

Why teams are often less than the sum of their parts



Dr Nick Udall



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THE most
potent forum
for shaping
the future’

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by Dr Nick Udall, CEO nowhere

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The challenge of our time is to bring the ‘new into the world’ – as innovative products, services, processes, strategies and business models – in more efficient, effective and elegant ways. For, in a VUCA world, it is our capacity to create, to innovate and to repeatedly reinvent ourselves that enables us to stand up, stand out and grow.

In order to bring the new into the world, we first need to become more adept at bringing the ‘new to mind’ – and in a complex world this can’t just be an individual endeavour, it must also be a collective one.



By definition a new thought must previously have been unknown. So, creating new patterns of collective thought requires us to step into the unknown together – as creativity is the dance between the known and the unknown. It is therefore our willingness to ‘not know’ that creates space for the new to emerge.

Stepping into the unknown, and lingering there without panicking, long enough for the new to emerge, requires us to marshal first our own energy, and then the energy of others around us. But when it comes to teams, most don’t know how to do this.

We rightly make the effort to bring ‘high talent’ into teams. However, it is unfortunately too common for teams, who can be made up of super bright, brilliant people, to somehow become less than the sum of their parts when they get together.

On paper a team can look very strong. Yet, in the real-world, they never get anywhere near their expected collective potential.

Recognise this?

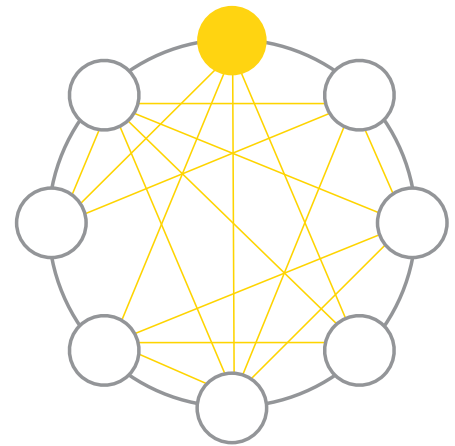
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Difference

Let's look into this a bit more, by starting with a simple principle. *You can only be in creative relationship with another person when you and they both stand in your magic – your differences.* This by default creates heat and tension. This tension is a necessary part of the creative process, providing it's in service of a larger, purposeful endeavour that you are both committed to and passionate about.

This tension is also the fuel that enables you both to move through and beyond your own preconceptions, current capabilities and beliefs, and see new, more elegant and optimal ways forward. This happens in sudden moments of creative insight and collective breakthrough, or through the gradual illumination of a new pattern of possibility.

Now scale this up. When teams establish creative relationships across the myriad of potential relationships within the team ie. at each, and every, creative intersection, then magic starts to happen. We start to tap into a wider collective intelligence, where new patterns of collective thought and action begin to emerge. The team becomes greater than the sum of its parts.



However, as soon as one or more members of the team surrender their difference, are unable to stand in their magic, or behave in a way that corrupts the space or takes up too much space, then the team immediately falls out of creative relationship – and stops being a creative team. It instead gets stuck in a highly inefficient and wholly unsatisfactory world of poor and pseudo relationships, unable to marshal the core energy needed to create, innovate and reinvent.

By the way, being out of relationship interpersonally, or within and between teams and functions, is the greatest generator of 'funk' in organisational life. Dealing with this 'funk' can take up so much time and energy. When we remember to slow down and re-invest in building relationships, most of the funk (drama, conflict, gossip, rumour, fear, insecurity) drops away.

When we are under pressure, any one, or any number, of these distortions can take us over, individually and collectively, and start running the show.

Allied energies

Much research has been done on what makes a team highly productive, peak performing and creative. Is it the right mix of introverts and extroverts, of followers and leaders, or of personality types? Or is it more about group norms, unwritten rules, conversational turn-taking, social sensitivities?

Latest research would posit that the key to creative teams and productive meetings is psychological safety ie. it is safe to speak up, voice differences of opinion, think out loud, take risks, disclose, fail fast etc.

Psychological safety, and the trust that it enables, is from our experience, one of the four allied states of mind of creative teams that help teams to be able to work at their creative edge and make the unmade future.

The other states of mind are: *communally loving the problem; the capacity to wander with wonder into the unknown together; and the ability to see and work with pattern so you can move like a flock of birds.*



However, these allied states of mind are easily undermined, or distorted, such that teams either struggle to establish creative relationships in the first place, or too easily and often fall out of creative relationship, collapsing the team back to being less than the sum of its parts.

These distortions include *defensiveness, indulgence, drama, gullibility, suppression, the need to control, insecurity and fear.* They are all the tools of the ego, designed to keep us separate.



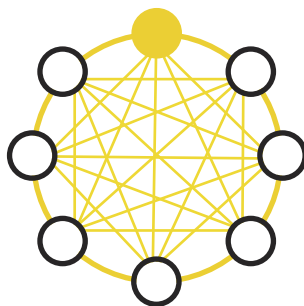
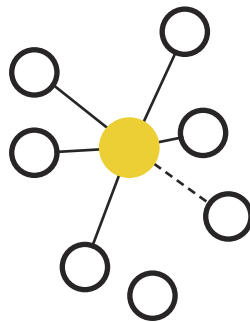
The challenge is that these distortions would have previously been used as protective mechanisms to help us to walk through an unpredictable world. They are natural. And they are in each and every one of us. For this reason, when we are under pressure, any one, or any number, of these distortions can take us over, individually and collectively, and start running the show.

Seeing difference as a threat

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People move towards leaders who take up space, when they have a similar outlook, and/or are good at playing politics. They move away from them when they don't feel seen, valued or heard, or are not falling in line with the leader's point of view ie. they hold a point of difference. Both positions have a massive cost, for when difference is not present, or worse still suppressed, so is our ability to create, innovate, reinvent and manage risk.



Leaders who habitually take up space view 'difference' as a threat. They put themselves under pressure to 'be seen to know', and this fuels an insecurity that struggles to tolerate anything that challenges their view. So instead they minimise difference and close it down as quickly as possible – or as fast as they can while still being politically-correct.

Typically this leads to an 'in crowd' (those who say 'yes'), and an 'out-crowd' (those who don't say much at all).

Unfortunately, because they are at the centre, and connected to everyone by default, leaders who take up space are also often oblivious of the cost of their position. They become blind to the problem that there is a sense of lack of 'team', and often deny or deflect any such inference.

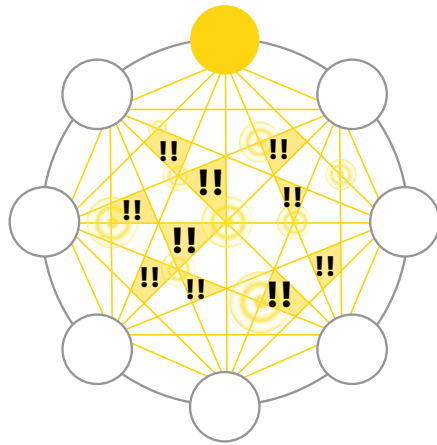
These leaders have other giveaway traits. For example, they expect you to pick up the phone whenever they call – you probably in turn expect the same of your team, as this is an infectious and invidious behavioral pattern. They focus their energy and attention on reactive rather than strategic agendas; and they struggle to express emotion and vulnerability. They swing between wanting consensus (as a way to avoid having to make decisions) and taking decisions off-line, while still making them in the name of the team. And, they often choose not to deal with bad behaviour, which means they subtly condone it.

However, the ultimate cost of taking up space as a leader is that people start mirroring your stance – shutting down difference by defending their own position, presenting preconceptions, regurgitating old thoughts, having circular conversations, and arguing for their own limitations. These are all ways of taking up space, driven by distortions – and they are the antithesis of the type of leadership needed to build creative teams.

Creative teams

The challenge therefore is to raise our awareness to our allied and distorted energies – the hidden patterns of thought and action – that move us into, or out of, co-creative relationship with the world, and with each other. Then we must learn to consciously expand our allies and interrupt our distortions by being in command in every moment, and from moment-to-moment.

When you do move into this state of consciousness together, creative teams begin to manifest like flames.



The beauty is that when you move into an allied state of consciousness together, creative teams begin to manifest like flames.

Creative teams are THE most potent forum for shaping the future. Yet, learning to tap into the ‘beautiful mind’ of a real, line, project or virtual team takes time and practice.

But when their subtle skills are honed, creative teams are able to turn the exponential number of relationships, intersections and spaces that exist within and between them into the fuel for peak performance and breakthrough innovation.

It’s simple really. Magic happens when teams learn to be greater than the sum of their parts, for this is when they surprise themselves with what they can create together.

This is the fourth in the hidden series of **nowhere** articles by Dr Nick Udall.

About nowhere

Since the mid nineties, **nowhere** has been working behind the scenes and at the highest levels, with multi-national companies all over the world, tuning the creative frequency at which their cultures operate.

Our ‘practice’ is born from a unique blend of insight traditions, creative and organisational disciplines and doctoral research, and has over twenty years of development and refinement with some of the biggest brands and inspiring leaders.

It enables us to work in creative partnership with our clients & partners to:

1. **design, catalyse and choreograph breakthroughs** – including breakthrough teams & meetings, strategies & innovations, cultures & journeys.
2. **transform the way they work** so they can breakthrough the cultural ceiling that many organisations all over the world are hitting up against ie. thinking that doing more of the same, but a little bit better, is good enough (it’s not), or thinking you can work harder and longer hours (you can’t). The challenge is to think, relate, learn and organise differently.

About Dr Nick Udall

Dr Nick Udall is a co-founder and the CEO of **nowhere**, and was a co-founder and the former Chair of the World Economic Forum’s Global Agenda Council on New Models of Leadership.

Since the age of 23, Nick has been working with executive leaders of global corporations, choreographing transformation journeys, and designing and catalysing breakthrough strategies and innovations. He also gives evocative talks at different events around the world.