

Just the Facts:

Title: “Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration”

Author: Keith Sawyer

Publisher: Basic Books

Length: 226 pages

Price: \$26.95

Reading time: 8 hours

Reading rating: 7 (1 = very hard, 10 = very easy)

Overall rating: 3 stars (1 = average, 4 = outstanding)

Keith Sawyer’s “Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration” is an intriguing look at the role of collaboration in creativity and innovation. It will likely challenge your understanding of how innovation happens and how a culture that encourages innovation can be developed within your organization. The main theme of the book is that while most of us think of innovation as the result of the work of a “lone genius”, that is often not the case. Instead the book presents the case for creativity and innovation as being group-based and collaborative in nature.

The focus of the first part of the book is to get the reader to rethink their model of the “lone genius” and see the power of creative collaboration. The author has studied group creativity for the last fifteen years in areas that at first seem far removed from the business world – improvisational jazz and improvisational theatre. While this is interesting, you may question whether improvisation has any relevance to the business world. The author suggests that one reason most people do not associate improvisation with business is something he calls “script-think” – a tendency to think that events are more predictable than they really are. According to the author innovation emerges from the bottom up, unpredictably and improvisationally, and it’s often only after the innovation has occurred that everyone realizes what’s happened. According to Sawyer innovation can’t be planned, it can’t be predicted; it has to be allowed to emerge – exactly like successful improvisation.

The engine of this innovation is collaboration, but clearly some groups have had more success than others at creativity. What accounts for this? The author develops a concept called “Group Flow” to show the things that should be happening in an improvisational team and looks at the things that can go wrong with teams to hurt their innovative potential.

With the stage set, the author then describes recent research findings in collaboration to encourage us to rethink our “lone genius” model of creativity. This section is a fascinating look at the creative process and how different it is from the model many people have of it. The focus is on how “ah ha” insights occur. Rather than solitary thought, the author shows the power of collaboration and conversation as a process in which a creative solution emerges as a product of the collaboration and not simply an individual insight. In this section the author re-examines historical innovations ranging from the invention of the telegraph to the introduction of the ATM and presents a compelling case for the vital role of collaborative “webs” of people in these innovations.

This revised view of creativity and innovation has significant impact on how organizations should promote innovations and in Part 3 the author provides suggestions for developing an organizational structure and culture that fosters innovation. At the core of his suggestions is the notion of “collaborative webs” which the author states are innovation networks that are diffuse, distributed and often cross over organizational boundaries to include both customers and competitors. The author strongly states that the “key to understanding innovation is to realized that collaborative webs are more important than creative people”. Its not that creative individuals are not important, just that it is the creative web of collaboration that increases everyone’s creative power and results in something that is greater than they could have created individually.

The power of this collaborative web, the author suggests, is what companies must tap into if they want to create a culture that encourages significant innovation.

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