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One doesn't need to be especially creative or innovative to come up with great new ideas, just smart enough to listen to creative people and collect ideas from experts.

In this spirit, the OWIC Executive Innovation Brief summarizes thinking from global innovation experts that we feel have application for forest industry companies.

In addition, each Brief includes insights from a group of advisors, listed below.

Executive Brief Advisors

Lyndall Bull, Lynea Advisory, Australia

Pablo Crespel, FPInnovations, Canada

Andreja Kutnar, University of Primorska, Andrej Marušič Institute (UP IAM), Slovenia

OWIC EXECUTIVE INNOVATION BRIEF

# Are You an Innovation Leader?

**Collective Genius** by L.A. Hill, G. Brandeau, E. True-love, and K. Lineback. Harvard Business Review. 2014.

Summary by: Eric Hansen, Eric.Hansen@oregonstate.edu

We may all think we know what a good leader looks like, but these authors, after years of studying individuals that have been highly successful in managing/leading innovation, suggest that innovation leaders are a bit of a different breed! Their research was specifically focused on identifying the role a leader plays in creating an innovative organization. See their book: *Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation*.

Innovation is often associated with positive descriptors such as "fun" or "creativity", but the authors suggest it is really about hard work and is a challenging process, both emotionally and intellectually taxing. Successful innovation emanates from the diverse thinking of diverse people. However, that same diversity often leads to passionate disagreement that must be carefully managed. Managers typically try to minimize differences and conflict, but this may be counterproductive to innovation. The authors suggest, "Leaders must manage this tension to create an environment supportive enough that people are willing to share, but confrontational enough to improve ideas and spark new thinking". The leader has other balancing acts to pull off. For example, finding the middle ground between improvisation and performance (see Figure 1) or integrating seemingly mutually exclusive solutions to a problem.

The traditional view of leadership works well when the solution to a problem is known and relatively straightforward. However, if the "correct" response is unknown, a different approach is needed. In this context leading cannot follow the recipe of selling a vision and inspiring people to make it happen. Instead, what is required is for the leader to create a community that is **willing and able to innovate**. In a forest sector faced with an ever evolving resource base and high competition from replacement products, the correct response is clearly unknown and thus needs this style of leadership.

**Willingness** – creating a sense of community is based on the following three elements.

**Purpose** – why you exist (collective identity). **Shared Values** – what you agree is important. **Rules of Engagement** – How you interact and think about problems. Purpose and shared values are pretty straightforward. Rules of engagement refers to maintaining trust, mutual respect, etc. and the concept that everyone involved has a voice in the process.

**Ability:** willingness is necessary but not sufficient – your group also needs three key capabilities.

**Creative Abrasion** – ability to generate ideas through discourse and debate. The authors quote a Google manager as suggesting you need an organization that, "argues with you." Creative abrasion requires intellectual diversity and intellectual conflict. This is an area, diversity of team, that is typically a weakness of forest sector firms. **Creative Agility** – ability to test and experiment through quick pursuit, reflection, and adjustment. The authors describe an iterative and fast cycle process of experimenting; reflecting and learning; and incorporating the new knowledge in the next cycle until a solution materializes. **Creative Resolution** – ability to make integrative decisions, combining ideas. By combining and implementing these three capabilities an organization positions itself to successfully innovate.

The authors describe paradoxes of innovation (Figure 1). They describe the situation as, "At the heart of innovative problem solving is the need to both unleash individual slices of genius and harness them into collective genius." Leaders must continually recalibrate between the two extremes. Managing too far to the right means the full genius will never be realized. Managing too far to the left means too many ideas and not enough execution. Leaders must find the sweet spot in the middle.

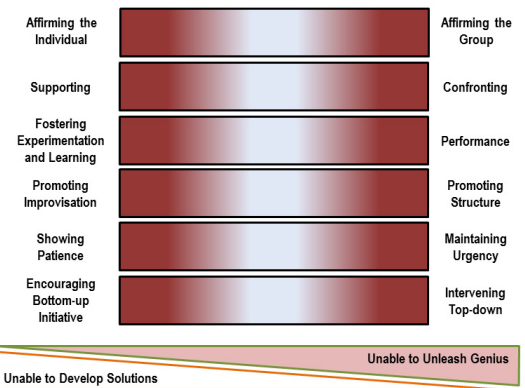


Figure 1: The Paradoxes of Innovation (Adapted from Hill et al. 2014)

The authors close their article with two messages. First, leaders of innovation are not take-charge direction setters but creators of a context that allows others to make innovation happen. Second, in their experience, the people with potential to lead innovation are often invisible to the current company systems used to identify future leaders. As you evaluate your own ability to be an innovation leader, also consider how you might identify the potential innovation leaders within your group.