

LEADING TEAMS

Teams Can't Innovate If They're Too Comfortable

by Nilofer Merchant

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On a warm afternoon in June, a few dozen people gathered on a sun-dappled spot of lawn in Cambridge to discuss the very broad topic of modern leadership.

The head of a famous museum debated a senior exec from Google about what constitutes great design. A Broadway choreographer shared his hiring process with the mayor of a Midwestern city. A philanthropist and a magazine editor discussed new business models for publishing.

Thirty minutes of a 50-minute discussion were spent reformulating the questions, rather than searching for answers. (Einstein would have been proud.)

How often does this kind of deep conversation happen where you work? If you're like most people, not often.

But this venue - Spark Camp - is designed for just such a thing. Spark Camp is a next-generation convener. They engineer productive collisions of people to tackle important topics, through clearer questions, challenging conversations, and listening with curiosity.

Funded by grant money and generous donors, with the luxury of inviting people to sit around on a grassy lawn for a whole weekend, you might think it's easy for them to spark such conversations, to find such a diverse array of interesting people. It's not. (For one thing, the organizers all have day jobs.)

Spark Camp is designed to bring together difference. Conveners Matt Thompson, Amanda Michel, Amy Webb, Jenny 8 Lee, and Andrew Pergam launched it because they were tired of going to conferences where they heard the same stories, by the same people, often without any opportunity for challenging the fundamental premise.

And their conference was visibly diverse (I later learned the demographic ratios were 50% women, 30% people of color, 25% LGBT, with a range of ages from 20 to 70). It's part of what made the conversations so good: research from Kellogg shows that the cost of thinking with people like you hurts the rate of innovation - as measured by new ideas - by 15%. Thinking with people different from you improves the quality of decisions by nearly 50%. (Many other studies have shown similar results.)

I asked the Spark Camp organizers how they designed for these sorts of high quality interactions. Their approach can be applied to many organizations.

1. **Decide difference matters.** Everything starts with an intent, says Amanda Michel. "Amy Webb and I kept going to so many events where women were - at most - 10% of the speakers and about 10% of the audience and it struck us how deeply flawed this is. So we decided from the beginning we'd include 50% women. But this goes beyond gender, of course. We believe strongly in diversity for a few reasons. We think events should be largely representative - and recognize that in these times, being representative can actually be transformative. We think that diversity of experience and ideas helps people see problems and issues anew."
2. **Define what difference means.** Spark Camp curation [start with capabilities](#) of difference. This includes cynics - those who challenge by nature- and cooperatives - those who build up others' ideas. Also, dimensions such as: introverts and extroverts. Skill sets. Jobs at big and small institutions. A variety of industry backgrounds (arts, health, business, journalism, government, education). A range of experience levels from two years of work experience to 50. Levels of seniority. And, of course, race and socioeconomic differences. As Michel put it, "If you want to address the texture and nuance of complex problems, you need to bring that texture and nuance in the room."
3. **Be relentless.** Matt Thompson described each person brought together as the "product of a very long and hard scavenger hunt." No organization wins by saying "that can't be done," and it's that same relentless energy that needs to fuel your process of bringing together people to work on a problem.

4. **Measure Everything.** Amy Webb - having written a [best-selling book](#) about how to use data to crack the dating system - says *everything* is tracked in an elaborate spreadsheet. The group measures and dissects data to learn from prior events as well as to adjust processes. For example if last-minute drop out rates are higher for women, they account for that by inviting more women upfront.
5. **Set up ground rules.** Spark Camp says the goal is to learn from each other and to create together. Not by monologue, but by interchange. “We make it very clear that we’ve not asked them to attend because of their title, or to represent their organization; instead they’re there to be themselves,” Andy Pergam shared. These principles are [openly shared](#) as a filter to be used by both the organizers and the invitee to decide if they can sign up to be fully themselves, fully present, to foster the kind of openness that leads to breakthroughs.

All organizations are looking to increase their innovation success rate. But that isn’t going to be something you accidentally do. You don’t just drift into better behavior. You have to be intentional and deliberate.

Innovation is, most fundamentally, a people-based process. Which is why I found Spark Camp worth delving into. It wasn’t easy for the organizers to bring together difference; they estimate it probably takes five times as much effort as it would to organize a more traditional event. And it wasn’t always easy for the attendees, either. Many attending expressed an intense discomfort at first. Asking themselves, “Why am I here? I have nothing in common with these people – what are we going to talk about?” But then what happened was incredibly fruitful: conversations were both *more* interesting, and *more* challenging.

To learn something new, you have to be uncomfortable. Our organizations are paying a high price for letting us work with only those we feel most comfortable with. When assumptions aren’t challenged, when questions aren’t posed, when new ideas aren’t thoroughly considered...you don’t invent a new solution to an old problem. Or find a new way to serve the next market. You simply miss out.

This data-driven and intentional approach that Spark Camp demonstrates has something all of us could take on. If we are going to create new outcomes, and be truly innovative, let’s design for it.



Nilofer Merchant has personally launched 100 products amounting to \$18 billion in revenue, and has served on both public and private boards. Today, she lectures at Stanford, gives talks around the world, and has been ranked one of the most influential management thinkers in the world by Thinkers50. Her latest book is *The Power of Onliness: Make Your Wild Ideas Mighty Enough to Dent the World*.

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