



# Collective intelligence

How can leaders take advantage of collective intelligence to generate innovation in their organizations and become iconic?

According to Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar, smart people are more important than good ideas. In fact, if he had to choose between a mediocre idea and a great team, he would not hesitate to stay with the latter because, in his opinion, a great team is capable of turning a mediocre idea into a great idea. For him, if a company wants to be original, it must undoubtedly accept uncertainty; Managers should not work to prevent risk but to build the ability to recover when it fails. And the key to recovering is having talented people, which is very difficult to find. "What is just as complicated," he adds, "is to make talented people

work effectively with each other. That requires trust and respect that we, as leaders, cannot demand; it must be gained over time. What we can do is build an environment that nurtures relationships of trust and respect, and free the creativity from everyone," he stresses. <sup>(1)</sup>

## **Amplifying Talent**

In her book *Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation*, Linda Hill - an expert in leadership and a professor at the Harvard Business School - explains that talent and the right investments are important for innovation, but that leadership is what really drives it. "It is decreasingly less

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(1) Source: <https://hbr.org/2008/09/how-pixar-fosters-collective-creativity>

about having a vision and inspiring people to execute it, and increasingly more about shaping the right context that will allow people to bring innovative solutions to problems. Innovative leaders understand how to build a sense of community in the organization and, at the same time, foster a range of values and commitment rules, which become keys to innovation," says Hill. According to her, when that kind of environment is created, talented people want to participate in order to have an opportunity to be avant-garde." Consequently, it is about establishing a culture that amplifies talent," she remarks.

Tamara Erickson, an expert in organizations and former president of the Concours Institute of Consulting and Education, argues that just as in the past three decades the focus has been set on seeking clients, now the main challenge for companies is to find the people they need. In this line, she states that the challenge of leadership is to create the environment, or the context in which others execute the strategy. To innovate, collective intelligence is necessary for people to combine ideas in new and exciting ways. "Innovation includes collaboration. And it is not about talking to everyone but about a strategic decision: to speak to people who will benefit from the visions that the leader has to share, to reach the right person at the right time. And above all it is about perceiving what happens outside the company and making sure that we are always thinking about the types of disruptive patterns that may be emerging," Erickson suggests. From her perspective, this way of working is what makes a company become iconic. Its product will not make it stand out or be special, as will the way it takes advantage of intelligence, which is a unique human skill.

For the expert, the machines will play an important role: they will help us

take advantage of intelligence. How? Dividing it, helping us find patterns and identifying new types of information sources. "But the initial spark, uniting the recognition of what is important, selecting which pattern is the one that will have the greatest impact on the company, will remain a fundamentally human characteristic,"

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she says. The technological advance will require us to think, investigate, use the best of ourselves and achieve the best intelligence and the best visions.

Erickson argues that in this respect, the role of a leader is to make your company take advantage of intelligence, creating an environment that attracts its team members, and resulting in the construction of a company that will attract, retain and thrill great people. This excites them and makes them want to contribute with their best effort giving shape to that context

### **Preparing the Stage**

If the leader does not find a way to form a group and surround himself with collaborative people, he will

never achieve sustained success. Which, according to Linda Hill, comes from the hand of another remarkable change: people no longer want to follow a leader. They want to co-create with him. And if we consider a successful company the one that is capable of operating in an innovative way, what corporate culture should a leader create so that his company is in a position to innovate? "As leaders we must start with ourselves. We are the instrument when we talk about leadership, and we must re-imagine our role as leaders," she says. For Hill, the great leaders understand that innovation is not the result of individual inspiration but of collective genius, and they focus on building values and guidelines that will promote collaborative work. "All the leaders I studied were in reality visionaries who were believed to be leaders in everything they did. In spite of that, they understood that this was not their role when they were leaders - and, in fact, it is not easy not to occupy that place when you really have the vision - they focused on being social architects, building culture, creating the necessary possibilities for an organization to innovate again and again," says Linda Hill, who believes that a good leader understands that his role is to prepare the stage instead of getting on it.

The expert in strategic planning and leadership, Mario Borghino, starts from the principle that in the company there are no people with experience but people with intelligence." The company must identify who is intelligent and in what field, to place that person in the right place and assign him to do what he really knows how to do in a natural way. Regardless of their age; Intelligence is not an issue of age," he says. "What really matters is to know how to empower it. Good companies boost the intelligence of their people, and that leads to the emergence of leaders as young as the ones we are currently seeing. We

now have young managers, and even young presidents. The founders of Facebook or Google, for example, started their businesses when they were 13, 14, 15 years old. Anyone can become a leader, based on their intelligence applied in practice. And a leader who knows how to do that with his people will have brilliant employees ... and leaders," concludes Borghino.

### Leading creativity

"Part of the main role of a leader is to elicit the creative abilities of each team member, no matter how big that team is," says Ken Robinson, an expert in innovation and creativity, who identifies the difference between general creativity - the skills of general creative thinking, such as: how to work in a group or how to generate ideas - and personal creativity, which means connecting people with their own natural talents. According to Robinson, the second role of a leader is, then to facilitate and shape great creative teams." Nowadays, ideas come from people. It sounds cliché when we say it but they really come from people. And it is necessary to enable them to have these ideas, nurture their imagination and give them the skills to do so," he says. However, it is not a matter of doing it only occasionally, since, as the expert considers, in order to succeed and survive as a company, good ideas must be systematically and routinely taken. That is what a culture of innovation means to him. And, by the way, companies that do not have it tend not to survive.

Robinson argues that you can be creative with anything if you learn the necessary skills. All human beings are born with the ability but the fact of acquiring it is a cultural achievement. That's why, for him, the best question is not how creative you are, on a simple scale, but rather: in what way are you creative? What turns your imagination on? What triggers your



**"The great key to creativity is to cultivate diversity instead of homogeneity. So the role there is to form and enable great creative teams."**

creativity? Likewise, he argues that we should not ask: how smart are you? But rather: in what way are you intelligent? "We have stereotyped the intelligence in our educational systems around a very limited academic ability concept. But companies depend on multiple forms of intelligence.

Human beings have highly fertile minds and consciousnesses. They are visual. They are verbal. They are kinesthetic. They express themselves in any form of human cultural practice," Robinson says.

Like Robinson, Adam Grant - a Wharton management professor and author of *Originals* - believes that the creation of many ideas, whether large or not, is fundamental if a company wants to achieve originality. For this reason, he affirms that leaders should encourage their teams more often to generate countless ideas, knowing that they will have to discard many that are not useful to achieve greatness.

Part of the barriers to innovation

and creativity is that we are often suppressed. We feel ashamed to do what could be considered a failure, although we know that this is a requirement for the innovation process. According to Jon Collins, creating an appropriate environment for creativity is defining an environment where employees feel they are free enough to take risks. That is, for him, the essence of creativity." I really do not believe that you can be creative - or truly creative - if you are constantly in a situation of fear and limitation. You can do the work, I mean, we all work with some other limitation (time, budget, etc.). If people feel that they are supported and in an environment that trusts in them and they have a certain freedom, they can be more creative," he says. ▀

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