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ARTICLE INNOVATION

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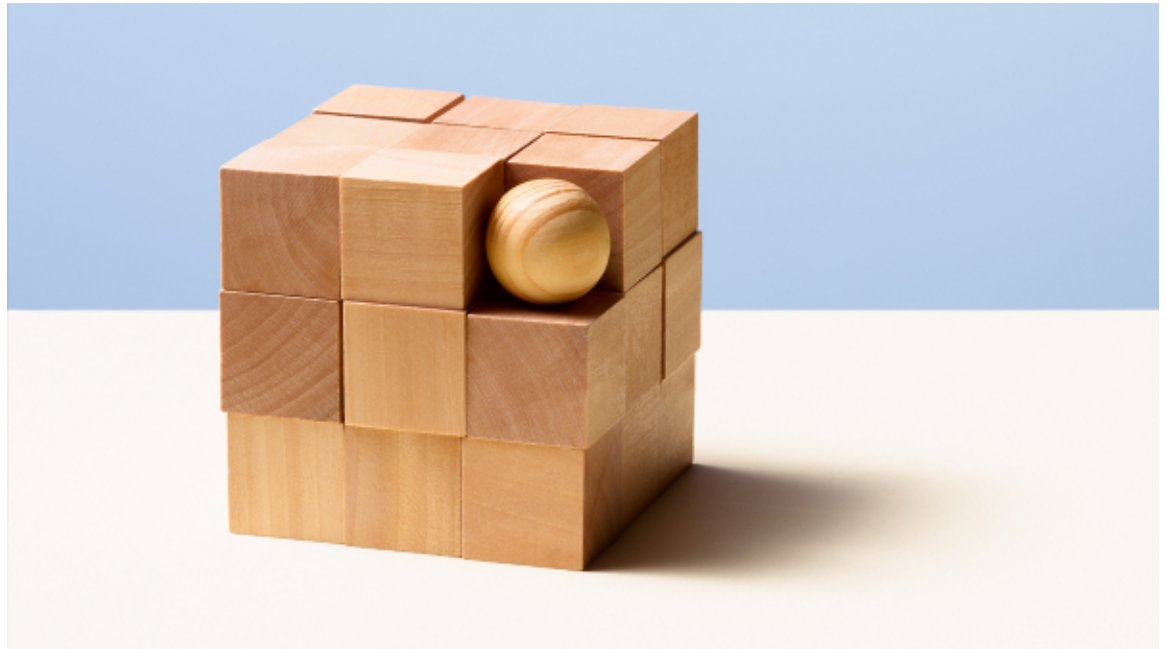
by Nathan Furr, Kyle Nel and Thomas Zoëga Ramsøy

INNOVATION

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An all-star team is making headway with a new initiative that could alter the future of the organization. Spirits are optimistic and the team is successfully maneuvering through new, yet very promising, territory. Then, the results begin taking longer than anticipated to prove, and after too much time spent outside of their comfort zones, the team of high-achieving employees can't seem to execute within the uncertain environment.

The team's outlook shifts and it becomes clear that the group will not be able to weather the storm of uncertainty needed to realize this new organizational opportunity.

How could such a capable team fail?

At the heart of many organizations is a deeper problem that blocks transformation: product/function organizational structure. This structure works in well-understood environments, where maximizing delivery of a product or service is the goal, but transformative projects require the organization to return to a more malleable state. This challenge requires teams that are formed through a re-matching of resources and employee capabilities.

Transformation-capable teams are made up of people who are not only high performers, but who hold a unique balance of skills and mindsets that allow them to sustain focus, agility, and optimism in the face of uncertainty for prolonged periods of time. Ultimately, not all top-performing employees are equipped for this.

In our book, *Leading Transformation: How to Take Charge of Your Company's Future*, we highlight certain capabilities to search for and cultivate while building a transformative team. Specifically, there are three unique characteristics that will play critical roles as a team takes on a breakthrough initiative.

Negative capability: being comfortable with uncertainty

The term “negative capability” was coined by the poet John Keats while describing writers like Shakespeare who were able to work within uncertainty and doubt. Keats was describing the ability to accept not having an immediate answer and to remain willing to explore how something may evolve before there is a clear outcome.

In the modern context, negative capability can be thought of as the ability to be comfortable with uncertainty, even to entertain it, rather than to become so anxious by its presence that you have to prematurely race to a more certain, yet suboptimal, conclusion. Whereas many people cannot stand the fuzziness of uncertainty, those who demonstrate negative capabilities can facilitate the exploration of new terrain and the discovery of an adjacent possible opportunity.

Individuals with negative capability remain curious and focused even when your project is far from the end goal. Chances are, they will even find this point of the project enthralling, rather than overwhelming, which is exactly what you want. They will also be able to suspend judgement about an end result and stay open to many possible outcomes, rather than become fixed early on to one version of success.

Chaos pilots: leading and executing in unfamiliar territory

In 1991, Danish politician and social worker Uffe Elbæk took out a \$100,000 personal loan to open an unusual business school called [Kaospilot](#). The vision of the business school was inspired by a

previous project of Elbæk's, where he observed a new skill set in students for navigating uncertain problems and saw the opportunity to teach these skills to business leaders who needed to do the same. *Chaos pilot* is a perfect label for a specific persona needed on a transformative team.

Chaos pilots are people who can creatively lead a project through uncertainty. They have negative capability, but they also have other critical skills, such as the ability to create structure within chaos and take action. Leaders who are chaos pilots are able to drive a team forward on a project even as the environment around them fluctuates.

Although it may sound glamorous to be such a person, being a chaos pilot is hard — they are the colleagues working on ambiguous projects and frequently getting beat up in the process. People who aren't capable of being chaos pilots quickly flounder when the environment around the project gets shaky.

Chaos pilots often care more about creating meaningful change than about climbing a corporate ladder or getting another star on their charts. Finding chaos pilots to join you can be challenging and requires observation and experimentation, though there are a few fertile places to look for good candidates.

For example, look for people who are getting mixed performance reviews, but who are still highly prized by the organization. Often, these people are getting mixed reviews because they make those around them uncomfortable — because the potential candidates often challenge the status quo — but they continue to succeed, because they perform so well.

Divergent thinking, convergent action, and influential communication

Finally, there are three neuropsychological traits to seek while building a transformative team. These three traits — divergent thinking, convergent action, and influential communication — all play a crucial role to succeeding in innovation and transformation. While many individuals hold one or two of these skills, finding a person with all three is more challenging, yet optimal.

The first of the three, divergent thinking, is the ability to uniquely connect new information, ideas, and concepts that are usually held far apart. People with this skill can match dissimilar concepts in novel and meaningful ways and uncover new opportunities that others may overlooked.

Convergent action, the second trait, is the ability to execute on these new ideas in order to create something tangible. Though many people can come up with great ideas, it is often those with convergent action who will move that new concept from idea to product. Last, having the ability to communicate ideas in a coherent, compelling, and influential way is paramount. This trait will inspire other leaders and decision-makers to believe, support, and act on a novel idea or opportunity.

Similar to how many transformative business opportunities are found in unlikely places, the same is true about where you may find the best-suited team members to drive forward a promising new initiative.

Each organizational project represents a moment of potential transformation, and each successful project helps an organization self-correct away from becoming a calloused machine executing on routine, and instead become what they need to survive: a malleable organization capable of capturing new opportunities.

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