



Innovation is not only about having good ideas, it is also about cultivating the best conditions in which our top teams can perform.

Jennifer Jordan

Resolving tensions of an innovation team

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FOREIGN VIEWS

DURING the course of my intensive work with companies, including most recently with a multi-billion-dollar European-based life and material sciences company, to increase the performance of their innovation project teams, I observed two fundamental tensions: the tension between reflection and execution, and the tension between holding the team sacred and sacrificing the team.

In his best-selling book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman talks about two systems of cognitive processing: Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 is the fast, execution-oriented processing. Type 2 is the slower thinking — which is more reasoned and deliberate.

High-performing innovative teams need both. The slow thinking is particularly important when an innovation team faces a failure or error in their project.

What keeps companies from truly being successful, particularly in an age where disruption is inevitable and agility is paramount, is an aversion to failure. But even if there is a culture where failure is accepted, what often keeps innovation-based companies, particularly when that innovation is highly technical, from succeeding, is not responding to a failure with a targeted and accurate pivot. What I mean by a targeted and accurate pivot is carefully

considering what went wrong, why it went wrong, and where to go next.

Sometimes, these failures have nothing to do with the innovation itself but more to do with what the market wants or needs at that exact moment.

For many for-profit and non-profit organizations, innovations are only as good as the market dictates. But that decision of “where to go next?” requires the Type 2 (slow) thinking that consists of stopping, considering what went wrong, and deciding how to carry on.

Like a golfer

At the same time, the Type 1 (fast) thinking is required to actually execute that next step rather than to remain in an eternal analysis-paralysis death spiral. I have seen innovation teams that are so preoccupied with a failure they recently experienced (and preventing another one), that they never actually take the next action. Or even worse, I have worked with organizations that are so fearful of another misstep that they paralyze their highly-talented teams from moving forward. Thus, to be successful, innovation teams need to be adept at both fast- and slow-thinking, and like a highly-skilled golfer who knows which club to use for which shot, know which system to use when.

Any leadership scholar or perceptive

manager knows that the key ingredients of excellent team functioning are cohesiveness, trust, and loyalty. These ingredients provide an environment of psychological safety where people can perform at their best and the true deep-level diversity of the team shines through constructive task conflict within the team.

However, inherent in an environment where pivots need to be made quickly and competently lies the reality that teams need the right technical and leadership skills in order to make these pivots.

Sometimes, these pivots are minor (tweaking the materials in a product or how the product is marketed) and sometimes, these pivots are major (pursuing an entirely new market or use for a product). When a pivot is major, sometimes the technical competencies and skills, or knowledge about a particular market needed to successfully make this pivot are not possessed by the existing team.

It is also a possibility that even if the technical skills or knowledge contained in the team are sufficient, the team has worked together for so long, and that they are no longer able to create the healthy cognitive diversity and discord necessary to be innovative.

Sometimes, people have worked well together over such a long period of time that they start to think exactly the same and view the world through a lens that is too-similar to be able to challenge their

collective thinking. This phenomenon spells certain death to innovation. Thus, while the attributes of loyalty, trust, and cohesiveness are absolutely vital for high-performing innovation teams, it is also sometimes necessary to sacrifice the team in order to create progress.

Can the skills required to balance these fundamental tensions be learned or developed within a team? Absolutely “yes”! All humans are capable of both fast and slow thinking.

The tension between holding the team sacred and sacrificing the team is difficult to resolve, as the conditions that allow a team to innovate at a high level are the ones that also can lead to the team’s innovation stagnation. The only way I have seen this tension successfully resolved is for the team leader or organization, more broadly, to cultivate an environment where the understanding that even high-performing teams sometimes need to be disbanded is tacit.

In the fast (and growing faster) world that our organizations are operating in, staying innovative is vital to remaining alive and successful. But innovation is not only about having good ideas, it is also about cultivating the best conditions in which our top teams can perform.

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China and Europe poised for better cooperation



Geoffrey Harris

FOREIGN VIEWS

EUROPE is committed to global regionalism and the strengthening of global governance. The US seems on a trajectory to distance itself from such an approach.

In spite of certain differences of interests and values, China and Europe seem capable of pursuing a stable relationship.

As with any major historical event, perspective is needed before concluding what really happened.

The recent visit to Asia by US President Donald Trump certainly got a lot of attention

but how important it turns out to be remains uncertain. His “America First” message did not go down well in Asia any more than it does in Europe.

With the US President continuing to perceive and present the US as a victim of globalization, its position as a multilateralist actor has indeed now become uncertain and unpredictable.

Interdependence is a concept with which the European Union and its leaders feel much more comfortable than the US. The EU has not suddenly noticed the idea of “win-win” cooperation.

Not zero-sum

China has supported the idea of European integration. In the current international situation, China and Europe should redouble their common efforts to safeguard common interests and resist the simplistic zero-sum approach to economic and political cooperation. China and Europe have a well-established

understanding and a functioning strategic partnership.

The EU is going through numerous political challenges. It is not, however, about to collapse. No one plans to follow the UK out of the door and the economy is recovering. Instability in Europe’s neighborhood brings many dangers as seen in the refugee crisis.

China’s leaders have wisely avoided offering any encouragement to populist, nationalist, anti-EU forces which do threaten stability in the Eurasia region. Indeed, cooperation within the Belt and Road framework sends precisely the opposite, positive message. There is much work to be done to deepen this cooperation.

There are concerns in Europe about unfair trade practices, but this should not be seen as a temptation by the EU to follow protectionist policies. Similar concerns about fair trade prevented progress on negotiations for an ambitious trade agreement

between the US and the EU.

Many voters in regions of Europe are feeling “left behind” even at a time of economic growth. This sentiment feeds into populism and EU leaders are acting to head off such concerns and to prevent demands for protectionist action to be taken.

Common ability

On substance, both China and Europe have shown a common ability to follow long-term strategic goals which are in both sides’ interests. Most notably, they have avoided unpredictable and erratic positions and actions. They both accept that multilateral structures are just as important as bilateral relationships.

In the coming years, Europe should respond to the vision of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Beijing speech by providing an inspiring narrative of its own and rejecting the short-sighted narrow-mindedness and

destructive paranoia.

In doing so, China will be Europe’s natural partner.

In historical terms, the most important recent event was the report by the Chinese President to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, in which he expressed a readiness for China to take a leading role in developing a global community of shared interests.

As the EU moves to consolidate its global strategy and defence policy, even as Brexit uncertainties remain, it should confirm its interest in peace and cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region.

Geoffrey Harris is currently a visiting researcher at the Fudan Development Institute. He is also visiting Professor at the College of Europe in Bruges and the Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (XJTLU) in Suzhou. From 1976-2016 he was an official of the European Parliament. Shanghai Daily condensed the article due to space limitations.