Extrovert Learning Strengths (2), ‘The Culture Code‘ (extract) Daniel Coyle (2015)

- “Progress had been delivered not through a beautifully constructed masterplan (there was no plan), but by rapid interaction with the world.”

  Matthew Syed, p135-161

The designer and engineer Peter Skillman held a competition. Over several months, he assembled a series of four-person groups at Stanford, the University of California, the University of Tokyo, and several other places. He challenged each group to build the tallest possible structure using the following items:

·Twenty pieces of uncooked spaghetti
·one yard of transparent tape
·one yard of string
·one standard size marshmallow

The contest had one rule: the marshmallow had to end up on top. The fascinating part of the experiment, however, had less to do with the task than with the participants. Some of the teams consisted of Business School students. The others consisted of kindergartners.

The business students got right to work. They began talking and thinking strategically. They examined the materials. They tossed ideas back and forth and asked thoughtful, savvy questions. They generated several options, then honed the most promising ideas. It was professional, rational, and intelligent. The process resulted in a decision to pursue one particular strategy.Then they divided up the tasks and started building.

The kindergarteners took a different approach. They did not strategize. They did not analyse or share experiences. They did not ask questions, propose options, or hone ideas. In fact, they barely talked at all. They stood very close to one another. Their interactions were not smooth or organised. They abruptly grabbed materials from one another and started building, following no plan or strategy. When they spoke, they spoke in short bursts: “Here! No, here!” Their entire technique might be described as trying a bunch of stuff together.

If you had to bet which of these teams would win, it would not be a difficult choice. You would bet on the Business School students, because they possess the intelligence, skills, and experience to do a superior job. This is the way we normally think about group performance. We presume skilled individuals will combine to produce skilled performance in the same way we presume two plus two will combine to produce four.

“Your bet would be wrong. In dozens of trials, kindergarteners built structures that average twenty six inches tall, while Business School students build structures that average less than ten inches. Teams of kindergartners also defeated teams of lawyers (who built towers that averaged fifteen inches) as well as teams of CEOs (twenty-two inches).

… But this illusion, like every illusion, happens because our instincts have led us to focus on the wrong details. We focus on what we can see - individual skills. But individual skills are not what matters. What matters is the interaction.

The Business School students appear to be collaborating, but in fact they are engaged in a process psychologists call status management. They're figuring out where they fit into the larger picture: who is in charge? Is it okay to criticise someone's idea? What are the rules here? Their interactions appear smooth, but their underlying behaviour is riddled with inefficiency, hesitation, and subtle competition. Instead of focusing on the task, they are navigating their uncertainty about one another.They spend so much time managing status that they fail to grasp the essence of the problem (the marshmallow is relatively heavy, and the spaghetti is hard to secure). As a result, their first efforts often collapse, and they run out of time.

The actions of the kindergartners appear disorganised on the surface. But when you view them as a single entity, their behaviour is efficient and effective. They are not competing for status. They stand shoulder to shoulder and work energetically together. They move quickly, spotting problems and offering help.They experiment, take risks, and notice outcomes, which guides them toward effective solutions.

The kindergartners succeed not because they are smarter but because they work together in a smarter way. They are tapping into a simple and powerful method in which a group of ordinary people can create a performance far beyond the sum of their parts.