

The Knowledge Notebook

On Not Going It Alone: No Organization Is an Island

BY LAURENCE PRUSAK



One of my father's heroes—and he didn't have many—was Albert Einstein. He often regaled me with stories of the great physicist. He especially liked to dwell on how Einstein, working in solitude in Zurich, wrote five equations that revolutionized physics as it was then understood. Now, much of what he described is true. One of the words he used is less than accurate, though, and that word is “solitude.” When I got older, I was also intrigued by Einstein and read a few biographies written after his death. It turns out that he didn't really work alone. He knew the work of most of the leading physicists in Central and Western Europe and was in communication with many of them. When you think about it, this is not the least bit surprising. Einstein was both sociable and highly ambitious, and he loved talking about the latest theories. And, no matter how brilliant and revolutionary he was, his ideas were part of an ongoing, shared process of wrestling with problems in physics.

What is surprising is the persistence of the myth of the solitary genius—the isolated individual who, entirely by his own efforts, comes up with something new and remarkable that transforms the world. It may be an attractive, heroic-sounding story, but it generally is not the case in real life. All geniuses know what their predecessors have done and what their contemporaries are doing; the most successful of them are consummate networkers, talkers, sharers, and correspondents. No genius is an island! Even Isaac Newton, Einstein's predecessor in discovering important truths about how the universe works, was connected with the ideas and thinkers of his time, though he was far less sociable and socially skilled than Einstein.

I have no idea why so many of us still seem to believe in the myth of purely individual brilliance and accomplishment. It clearly has deep cultural roots in western stories of mavericks, pioneers, and lonely heroes. The myth has far less potency, for example, in Asia. In the West, it seems to defy any attempt to eradicate it with facts and historical examples. The myth underlies (and is reinforced by) the adoration we give to executives of large corporations and sports superstars. It makes some of us swallow the absurd idea of the “self-made man,” which suggests that there are people whose success owes nothing to parents, teachers, colleagues, and the whole social infrastructure of health, education, and public safety.

Acceptance of this myth is a danger to organizations of all kinds. In our very complex, interrelated, and volatile world, any firm, agency, or non-governmental organization that consciously or unconsciously acts on the belief that an individual or organization can “go it alone” is sure to fail. Like the geniuses of science, they need to learn from and collaborate with the outside world, because no single entity can know everything that needs to be known to accomplish work or deal with the challenges and surprises of the world it operates in.

There is a term in cybernetics known as “requisite variety”—the idea that a complex system can only sustain itself if its internal variety is equal to that of the environment it operates in. What is true of cybernetics is also true of organizations. Organizations cannot achieve that variety on their own. They need to develop processes for working with potential allies outside their own systems and official channels. Equally important, they need to promote the idea that connecting and

collaborating are *the* way to work—that no one is an island. Smart organizations like Procter and Gamble (P&G) are doing just that. P&G mandates that half its new products come from outside the firm itself. The consulting firm McKinsey, the World Bank, and Netflix, to name just a few, have all recently begun to organize their work so that they are much more open to ideas from outside their own borders. NASA has always collaborated with industry and other agencies, and now increasingly with governments of other spacefaring nations. The trend must continue.

For some, this increasing emphasis on collaboration is not a welcome trend. Myths of self-sufficiency die hard. Admitting that others have valuable knowledge we do not possess is not pleasant, and we have not seen the end of ideas rejected because they were “not invented here.” Many of us still have to learn how to learn from others.

Yet there will be little cognitive or material progress without increasingly coordinated, interactive learning and collaborative work. To understand the rich complexity of today’s knowledge environment and act effectively, we must reach out to whoever has ideas of value that we can use. We have no alternative but to do it—and do it soon. ●

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