experience in analysis and decision making.

Martin speaks of the importance of questioning what is now to look for the new. One way to look for the new is to ask the right questions. In *Making Questions Work*, Strachan examines how the effective use of questions can help groups structure their processes better and achieve improved outcomes. According to Strachan, “Questions that work have intention; they enable a group to get where it wants to go” (p. 8). These questions and the frameworks presented can be used in any group situation, such as in strategic planning, project implementation, or team development.

Strachan advocates the use of *conscious questioning*, questioning that is typically planned, is customized for each situation, involves questions that are inviting and elicit responses, includes sensitivity and accommodates risk, and is not based on assumptions. The five processes found in group work and the types of questions that should be developed include:

Opening a Session: Questions used in opening a session should allow participants to be themselves, give them some sense that they will be able to accomplish the task, and diminish any risk participants may feel. Questions should be developed that allow participants to get to know one another, clarify what the expectations are for the group, and encourage participants to be committed to the project.

Enabling Group Action: Questions can help participants to make valid observations, make meaning of their observations, and think about possible actions. Strachan suggests thinking about this process as a “What? So What? Now What?” model in which questions are developed to help participants notice what is going on, reflect on how it relates to their current situation, and identify what the next steps are.

Thinking Critically: Intentional questions in this area help the group to test their assumptions, understand relationships, explore alternatives, and make ethical choices. The questions developed should provide a comfortable climate in which participants can be candid, allow for an appropriate flow to the discussion, encourage new and diverse perspectives, and allow for in-depth reflection.

Addressing Issues: Questions developed should be used to help the group members understand the situation,

clarify the issues, develop and test options and make a decision. Such questions should help participants have a mutual understanding of any special terminology used, be able to explore areas of conflict, and clarify the scope of the issue.

Closing a Session: Questions should be used to help participants look back on their work and consider next steps. Closing questions are an important step in helping participants see their accomplishments and can help to provide a transition between the end of one project and the beginning of another.

Making Questions Work contains over 1800 questions which can be applied to different situations in each of these phases. Their use can result in more focused, effective group processes.

Gratton describes an environment where team “hot spots” can develop and make possible not just a performing work unit, but a pioneering work unit, identifying new solutions. Martin presents a model for integrative thinking in which multiple opposing alternatives are considered in identifying these solutions. Strachan provides a framework of questions to intentionally enable this integrative thinking. Using these approaches can contribute to more effective use of teams and enhance a team’s progress toward its goal.

Other References:

Janis, Irving. (1982). *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Contact

Office of Planning and Institutional Assessment
The Pennsylvania State University
502 Rider Building
University Park, PA 16802-4819
Phone: (814) 863-8721
Fax: (814) 863-7031
Email: psupia@psu.edu

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