



Group Creativity: Orchestrating Insights and Innovation

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Investing in collaboration at work leads to success. Value emerges from the reciprocal interactions and the ability to improve performance and innovation in collaborative tasks.

Integrating different types of companies, higher education organizations, and research bodies in collaboration is a key factor. The cross-fertilization and encounters at the border zones of the different actors give space and new professional opportunities to multidimensional personalities and their unique competences.

Collaboration is the secret to breakthrough creativity. Creativity allows to quickly react to changes and to be proactive towards innovation.

Successful teams share much in common with techniques used in improvisation theater and jazz music ensembles. All of the learnings of e.g. improvisational acting apply to learning soft skills in the workplace.

The art activities help to break through the limitations of previously codified knowledge. Using a wide range of disciplines in the arts can make a difference in team performance and innovation capacity.

Abstract

This article explores how cooperation and collaborative work between professionals with varying backgrounds, fields of study, and interest can be supported and conducted successfully. It is found important to raise a question of the conditions that inspire especially cross-disciplined partners to take part in networked innovation processes. According to the latest research, there are difficulties to be seriously taken in account in order to surpass them. The awareness of the dynamics of teamwork and collaborative processes is particularly crucial within higher education organisations, as the challenges get bigger when the innovating partners include members with scientific and practical knowledge interests. Because of this, the objective of this article is to study the motives that make highly educated people cooperate and co-create. Thus, the goal is to shed light on the methods or levers that the organization can use to improve collaborative team performance.

“ *Creating collaborative environments – where people feel connected, where their voice is heard and their creativity is cultivated – is not only healing, it is a strategy for success.*

–Nan Crawford, Pacific Playback Theatre

At the end of the article the universities of applied sciences and their great opportunities in creative collaboration are brought into the focus. Universities of applied sciences form an interesting multidisciplinary environment with highly educated staff members who often have notable company-based background and academic research interests. In addition, the universities of applied sciences have a nearly never-ending energizing interaction with talented young students, often an intrinsic source of creativity through strong study fields in arts and culture, and lively connections to corporate life.

1. The driving force of innovations

Today, unfolding and fostering human capacity for innovation is considered to be the very essence of success both in companies and in the public sector. Creativity and diversity of teams composed of highly educated specialists are widely seen as the driving force of innovations. Without innovation there can hardly be competitiveness and economic growth, whether it is a question of countries, regions, public organizations, or companies.

The ability to improve team performance and innovation in collaborative tasks is crucial for flourishing businesses and agile societal service structures. Recent research e.g. in the field of knowledge intensive business services emphasizes that value emerges from the reciprocal interactions and extensive collaboration between suppliers and customers (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2012, 15). “An organization’s success and survival depend on its capability to create new knowledge and, then, innovation”, say Satu Parjanen, Vesa Harmaakorpi and Tapani Frantsi in their article focusing of collective creativity and brokerage functions in heavily cross-disciplined innovation processes (2010, 1–2). Creativity allows quick reaction to changes and proactivity towards innovation. Breaking down the boundaries inside and between organizations enhances the ability to build bridges for knowledge sharing within organizations themselves and within networks. (Parjanen 2012, 107.)

The reason behind the all-growing emphasis on innovation and creativeness is the increasing speed of change. When the pace of the professional life is rapid, top experts and specialists find it important to be present there, where new ideas and insights are evolving. A widely accepted fact is that innovation processes are interactive, including partners with varying backgrounds. Thus, those who are involved with the endless flow of encounters, discussions, and knowledge, are able to see possibilities and to apply their competence faster than others. “Collaboration is the secret to breakthrough creativity”, notes Keith Sawyer, a management consultant, PhD in psychology, and jazz pianist, in his award-winning book *Group Creativity* (2007). In his experience, innovations emerge from a group genius.

2. Focus of the article: how to enable creative collaboration

It becomes more and more important to integrate different types of companies, higher education organizations, research bodies and their experiences into a cooperative perspective. Only these kind of environments enable a rich enough variety of workplaces for multidimensional personalities and their unique competences. The modern large-scale hubs or science parks offer encounters in a natural way, where knowledge can spill over the borders of traditional business sectors and fields of expertise. (Ranta-Meyer 2016.) For organizations to flourish, there is an indispensable need to bring together multi-talented groups of people who orchestrate the exchange of knowledge and ideas that shape the future (VanGundy and Naiman 2007, 1).

This article aims to explore how cooperation or collaborative work between professionals with varying backgrounds, fields of study, and interest can be supported and conducted successfully. As Parjanen, Harmaakorpi and Frantsi (2010) have noticed, it is very difficult when “heavily cross-disciplined partners aim to take part in networked innovation processes”. According to their research, the difficulties even increase when the innovating partners include members with scientific and practical knowledge interests. Because of this, the objective of this article is to study the motives that make highly educated people cooperate and co-create.

Moreover, the goal is to shed light on the methods or levers that the organization can use to improve collaborative team performance. At the end of the article the universities of applied sciences and their opportunities in creative collaboration are brought into the focus. They form an interesting multidisciplinary environment with highly educated staff members who often have notable company-based or academic research interests. In addition, the universities of applied sciences have a nearly never-ending energizing interaction with talented young students, and lively connections to corporate life.

3. How to build collaborative teams

When tackling major initiatives or challenges, companies rely on large, diverse teams, which often work together virtually, collaborating online. Appointing such a team is frequently the only way to assemble the knowledge and breadth required to pull off many of the complex tasks businesses face today. But a research article in Harvard Business Review (Gratton and Erickson 2007) interestingly reveals that members of a complex team are less likely to share knowledge freely, to learn from each other, to help one another complete their jobs and meet deadlines, and to share resources. They are less likely to say that they “sink or swim” together, want one another to succeed, or view their goals as compatible.

The survey above included 1,543 people in 55 teams, and the companies involved were e.g. telecommunication, media, financial service and consulting companies. According to the research, the tendency to collaborate naturally decreases as the size of a team increases beyond 20 members. Working together virtually has a similar impact on teams. As for diversity, the challenging tasks facing businesses today almost always require the input of people with disparate views and backgrounds to create cross-fertilization that sparks insight and innovation. But diversity also creates problems: the researchers point out that team members collaborate more easily and naturally if they perceive themselves as being alike.

The differences include nationality, age, education level, and even tenure. The higher the proportion of strangers on the team, the less likely the team members exhibit collaborative behaviors. In the same way, the higher the educational level of the team members is, the more likely it is to disintegrate into nonproductive conflict or stalemate. (Gratton and Erickson 2007).

So how can an organization's ability to perform complex collaborative tasks be strengthened? How can the effectiveness of large, diverse teams be maximized, while minimizing the disadvantages posed by their structure and composition? A closer look at teams that were strong in overcoming the difficulties revealed eight factors behind success according to Gratton and Erickson (2007):

- ▶ *Top executives had invested significantly in building and maintaining social relationships throughout the organization and the most collaborative companies had an own "handwriting" or "signature" in their underlying culture which made the practices memorable and difficult for others to copy.*
- ▶ *The senior executives demonstrated highly collaborative behavior themselves. Investment in face-to-face interaction created opportunities to see the top executives in action.*
- ▶ *In addition to formal mentoring, there was less formal coaching. It was integrated to everyday activities and in the routine behavior of executives.*
- ▶ *The employees were taught the requisite cooperation skills, e.g. appreciating others, resolving conflicts by human resources or corporate learning department.*
- ▶ *The company was supporting a strong sense of communal spirit.*
- ▶ *The team leaders were flexible. Teams were led by people who were both task- and relationship-oriented. What is more, these leaders changed their style during the project.*
- ▶ *The importance of trust to successful collaboration was recognized and the teams were formed on pre-existing relationships or ensuring key "heritage" relations to continue and strengthen during the time.*
- ▶ *The roles of the individual team members were clearly defined, but the path to achieving the team's goal was left somewhat ambiguous.*

4. Increasing possibilities for successful innovation

To promote collective creativity, the role of the leaders is essential. The traditional way of thinking of creativity tends to discount leader influences and may see leaders at best a hindrance for creativity. However, in managing creativity, an understanding of the personal characteristics of the employees and the characteristics of creative work is important. (Parjanen 2012, 107-109.) Strengthening an organization's capacity for collaboration requires a combination of long-term investments, e.g. building relations and trust, and smart near-term decisions about for instance the ways teams are formed (Gratton and Erickson 2007).

In her dissertation at Lappeenranta University of Technology, Satu Parjanen (2012) has found out that just as organizations need outside sources of knowledge, they also need outside sources of creativity. In the open, practice-based innovation, it is possible to

distinguish between internal and external creative capabilities which are available for an organization. The first refers to the creative capabilities of the internal stakeholders of the organization, such as individuals and groups of employees. The latter stands for the creative capabilities of those individuals, groups, and partners that contribute to defined projects as non-members of the organization in consideration. As a consequence, it is important to ask how the interplay between internal and external creativity can be best designed. The key question is also whether organizations should do the interplay themselves or whether they would benefit from external activators or facilitators, so called brokers. Brokerage functions aim to connect different employees, groups or departments and to make them aware of the interests and difficulties of the other group and to transfer best practices. According to Parjanen (2012, 110) there is a need of brokers acting in a bridging role not only outside the organization but also inside it.

Successful innovation under complexity and uncertainty can be achieved through collaborative approaches that integrate knowledge inside and outside the organization. Parjanen's research and case studies underline especially the importance of brokerage functions. They are essential in exploiting the different kinds of distances. Distances between potential innovating partners may be too large, but the skills and knowledge to use ideas or tools of open, multi-actor innovation may also be missing. By utilizing brokerage functions, the external knowledge can be brought already to the idea generation process.

Brokerage functions include building ideation arenas which are based on cognitive cross-fertilization and enhancing individuals with the help of creativity methods and boundary objects. Parjanen (2012, 110) divides the brokerage functions into process and session brokerage. Process brokerage includes the management of the whole process and includes, for example, reducing the organizational and cultural distances during the preparatory phase. Session brokerage, on the other hand, refers to the facilitation of the idea generation. A session broker's goal is to develop an understanding between the participants and shorten the cognitive, communicative and social distances in particular.

5. Maximizing collaboration

In his best seller called *Group Genius* (2007), the author Keith Sawyer has taken a new perspective on collaboration and how it is understood in today's networked economy. In the business world, many innovations emerge from a group's genius and innovative team experience group flow realizing its full creative potential. According to Sawyer, even though sparks of insight often feel like a solitary, private event, their roots are in collaboration. Moments of insight can be traced back to previous dedication, hard work, and interplay with others.

Sawyer, as a psychologist and jazz pianist, has been interested in understanding the secret of what makes a collaboration successful. What happens when collaboration translates each person's creativity into group genius? After years of research and interaction analysis, Sawyer (2007, 13–14) is convinced that successful work teams share much in common with techniques used in improvisation theater and jazz music ensembles: the members play off one another, each person's contributions providing the spark for the next. Together, the improvisational team creates a novel emergent product, one that

is more responsive to the changing environment and better than anyone could have developed alone.

On the basis of his research, Sawyer (2007, 14–17) has identified seven key characteristics of effective creative teams.

- ▶ *Innovation emerges over time as an improvisation theater play emerges bit by bit. In theater, we can see this process on stage; but with an innovative team, outsiders never see the long chain of small, incremental ideas that lead to the final innovation.*
- ▶ *Successful collaborative teams practice deep listening. Trained improvisation theater actors listen for the new ideas that the other actors offer in their improvised lines, at the same time as they are coming up with their own ideas. The difficult balancing act is essential to group genius.*
- ▶ *Team members build on their collaborators' ideas. When teams practice deep listening, each new idea is an extension of the ideas that have come before.*
- ▶ *Only afterwards does the meaning of each idea become clear. Ideas don't take on their full importance until they are taken up, reinterpreted, and replied by others. Individual creative actions take on meaning only later, after they are woven into other ideas, created by other actors. In a creative collaboration, each person acts without knowing what his or her action means for the result.*
- ▶ *Surprising questions emerge. The most transformative creativity results when a group either thinks of a new way to frame a problem or finds a new problem that no one had noticed before. When teams work this way, ideas are often transformed into questions and problems. That's critical, because creativity researchers have discovered that the most creative groups are good at finding new problems rather than simply solving old ones.*
- ▶ *Innovation is inefficient. In improvisation, actors have no time to evaluate new ideas before they speak. That is why improvised innovation, too, perhaps makes more mistakes, and has as many misses as hits. But the hits can be phenomenal; they will make up for the inefficiency and the failures. When we look at an innovation after the fact, all we remember is the chain of good ideas that made it into the innovation; we don't notice the many dead ends.*
- ▶ *Innovation emerges from the bottom up. Improvisational performances are self-organizing. With no director and no script, the performance emerges from the joint actions of the actors. In the same way, the most innovative teams are those that can restructure themselves in response to unexpected shifts in the environment; they don't need a strong leader to tell what to do. The improvisational collaboration of the entire group translates the moments of individual creativity into group innovation. The method may be riskier and less efficient, but when a successful innovation emerges, it is often so surprising and imaginative that no single individual could have thought of it.*

6. Orchestrating deep dialogue

Businesses today want to break away from their limitations, aim higher, and be a creative force for the greater good of the world. No company can win over in the long

run without energized employees who believe in the mission of their organization and understand how to achieve it collaboratively. Top innovative companies – like American Express, Boeing, Pfizer, Coca-Cola, Oracle Storage Tek, and World Bank – and the arts are therefore formulating a new relationship, distinct from the traditional models of entertainment or sponsorship. “We need the transformative experiences the arts give us to thrive in a world of change”, say Arthur B. VanGundy and Linda Naiman in their book *Orchestrating collaboration at work* (2007).

A growing number of companies in Europe and USA are using arts to enhance high organizational performance. They have used arts as a tool for visioning, communication, customer service, and team development. Since human organizations are fundamentally driven by human behavior, the arts are seen a vast resource providing understanding for human relationships, the way people communicate, their motivations, limitations, resolve, the capacity to envision possibilities, and the ability to manifest goals. “Forward thinking leaders can gain tremendously practical tools by applying the wisdom and skills from the arts to their current business issues”, VanGundy and Naiman (2007, 2) emphasize.

Hiring professionals holding both scientific and artistic university degree, and recruiting arts, theater and music education experts to reinforce innovation have grown very popular among organizations both in public and private sector. At the human development departments, there are several arts-based activities in use – designed specifically to enhance team spirit, collaboration and ability to invent new: improvisation, applied drama, storytelling, poetry, painting, music, photography, and sculpture.

The art activities help to break through the limitations of previously codified knowledge and teach about aesthetics, ambiguity, diversity, chaos, change, courage, and complexity. Becoming emotionally fit for the rigors of collaboration requires emotional development: one’s capacity for and ability to offer empathy, support, trust, and hard-headed, constructive criticism (John-Steiner 2000, 190). The use of the arts can take team members on adventures in creative expression that help explore safely unknown territory, overcome fear, and experience that also risks of the exploration are shared.

A shared art experience enhances the sense of belonging and enriches conversation, from which emerges trust, caring, camaraderie, and genius-level thinking. (VanGundy and Naiman 2007, 10–11.) Using a wide range of disciplines in the arts, from sculpting, drawing, music, and literature to electronic arts, can really help people see their problems and opportunities differently.

7. Multidisciplinary universities of applied sciences make the difference

According to commonly shared definitions, universities of applied sciences are practice-oriented higher education institutes and applied with strong connection and cooperation with industries, society and small businesses. The research, development and innovation activities conducted at universities of applied sciences not only serve their own endeavors but also promote work life and regional development as well as renew the economic structure of local and global society. (See e.g. http://www.arene.fi/sites/default/files/PDF/2016/UAS%20in%20Finland_EN_A1_Arene.pdf)

However, this definition excludes the very core and unique potential of universities of applied sciences: their multidisciplinary character. In most cases the universities of applied sciences consist of different schools, fields of study and professional expertise: the arts, culture and creative industries, business, healthcare and social services, technology and life sciences among others. The enormous potential for universities of applied sciences lies in the different ways of how professionals from totally distance expertise fields are attracted to collaborate. Today there is a deep mutual awareness in corporate life that all answers to problems cannot be found in the world of the rational, logical, and scientific. The best results are gained through cross-fertilization and team spirit, people working together with passion (see e.g. Netflix's company culture <http://www.slideshare.net/reed2001/culture-1798664>).

“ *The best results are gained through cross-fertilization and team spirit, people working together with passion.* ”

The forerunner companies understand they cannot keep driving organizations by numbers. Therefore, they seek and strive for the kind of solutions, which are already rooted in the structures and main tasks of universities of applied sciences: professors from various departments, educational backgrounds and worldviews working together with students and companies in order to resolve challenges and inventing new. In companies, it must sound like a dream to have in one organization – like at universities of applied sciences – departments of various fields with highly educated staff that can combine knowledge and skills: nearly anything to everything.

In which company you could find PhDs of international business and logistics to robotics and data mining, from environmental engineering or circular economy to storytelling, stage, sound and light technology, or big band leading. Wouldn't every human resource development department in companies be envious for a university of applied sciences having a degree program in performing arts with young students specializing in drama improvisation, Playback Theater, community theater and drama-based methods in facilitating collaboration.

“Actors, especially improvisational actors, have been training their minds for centuries to deal with the unanticipated or, rather, to ‘anticipate surprise’. All of the learnings of improvisational acting apply to learning soft skills in the workplace”, says leading organizational development consultant Jerry Kail from LexisNexis. (VanGundy and Naiman 2007, 15.) The company is a global provider of content-enabled workflow solutions designed specifically for professionals in the legal, risk management, corporate, government, law enforcement, accounting, and academic markets. (See <http://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/about-us/about-us.page>.)

8. The power of co-constructing collaboration in metropolitan areas

Unfortunately, sometimes the pioneering ideas and unique possibilities come to life too early. E.g. in Finland there was earlier clear state-level policies to support creative industries and faculties of art and culture at the universities of applied sciences as equal

fields of study among the traditionally more appreciated business or technology studies; however, the environment has not been streamlined with the goals.

The administrative structures at the higher education organizations or, innovation and employment strategies of companies have not necessarily beaten time with the arising, globally trailblazing knowledge and creative human potential. Instead, once flourishing and very successful degree programs in the field of culture and creative industries in Finland have today been increasingly abolished in universities of applied sciences or, the harsh budget cuts have paralyzed their only true beating heart, the artistic expression.

For instance at Lahti UAS both the institute of music and drama and the institute of fine arts were closed entirely in 2012, and the jewellery design degree programme will be abolished next. Metropolia's decision to close down the degree program of performing arts with a unique orientation for applied drama has been a setback, not only for the institution itself, but to Finnish cultural life, too. Today, the success of the former students is undisputable and they receive acknowledgement for their pioneering work (see e.g. Sarhimaa 2017; Ängeslevä 2017).

Despite the challenges, threats and budget cuts that the Finnish universities of applied sciences and especially the faculties of culture have recently faced, investing anew in best practices for genuine multidisciplinary collaboration is crucial for the future. The capital areas in Berlin, Helsinki, and everywhere in the world are growing with an accelerating speed. The wicked problems and the most universal phenomena always appear first in metropolitan areas. Therefore, in these regions there is a never ending demand for creativity, well-functioning, practical solutions and new technologies.

The complex ecosystems of metropolitan areas need strong universities of applied sciences as a necessity because of their capability to react in an agile way to societal needs and changes and to develop practice-based solutions together with their partners. The power of universities of applied sciences relies on their ability as multidisciplinary organizations to observe and understand the various aspects and facets of the society, business life, and behavior of different inhabitant groups or individuals.

At their best, the universities of applied sciences can be the forerunners who have the means, the know-how, the networks and the passion to improve and co-construct creative collaboration.

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