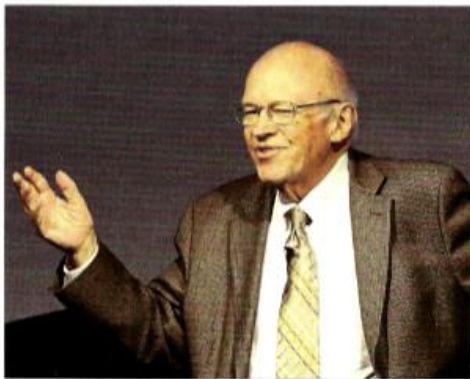


# The ABCDs of Trust from Ken Blanchard



Ken Blanchard

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## Unleash Your Organization's Potential for Innovation Through Collective Genius

BY JAY MATHUR

To survive and thrive in this era of global competition, businesses must continually innovate to deliver superior products and services and create better customer experiences while being cost competitive. Increasingly, they are looking for ideas, expertise, and resources from external parties, such as consultancies, academia, research organizations, and professional societies, to help them meet this challenge.

**THE INNOVATION CHALLENGE** In my firm's work across a variety of industries, we have seen companies that strive to make huge organizational transformations but fail in the effort to innovate because they didn't realize that the major asset in their competitive arsenal was right in front of them.

It's the very people within and around the organization's ecosystem—coworkers, customers, suppliers, alliances and partners, and even competitors—who are the most knowledgeable about the business. These are the individuals who can help create and execute innovative solutions to the complex issues a company is facing.

We define innovation as the creativity of a diverse group of knowledgeable people—the collective genius—applied to create new solutions to specific issues or opportunities that deliver tangible and superior value.

**WHAT IS THE COLLECTIVE GENIUS?** Collective genius is the application of the cognitive diversity of a group of people who ignite their innate creativity to define a problem, generate ideas, and create leading-edge, innovative solutions to issues or opportunities. Companies must tap into this collective genius.

***"A diverse team of knowledgeable people creates far superior solutions to those devised by a few brilliant individuals."***

**DIVERSITY TRUMPS ABILITY** As the scope of our interactions enlarge, so does the enormity of the daily challenges we face. From geographically diverse customers with unique needs to global supply chains, the complexity of business issues has grown to the point that a few smart people in cubicles are not enough to create solutions that drive a sustainable competitive advantage. It takes a team of people with different types of expertise and skills to address and resolve problems collaboratively. Most businesses have acknowledged this reality and structured their work around teams or groups, but they must go further.

In our experience, a diverse team of knowledgeable people creates far superior solutions to those devised by a few brilliant individuals. Diverse teams are better at prediction, problem solving, and innovation, and the solutions they create are more robust than those of individual performers.

So why doesn't every team and organization create innovative and breakthrough solutions to the issues they face? Having a number of people in a team does not mean it is diverse. In fact, some team compositions may be downright bad for an organization. We've all heard the phrase "too many cooks in the kitchen" used to describe chaos and dissension. However, if those "cooks" collaborate on a recipe by applying their unique experiences and background, a superior broth will result.

**LEVERAGING YOUR COGNITIVE DIVERSITY** Cognitive diversity encompasses more than race, ethnicity, color, gender, and sexual orientation. Clearly, our identity and background play a significant role in how we perceive the world. They're an important part of cognitive diversity, but they're not the whole picture.

Cognitive diversity means each of us is the product of factors such as our background, education, training, interests, and professional and social experiences. These factors shape the way we look at the world and, ultimately, the way we view, categorize, approach, break down, and create potential solutions to problems. The combination of these factors shapes how

we observe, draw inferences, and form points of view on issues and analyze and develop solutions.

In most cases, effective teams not only have more tools (ability) but also a varied collection of tools (diversity) that allows them to better solve problems. A group of people with comparable backgrounds, education, and training will have similar tools. And this team will be markedly inferior to the group whose members have different backgrounds and a diverse set of tools to use in creating innovative ideas and solutions.

By leveraging your organization's cognitive diversity, you will be better able to create innovative solutions and build a culture of innovation and excellence.

**FROM COGNITIVE DIVERSITY TO COLLECTIVE GENIUS**

All of us are born with creative potential. We apply and grow that potential as we progress through life, discover new opportunities, and find different ways of doing things. Human beings are innately creative.

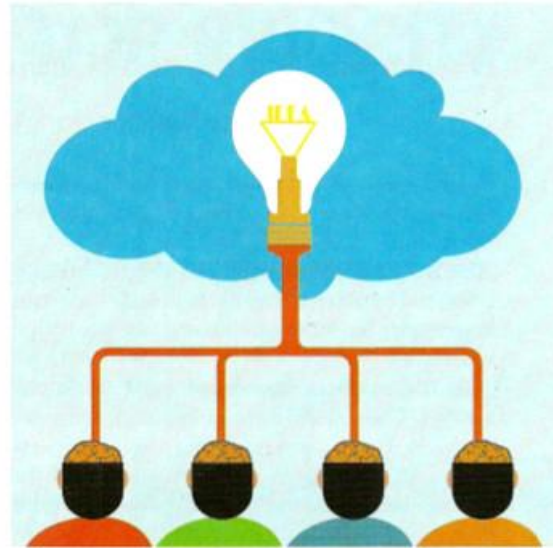
It is our experience, however, that businesses and organizations often underutilize and stifle individual creativity. Corporate structures and processes such as performance measurement systems steer people toward a set of defined directions, focuses, behaviors, and norms, boxing them into a limited playing field and undermining their creativity and potential for innovation.

Under the right conditions, the application of cognitive diversity sparks a chain reaction. Cognitive diversity helps ignite the innate creativity of individuals and groups, and this creativity spirals into a powerful force of collective genius. The collective genius, in turn, unleashes the greater potential for innovation needed to create solutions that drive competitive differentiation in the marketplace.

So how do you start this powerful chain reaction? Consider these key points:

**1. The organization must have a clear definition of the issues that need to be resolved.** This critical step creates focus, provides direction, and defines the stretched targets for which people should aim. An unclear, unfocused effort, on the other hand, may waste critical organizational resources, lead to frustrations among the participants, and ultimately result in the failure of the effort.

**2. The organization must aspire to be the best, and its leaders must commit to excel and execute.**



A case for being the best in your business and fact-based data to show the potential are important foundations. The leadership's commitment to excellence and the potential to achieve it motivate and challenge the organization to be the best in the business.

**3. Size and diversity matter.** The cognitive diversity of a team is critical, especially when addressing complex issues. Leaders must carefully select individuals for the team who represent the necessary diversity in background, education, training, experiences, and so forth. Additionally, traits such as personality, organizational role and status, and opinion and thought leadership are important considerations for group dynamics.

The size of the team is usually dependent on the difficulty, complexity, and scope of the issues being addressed. Group sizes can range from 10 to 100. Too small a team may undermine the potential for innovation and the robustness of the proposed solution, whereas too big a team may be chaotic and unwieldy and thus hamper team performance. Balance these needs against the problems at hand to determine the ideal size of your working team.

**4. An open and creative environment is essential.** People must be free to express their ideas without constraints and judgment. An environment of openness is essential if the group is to break through the shackles of current thinking. All ideas and points of view must be respected, no matter how outlandish



***“Unnecessary delays kill momentum and the enthusiasm for collaboration.”***

they may seem at first glance. A group that encourages learning from one another will create new and better ideas.

**5. A fast, collaborative process is key.** Communication and collaboration are fundamentally important in generating breakthrough ideas and concepts. In this, speed is key.

**6. The solutions developed must be implemented.** The collective-genius approach generates tremendous enthusiasm and buy-in from participants who generally represent a large cross-section of the organization. This energy must be channeled to drive dramatic changes in the organization. Failing to implement solutions after such a creative effort is akin to not watering a seed that has been planted. Implementation is critical in transforming toward a culture of excellence and innovation that has the potential to deliver increasing returns on your invest-

ment over the long term. This is why upfront commitment from the leadership to execute solutions is critically important.

Organizations significantly underutilize their innate creative potential. By applying their cognitive diversity contextually and with certain conditions, companies can ignite dormant creativity and unleash their collective genius to develop leading-edge solutions to complex challenges. *MW*

*Jay Mathur is founder and CEO of valueideas, a consulting firm that helps organizations unleash their creativity to develop and execute innovative solutions to complex challenges faster and with superior results. Mathur consults with senior executives in a wide range of companies from various industries. He believes that strategy development and execution should be everyone's business, not just senior management's. For more information, go to [www.valueideas.com](http://www.valueideas.com)*

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