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How to motivate teams to collaborate

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Organisations can achieve "superior" innovation by harnessing both individual motivation and creating a collaboration mindset in the workplace, according to two culture specialists.

In their book, *The Innovation Race: How to change a culture to change the game*, **Andrew Grant** and **Gaia Grant** discuss how employers can create a workplace culture that best supports innovation in four steps.

One of these is to motivate employees *and* teams to collaborate so that neither 'individualism' (being independent and self-reliant) nor 'collectivism' (prioritising a group over each individual within the group) prevails.

Individualism can be driven by personal passion, but can also lead to apathy and disengagement from a group; while group commitment and engagement can lower accountability and individual motivation to perform at a high level, but can produce higher levels of creativity, Grant and Grant say.

They say, therefore, that "balancing competition (individual drive to achieve) and collaboration (working together for the communal good) will be essential to future collective development".

People are "neurologically wired" for both competition and cooperation, with both activities accessing the same parts of the brain. But while they help people make choices about the best course of action in new situations and predict others' behaviour, significant differences also exist between the two.

Competition requires more energy in the brain for processing, while cooperating "appears to be more socially rewarding", Grant and Grant say.

"This means that there are natural systems in place to reward cooperation – so long as we can deal with that competitive urge... which impacts our ability to collaborate effectively and 'drains the brain'," they say.

But they acknowledge that encouraging people to cooperate "without the ties of kinship" is challenging, and if a lack of trust exists, organisations risk having 'defectors'.

Grant and Grant describe the problem of defectors using the following scenario: If 50 people, who each sit in their own booth with a buzzer, get to the end of one hour without pressing the buzzer, they will each receive $1k. But if someone presses the buzzer anonymously before the end of the hour, that person will receive $100.

"Obviously the best mutual outcome is for everyone to wait until the end of the hour for the big pay-off. Yet, if there is no trust most people will expect that someone will 'defect' and take the $100, so they figure it might as well be them," they say.

This demonstrates that rational individuals "might opt not to cooperate, even if it is, on the face of it, in their best interests to do so".

Build trust

Research shows the level of trust between employees and leaders affects an organisation's ability to embrace technological innovations, and can be linked to good governance and high economic performance, Grant and Grant say.

Further, cooperation, commitment and trust, are considered major factors for business success, they say.

Business teams, however, are "commonly more competitive than collaborative" and might "try to maintain the appearance of being a cohesive team while conducting turf wars behind the scenes".

"This obviously impacts team performance, productivity, engagement – and ultimately innovation."

Grant and Grant describe trust in an organisation as **credibility**, including a sense of respect and fairness, plus **reliability**, plus **intimacy**.

"Where individuals are authentic and have integrity, they develop credibility. Where they have shown themselves to be consistently reliable over time, they develop reliability. And where they open up and allow themselves to become vulnerable to others, they can develop intimacy," they say.

"Where these qualities are understood and modelled in the organisation at all levels it is possible to build a culture of trust, which in turn will support collaboration for innovation."

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