



Innovative Team Learning

Maximizing the value of learning and working together



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By Dr. David Weiss and Claude Legrand

The concept that a team can generate new knowledge and value beyond the individual capability of its members is an important insight in our knowledge economy. We call the process innovative team learning and submit that organizations need this kind of team learning in order to survive and thrive in the current challenging competitive environment. We use the term 'learning' as an outcome where the team learns something new rather than as the process of learning for a team.

Before innovative team learning can be achieved, a team needs to meet certain minimum or baseline standards.

Baseline team learning

There are two minimum standards for team learning.

- **Team members must learn what each team member knows:** Teams must, as a baseline, commit to share knowledge so that everyone on the team knows all the relevant elements of what each individual team member knows. Unfortunately, many teams do not reach this baseline level. Often, individuals use knowledge as power rather than as a shared resource. Human competitiveness and individual

resistance are frequently the difficulty.

- **Team members need to be open to learning from expert resources:** Teams grow together by exposure to new ideas, new processes or new approaches that experts external to the team can provide. While an expert may give new knowledge to individual team members, the team collectively may not learn. To gain maximum value from what they learn from an expert, teams need to explore how they can use and create value from the learning in their own specific context.

These two forms of team learning are the fundamentals for the average team, but they are only the baseline that forms the preconditions for effective team performance.

Innovative team learning

Here is an example of a team that took the step beyond baseline learning to innovative team learning. After recognizing the need to solve a particular problem, they met for a full day to explore the issue in detail. They thought through the problem collectively, surfacing underlying assumptions and new insights by integrating a collective idea that no individual considered before the meeting. They then tested the idea through

a joint process of assessing and mitigating risk to determine the direction with the greatest probability of success. By virtue of their innovative team learning, they actually created new value as a team. If they had relied on baseline team learning, the result would have only been the redistribution of existing knowledge.

Innovative team learning occurs in three areas of team problem resolution. These are:

1. **Issue Redefinition:** When the team redefines an issue to ensure they have an accurate understanding of the issue

Innovative team learning occurs when teams take a deep dive to explore a problem collectively. They pool their assumptions and generate new perspectives that are unique to the team experience.

For example, a Canadian management team met to plan how to gain support from their global leadership operating in the US. The Canadian group believed their leadership undervalued them and, therefore, did not give them assignments that would maximize their capacity. Rather than starting with brainstorming solutions, the team took a deep dive, dissecting the problem and surfacing the real issue. They uncovered that their leadership viewed

them as very insular and knew very little about them. This understanding created focus for their teamwork in idea generation.

Teams that take a deep dive are able to redefine issues by putting their collective ideas together and creating new interpretations. They also are able to challenge objectively the existing individual and collective assumptions, enabling the team to eliminate their faulty assumptions and replace them with a more accurate reflection of reality.

2. Idea Generation: When the team engages in expansive thinking to generate ideas that were not considered before

To achieve expansive thinking, leaders need to ensure initially that everyone expresses their ideas openly because hidden agendas and unspoken objections can taint or even destroy the best potential solutions. Individuals need a safe and nonjudgmental environment to express their own idea to the group. However, many teams include individuals with either strong personalities or higher authority who tend to stifle the thoughts and contributions of others, which inhibits innovative team learning. No judgment or convergence should occur until the team hears the ideas of each of its members. This process, successfully accomplished, establishes the baseline team learning.

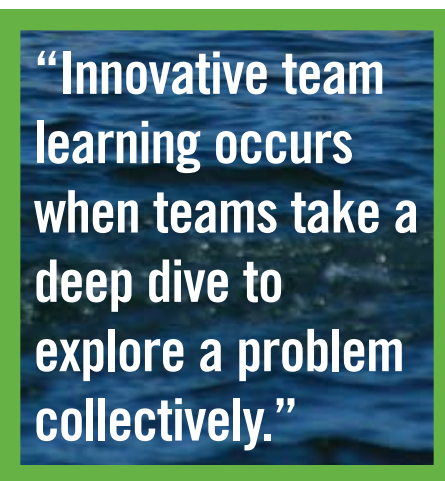
Only after a team achieves baseline team learning does the team engage in expansive thinking to generate ideas that were not considered before. It does this through combining ideas, expanding thought, engaging in brainstorming, and diverging without judgment.

3. Risk Mitigation: When the team assesses risks associated with the preferred solution and determines how to mitigate the risks

Teams must explore risks associated with a new direction. The team collectively forecasts probable and possible risks and then identifies how to mitigate those risks to an acceptable level. The process generates insights and leverages team potential.

For example, in one organization a team met to consider how to launch a new product line that was similar to a line that a third-party contractor was providing. The team members believed they could generate new revenue by becoming a third-party

contractor themselves for their own customers. However, in the team risk mitigation discussion, they realized that if they followed this path, they risked alienating their current third-party contractor and that other employees would perceive this idea as borderline unethical behaviour. Some on the team felt the risk was potentially too damaging for the team to recommend. Other team members wanted to take the risk anyway, while others thought they should abandon the idea. The leader encouraged the team to explore risk mitigation ideas and not to abandon the idea entirely. After they brainstormed and combined various insights, the team crafted a way to mitigate



the risk by partnering with the third-party contractor rather than going it alone. By tackling this issue jointly, the team maintained the internal trust, kept the service provided by the third-party contractor and delivered a credible product to the marketplace.

Through innovative team learning, the team was able to expose the risks and to identify alternative solutions that no individual had identified before.

Vulnerability of innovative team learning

When innovative team learning is embedded within an organization, it becomes an invisible competitive advantage, creating new value for the organization. It enhances an organization's capability to redefine issues, generate new ideas, and identify and mitigate risks. However, innovative team learning is an outcome that can be elusive and difficult to achieve. It is also vulnerable—once you have it, it can slip away easily.

We have found five challenges to achieving innovative team learning:

- **Time:** Teams need to invest time to share ideas, think together and build trust. Many leaders and teams are not willing to invest the required time.
- **Process:** Teams need to follow a clear process. They simply cannot improvise to achieve innovative team learning. It requires a defined process to help people work through issues in order to have an outcome that creates new ideas.
- **Ambiguity:** Teams need to become comfortable with ambiguity and not rush to close down their discussions and resolve them too quickly.
- **Commitment:** Teams must commit to innovative team learning. Team members also must protect the team as they think collectively by stopping peers who attempt to block or limit the team's capability to become more than the totality of its parts.
- **Sustainability:** When teams are successful in innovative team learning, they often enjoy the experience and foster it. However, team learning may be difficult to sustain when there are urgent demands for quick solutions. Also, a change in the leader or team members alters the entire team experience. These teams need to sustain what they have and rebuild if necessary to ensure they can continue to achieve innovative team learning outcomes.

The role of leadership

Leadership has a crucial role to play to create, foster and sustain innovative team learning—even in turbulent times. Leaders must become champions of innovative team learning and understand that as good as an individual idea may be, the team can achieve a better one with innovative team learning. Finally, leaders need to model a commitment to innovative team learning consistently, both as the leaders of their teams and also as participants of other teams. In this way, innovative team learning spreads throughout their organizations, contributes to generating new insights and ways of doing things beyond the capability of any individual, and creates new innovative advantages for their organizations.

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