

INNOVATION

# Too Much Team Harmony Can Kill Creativity

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MATJAZ SLANIC/Getty Images

William Wrigley Jr., the American chewing gum tycoon, once noted that business is built by men who disagree, and that “When two men always agree, one of them is unnecessary.” Indeed, not just in business but also in politics, sports, and the arts, there is no shortage of real-world examples of successful partnerships that were fueled as much by the alignment of ideas as by creative tension or discord.

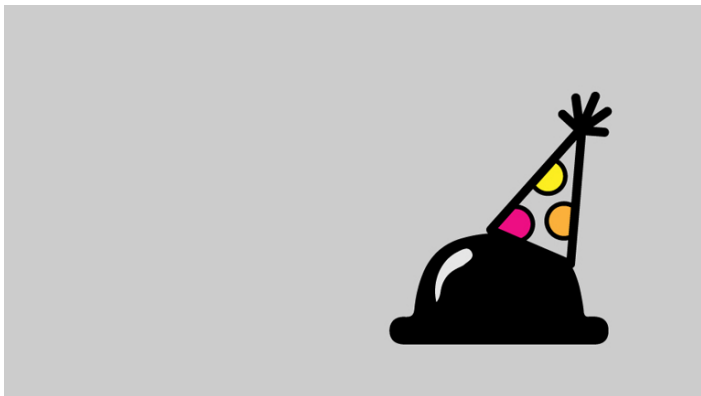
Miles Davis and John Coltrane revolutionized jazz, but they also had a volatile relationship that prompted “Trane” to leave the band twice. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak were a total mismatch when it came to style and personality, but their ability to combine their strengths — Jobs the visionary salesman, Wozniak the genius inventor — was key to Apple’s DNA. Shaquille O’Neal and Kobe Bryant won three consecutive NBA titles together, but they also had a bitter and tense relationship that they could not hide from the public. Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy played a big role in stabilizing Europe after the 2008 financial crisis, but they made an odd couple in public and mocked each other in private.

Consistent with these famous case studies, scientific research shows that creativity and innovation can be enhanced by *reducing* team harmony. For instance, a recent study of 100 product development teams found that two common disruptors of team harmony, namely diversity and task uncertainty, were positively associated with creative performance. Likewise, a review of theoretical and quantitative studies showed that teams are often more creative when they have *fewer* rather than more resources (for example, time, money, and people). Furthermore, teams that are able to engage in productive task conflict — expressing disagreements, negotiating between different views, and working under a certain amount of tension — tend to be more innovative.

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It is for these reasons that startup accelerators such as Y Combinator have made an art form of creating pressure within a supportive environment. It establishes a supportive community, models open discussions, and generally crafts an environment in which open feedback becomes a norm. At the same time, its illustrious history and access serve to galvanize bold goals, and continuous pitches and feedback elicit sustained tension and conflict.

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Blackberry to Blockbuster, business schools are spoiled for choice when it comes to examples of dominant market players that were jettisoned from the top by their complacency. Success and happiness pose a bigger threat to businesses than a moderate degree of dissatisfaction. Being happy with the status quo is a sure way to escape creativity. Any significant innovation in the history of civilization was the product of *dissatisfied* minds: people who were unhappy with the current order of things and sought to disrupt the existing harmony.

The lesson for leaders is obvious: Fight harmony, inject some tension into your teams and organizations, and embrace a moderate amount of conflict. Here are three suggestions for making this happen.

- **Set bold but achievable goals.** Performance is a function of motivation, and motivation can be increased by setting bold goals, which are at the edge of the team's capability. For example, in a recent study, participants in a two-player game performed better when challenged by an opponent who was *slightly* better than them. Creating tension between the team's skills and those required to accomplish the task will have motivating effects, so long as the task is still achievable. This is aligned with the Yerkes-Dodson Law, which states that performance is best when tasks are moderately difficult. People are not motivated by tasks that are either too easy or unachievable.
- **Sustain positive stress.** Although not all hard tasks are worth doing, most things worth doing are hard, which is why we aspire to them. How we interpret our circumstances is key (PDF) to turning stress into eustress, generating hope and purpose. A recent research review suggested that managers can help this process by framing challenges as opportunities, while keeping their focus on the distance that still needs to be traveled.

Conversely, when teams and organizations enjoy too much harmony, they will gravitate toward inaction and complacency, which, as Clayton Christensen noted 20 years ago in *The Innovator's Dilemma*, will breed decline and extinction. From Kodak to

- **Elicit conflict and adversity.** Good managers are able to get people to speak honestly and use disagreements to reach more-considered decisions. Often, an explicit process can help. For example, many military units use red teaming (role playing the adversary, conducting a vulnerability assessment, or using analytical techniques to improve intelligence estimates) to test and challenge their capabilities and shatter illusions before they become costly. Similarly, performing a project premortem to identify all the things that could go wrong before it even begins can surface hard truths while they can still be addressed.

Although these recommendations will likely reduce the level of harmony in teams, it is essential that teams are equipped for coping with conflict and discord if we want to see improvements in creative performance. Here are three suggestions for enabling this:

- **Make sure that the team has the right personality characteristics.** While one size does not fit all, teams with higher aggregate levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness will be better equipped to manage diversity and conflict. Team members will be more likely to hold themselves accountable to agreements, will try to smooth over relationship conflicts, and will ensure that the task focus is not derailed by personal dramas.
- **Increase psychological safety.** Psychological safety creates an atmosphere of participation and trust that allows members to actively engage in risky social behaviors such as disagreements and criticisms, as well as nondefensive and open responses to those risky behaviors. In a recent study, intragroup trust was found to be the best predictor of productive task conflict, without creating relationship or personal conflict.
- **Give the team a chance to settle.** Sometimes there is no substitute for the passage of time. Teams that develop sufficient familiarity create both emotional connections and precedents that allow them to productively work through tensions. For example, a NASA study found that teams with a shared working history made half as many errors as newly formed teams. Loyalty is a powerful source of resilience, as religious groups, movements, and families have always known. And in the absence of a shared history, team members with similar values are more likely to put up with tension and turn task conflict into a positive outcome.

Productive teams are productive because they are able to thrive under tense and difficult circumstances, making the most of disagreements and conflict while keeping the foundations of their relationships and dynamics intact. Great leaders are able to build teams that can cope with a moderate amount of conflict and tension and to create the conditions for such conflict and tension to arise.



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