

INSPIRED INNOVATIONS, L.L.C.

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Innovation by Teams

The world is full of bright, innovative people. Some of these people are extremely successful, but most are not. Human knowledge continues to grow almost exponentially. Tools like computers and the Internet let us share knowledge more quickly. Internet publishing makes new information available to a much wider range of people.

Old style tools like technical journals and symposia have been very useful, but are extremely limited in their ability to reach large numbers of people who may not be specifically trained in their area of focus. It is the Internet that lets anyone with any interest gain access to the latest data and ideas. This allows people to take ideas developed for one field and quickly apply them to their own interests.

This is the ultimate approach to team based innovations. People with many different backgrounds, in many different industries, companies or even countries can build on each other's ideas.

In my recent book, "Inspired Innovations – A Guidebook to Highly Efficient New Product Development", I discuss how development teams can be used to routinely produce award-winning, commercially successful innovations.

As human knowledge expands it is almost impossible for any one person to know everything about anything. Developments produced by properly selected and coached teams will almost always be more innovative than those of even the most brilliant individual **AND** they are much more likely to be commercially successful. In addition, the innovations and the accompanying intellectual property that is generated will provide a company with more durable competitive advantages.

Two of my favorite activities involve teams and they share many

similar concepts. I love organizing and facilitating development teams. I also love my role as the Referee in high school football games.

The players on high school football teams are selected from those students that come to try-outs. They are chosen for their physical and mental abilities. They are also chosen because of their attitudes, their willingness to work hard and to work as part of the team. Many players that become starters in high school are not the biggest, the strongest, the fastest or even the smartest members of the team. They are the ones that will work the hardest and do whatever is asked of them in order to make the team successful.

Football at the high school level is not about superstars. It is about taking the talent available, putting those people in the right positions and everyone working as a team. The games that I have enjoyed the most or that have become the most memorable over the years were those in which the team with the lesser talent won.

They did so because every player accepted his (or her) role and performed their assigned tasks to the best of their personal abilities.

As the Referee, my role is to see that the rules are enforced fairly and to ensure that the game proceeds smoothly. The rules in high school sports are designed to minimize the opportunities for serious injuries to occur and to see that neither team has an unfair advantage.

My role as the Referee is very similar to my role as a Facilitator in innovation sessions. Each game has certain rules that improve the opportunity for success, that assure the opportunity for each participant to contribute and that attempt to minimize serious mistakes.

In Innovation Teams, the participants are selected because of their formal training, their work experience and their specific job functions. A chemist brings different tools than a manufacturing engineer or a marketing specialist or a product development specialist or a

purchasing person.

Each of these sets of skills may be very useful to the team as a whole. The specific types of individuals to include in the development team depend upon the type of problem involved. Improving a production process, developing a new product or restructuring a service business requires different skills on the team.

Like the high school football team, the innovation team is selected from the resources that are available. And just like the football team, the starters on your innovation team may be those that are the most willing to work together and not those that appear to have the best credentials on paper.

Innovation sessions, as described in my book, can deliver amazing results. These sessions are wonderfully stimulating, very efficient and great fun. They require an open exchange of ideas and suggestions to be successful. If a person with seemingly perfect credentials is not a willing participant, do not include them in the team. Such a person can ruin the effort by stifling the creativity of the team.

Facilitator for Innovation Teams that develop award winning and commercially successful new materials, processes or products;
Referee for state championship high school football games; two great jobs and I get to do both!

Dr. Phillip S. Wilson

Please note: I first wrote this article in 2000. Now “open innovation” and “crowd-sourced innovations” are hot topics for many so-called “thought leaders”. It’s nice that these expensive innovation consultants have finally recognized the benefits. I have been delivering low-cost, fast and highly efficient innovations for nearly thirty years.