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Further Reading, Cognitive Diversity, ‘Rebel Ideas’ (extract) – Matthew Syed

Summary:

1. Individuals don't possess all the relevant insights to solve complex problems
2. Dynamics that drive collective conformity in groups operate to convert individual intelligence into collective blindness
3. The hallmark of collective intelligence is the constructive challenging of perspectives and assumptions
4. Demographic diversity doesn't guarantee cognitive diversity:
5. Diversity needs to be combined with psychological safety, and diversity that's relevant and valued for the collective task

We can express the basic idea of diversity science in visual form. Suppose the rectangle in Figure 1 represents the universe of useful ideas; that's to say, the *insights, perspectives, experiences and thinking styles* relevant to a particular problem or objective. We might call this the 'problem space'.

With simple problems, one person might possess all this 'information'. Diversity is unnecessary. But with complex problems, no one person will have all the relevant insights. Even the smartest individual will have only a subset of knowledge. We can represent a smart person, David, with the circle. He knows a lot, but he doesn't know everything.

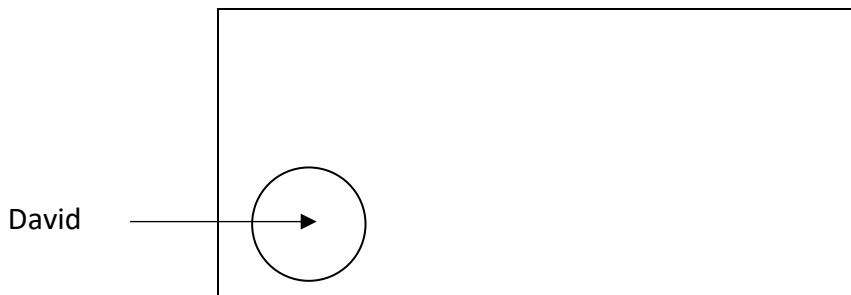


Figure 1: An intelligent Individual

But we can now see the dangers of homophily. In Figure 2, we can see what happens when a group of people come together who think in the same way. Every individual is smart. They each have impressive knowledge. But they are also homogenous. They know similar things, and share the same perspectives. They are, so to speak, 'clone-like'...

David
Andrew
John
Toby
Nathan
Jacob
Theodore
Ben

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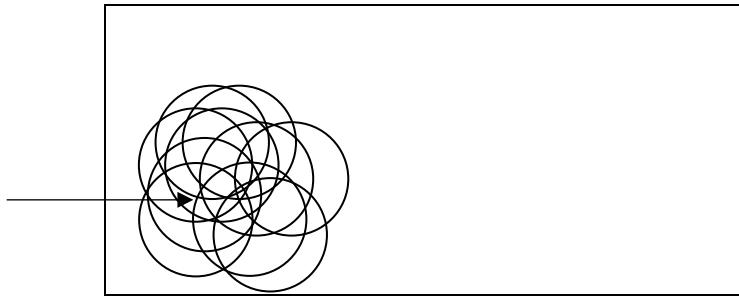


Figure 2: An unintelligent team

Think how comforting it is to be surrounded by people who think in the same way, who mirror our perspectives, who confirm our prejudices. It makes us feel smarter. It validates our world view. Indeed, evidence from brain scanners indicates that when others reflect our own thoughts back to us, it stimulates the pleasure centres of our brains. Homophily is somewhat like a hidden gravitational force, dragging human groups towards one corner of the problem space.

These dangers are as ancient as mankind itself. They were certainly well understood by the Ancient Greeks. In *Nichomachean Ethics* Aristotle writes that people ‘love those who are like themselves.’ Plato notes in *Phaedrus* that ‘similarity begets friendship. The phrase ‘birds of a feather flock together’ is derived from the early pages of Book One of Plato’s masterpiece *The Republic*. Indeed, if you look closely enough, the danger of intellectual conformity is an abiding preoccupation of Greek culture. And this is why Figure 2 is worth keeping in mind for it represents a pervasive problem in the world today: groups of people that are individually intelligent but collectively, well, stupid.

‘... when smart people from a singular background are placed into a decision-making group, they are liable to be collectively blind.’

... Even when groups start out with diversity, this can be squeezed out by a process of social osmosis as people converge upon the dominant assumptions, a phenomenon known as ‘assimilation’.

The clustering of people in small parts of the problem space, then, is a predictable consequence of human psychology. Groups have an inbuilt tendency to become clone-like... when smart individuals have overlapping frames of reference, they become collectively myopic.

Wise groups express a different dynamic. They are not clone-like. They do not parrot the same views. Instead, they are more like groups of rebels. They do not disagree for the sake of it, but *bring insights from different regions of the problem space*. Such groups contain people with *perspectives that challenge, augment, diverge and cross-pollinate*. This

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represents the hallmark of collective intelligence: how wholes become more than the sum of their parts.

The individuals here (below) are no smarter than those in the team of Figure 2 and yet they possess vastly higher levels of collective intelligence. They have *coverage*. And they reveal why, when it comes to complex problems, it is important to work with people who think differently.

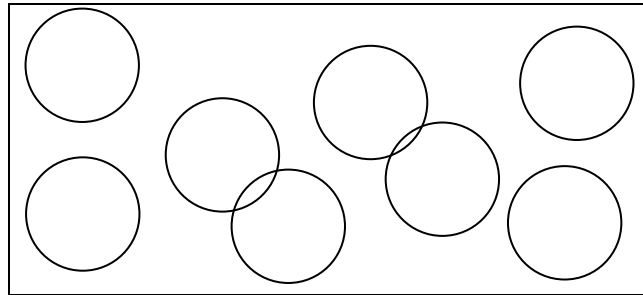


Figure 3: An intelligent team (a team of rebels)

'Collective intelligence emerges not just from the knowledge of individuals, but also from the differences between them.'

Demographic diversity often overlaps with cognitive diversity. This is intuitive since our identities influence our experiences, perspectives and more... (one piece of research showed an increase in racial diversity of just one standard deviation increased productivity by more than 25 per cent in legal services, health services and finance.) In any domain that requires an understanding of broad groups of people, demographic diversity is likely to prove vital...but difference in colour or gender does not guarantee an increase in cognitive diversity. Building collective intelligence cannot be reduced to a box-ticking exercise.

Diversity contributes to collective intelligence, but only when it is relevant. The key is to find people with perspectives that are both germane and synergistic.

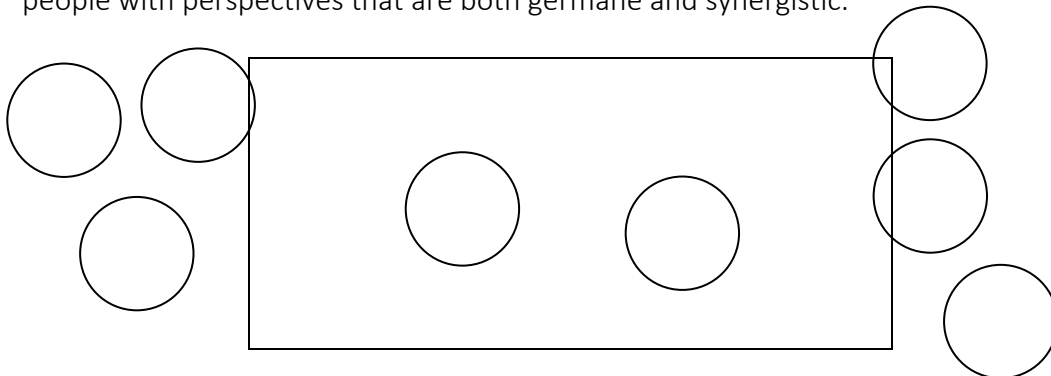


Figure 4: A diverse but collectively unintelligent team

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Power Dynamics and Cognitive Diversity

'One person has a single pair of eyeballs. A team has many. So the question we are going to ask is: how are useful information and perspectives combined? For diversity to work its magic, different perspectives and judgements must be expressed. It is no good having useful information that never gets aired.'

Dominance hierarchies have served an important evolutionary purpose. When the choices that confront a tribe or group are simple, it makes sense for a leader to make decisions, and for everyone else to fall into line. This boosts speed and coordination. Tribes with dominant leaders tended to fare best in our evolutionary history.

But in situations of complexity, dominance dynamics can have darker consequences... collective intelligence hinges upon the expression of diverse perspectives and insights. This can shut down in a hierarchy where dissent is perceived by the alpha as a threat to their status.

'A clever study by the Rotterdam School of Management analysed more than three hundred read-world projects dating back to 1972 and found that projects led by junior managers were more likely to succeed than those with a senior person in charge... the presence of a HiPPO (Highest Paid Person's Opinion) can prevent ideas from coming up.'

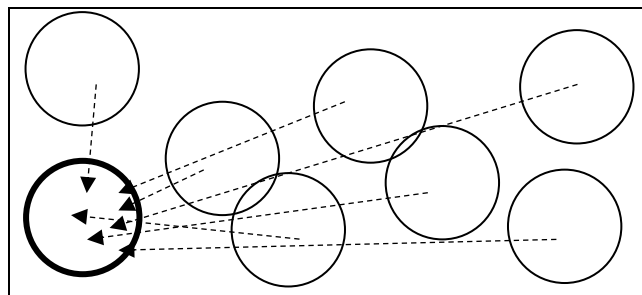


Figure 3: A diverse team under the influence of a conformist power dynamic

'No amount of commitment can drive effective decision-making in a situation of complexity when diverse perspectives are suppressed; when critical information isn't flowing through the social network.'

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