Personality Poker: How to Create High-Performing Innovation Teams

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You've Been Fed a Pack of Lies (Or "Chronic Sameness Destroys Innovation")

"Opposites attract," or at least that's the line we've all been fed. However, in reality, nothing could be further from the truth. Aside from the physics of magnets, the fact is that opposites actually *repel*. Human beings strive for commonality, and organizations exist amid striking homogeneity—but why is this a concern?

Chronic sameness is the very thing that destroys innovation.

The desire for equality permeates everything we do and always has, as can be seen in many of our age-old philosophies. For example, we see it in the Golden Rule, which is often interpreted as "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." However, who really cares what you want? After all, treating people as you want to be treated doesn't address the needs and desires of *others*.

Buying into these doctrines, myths, and lies leads to pasteurizing, homogenizing, and sanitizing everyone in order to fit people into one mold and think the same way so they can then gather together in like-minded harmony. There's a good reason why they call it a company culture, since organizations are, in actuality, mini-cults. Instead, we should consider living by the doctrine:

The person you like the least may be the person you need the most.

Work against your natural desire for comfort and commonality. Seek out people who think differently. Embrace divergent and conflicting points of view. Create organizations that are made up of people who truly value diversity.

Creativity and Innovation Require New Thinking

Creativity is about new ideas and requires fresh thinking and new perspectives. Gathering a bunch of "yes men" together who agree all the time only leads to solutions that are stale variations of old ones. Creativity is non-existent in such an environment.

Innovation, on the other hand, is the implementation and commercialization of creative ideas that generate significant value for an organization. Innovation is an end-to-end process that requires a wide range of skills for successful execution. You require analytical, fact-driven people who are talented at finding and defining problems that need to be solved or opportunities that are waiting to be tapped. You need creative and lateral thinkers who can identify and generate breakthrough solutions. You want methodical and results-oriented individuals who can plan the work and then work the plan. Finally, you must have people who are masterful at building relationships with both internal employees and external customers.

But all of that hinges on the fact that opposites don't attract—*they repel*. Therefore we need a method to help make diverse teams work effectively together.

Work against your natural desire for comfort and commonality.

The Four Principles of High-Performing Innovation Teams

There are many personality and strength-based assessments on the market, such as the Myers-"Briggs Type Indicator®, DiSC®, or StrengthsFinder. Most are time-consuming and yield results that are hard to leverage. To make life simpler (and more fun), I have created *Personality Poker®*, a personality "game" that uses specially designed poker cards. Mechanics of the game aside, the four basic principles associated with Personality Poker can be applied to organizations, regardless of which personality assessment you use.

1. **Play to your strong suit:** Put people in the right roles based on their strengths.

2. **Play with a full deck:** Make sure that you have a good complement and diversity of innovation styles.

3. **Deal out the work:** Divide the work in a way that maximizes individual accountability, limits groupthink, and minimizes redundant tasks.

4. **Shuffle the deck:** Bring together each style on a regular basis in a way that encourages collaboration and creative tension.

High performing innovation teams require all four of these principles to be applied. However, given that opposites do *not* attract, the biggest challenge is typically principle #2: "Playing with a full deck." To better understand this concept, let's first introduce the innovation styles— in other words, the "strong suits."

Seek out people who think differently.

Four Phases of Innovation, Four Innovation Styles

In Personality Poker, the primary driver of innovation style is determined by a "suit," and each suit relates to a phase of the innovation process:

Phase 1: Define the Challenge = Spades. These are the analytical, data-oriented people. They like facts and are a bit more cerebral than the other styles. They often make decisions based on analysis and are known for their deep knowledge. Engineers, philosophers, scientists, and professors are typically Spades.

Phase 2: Generate Solutions = Diamonds. These are the stereotypical "creative" individuals. They like ideas and experiences. They make decisions based on what is "enjoyable" and often participate in artistic endeavors. Designers, actors, and serial entrepreneurs, for example, are usually Diamonds. Although they're primarily cerebral, they're also interested in adventure. Diamonds don't care where they're going, as long as they're having a good time getting there.

Phase 3: Plan and Execute = Clubs. These are the people who "plan the work and work the plan." They're more about structure and action. Bottom-line results are critical. Some Clubs can be more competitive and action-oriented than the other styles, making them a natural fit as CEOs of large corporations. Other Clubs make great project managers, producers, and quality control professionals.

Phase 4: Engage the Hearts and Minds = Hearts. These people are all about relationships. They make decisions based on what others think. They're more empathetic and supportive and often take human resources or customer service roles. Some Hearts are social butterflies and master networkers. They also make great diplomats and teachers.

Once you've identified everyone's "strong suit," you can begin to assess whether or not your organization is playing with a full deck.

Playing with a Full Deck

Although the expression "playing with a full deck" is typically used to describe someone who is mentally sound (more commonly in the negative: "That guy's not playing with a full deck"), here I'm using it in its literal sense. When your organization is playing with a full deck, you have all of the styles represented on your team, each allocated in the most effective way.

If you don't have every style integrated into your innovation process in some way, you'll have difficulties growing your business because you:

• Solve the wrong problems because you aren't fact-driven (missing Spades)

• Arrive at uncreative solutions (missing Diamonds)

• Neglect the implementation of your ideas (missing Clubs)

• Fail to engage the support of your organization (missing Hearts)

Create organizations that are made up of people who truly value diversity.

Why Imbalance is the Norm

When it comes to interpersonal relationships, we're interested in people who are like us and not our opposites, thereby attracting, hiring, and retaining a more homogeneous collection of employees.

Yet, when it comes to the creation of successful innovation teams, the reality is: the person you like the least is the person you need the most.

Embrace divergent and conflicting points of view.

Your "opposite style," the one that conflicts most with your own style but is actually complementary, provides important traits that you most likely lack. Think of the classic oil and vinegar analogy. The two don't mix, but they can work together to make a great dressing. In other words, they complement each other perfectly—and this is what happens between you and your opposite style. In Personality Poker, Diamonds are the opposite of Clubs and Hearts are the opposite of Spades.

Appreciating the value of your opposite can be extremely useful and is critical if a company wishes to play with a full deck.

There are three steps for making sure you're playing with a full deck:

1. Identify imbalances
2. Hire in pairs
3. Retain all styles

Step 1: Identify Imbalances: The first step is to identify any imbalances in your organization. Most companies are oblivious as to how lopsided they actually are.

I once played Personality Poker with a small branding and marketing agency that, although very successful, was having difficulty finding a way to scale and grow their business. As expected in such a highly creative business, there were a lot of Diamonds in the company. In fact, 80 percent of the employees were creative; 15 percent were relationship-oriented (Hearts); 5 percent were planners (Clubs); and no one at all seemed to demonstrate an appetite for facts and data (Spades). One of the few Clubs was the CEO's executive coach, someone who wasn't even involved in the day-to-day activities of the business. Another was the CEO's executive assistant.

For the CEO of that company, those statistics represented a breakthrough moment. To grow the business, she realized that she would have to create a more balanced team of styles—and above all, facts and data people (Spades) would need to become a greater part of the mix as the company moved forward.

Although she was good at making sure that projects adhered to plans and schedules, she learned that she could benefit from bringing in people for whom that skill was a natural strength. In doing so, she could free up her creative people, including herself, to do what they did best. Although her company's business was creative in nature, it needed to become better at nurturing diverse points. Like that CEO, once awareness has been raised, it's appropriate to move to step 2.

Step 2: Hiring in Pairs: The second step is to make sure you're attracting and hiring a wide range of innovation styles. When organizations recruit employees, they typically hire people based upon a combination of competency and chemistry. Yes, the skills of a potential new employee are important, but it's just as important that they fit the mold of the organization.

We want people who conform. In short, we want people who are like us. Unfortunately, when recruiting this way, we create an organization that is wildly out of balance (that is, too many people of one suit) that will typically get worse over time.

The concept of "opposite styles" can be useful during the recruiting process. I like to build creative tension into my teams from the start, so when hiring, I take on people in pairs. For example, since I'm a Diamond, the first person I bring onto my team is a strong project manager—a Club. Why? Because if I'm left to my own devices, I'll follow the work that is new and creative and not get the task at hand completed. I'll be attracted to the "bright shiny objects," such as emerging opportunities, as a way of satisfying my need for variety—and thereby neglect getting the important work done.

That is why I need someone methodical and organized—someone who will stand toe-to-toe with me. I need someone who will be there to make sure I stay on track. Although I know there will be tension between us, I realize that a Club will help me get my work done. Similarly, when employing a Club, I always enlist a Diamond at the same time. When hiring a Heart, I'm sure to add a Spade as well. Doing that ensures a balanced team.

An important point is to recognize that companies have personalities, too. Engineering companies can lack soul because they are Spade-dominated and don't hire (or retain) as many relationship-oriented people (Hearts). Traditional big businesses tend to attract action- and plan-oriented Clubs, who enable a company to hit quarterly earnings while paying little attention to hiring creative individuals (Diamonds). On the other hand, Diamond-like creative industries such as advertising often fail to recruit planners (Clubs) because those individuals may be viewed as limited or restrictive in their approach. Finally, Heart-driven, people-dominated organizations, such as many nonprofits, frequently do a poor job of dealing with business fundamentals because the potential employees who could help the most in that area (Spades) are seen as less attractive candidates during the hiring process.

As a result of these organizational personalities, we may become too efficient at hiring individuals who "feel right" for the organization—and stifle company innovation as a result.

Step 3: **Retain All Styles:** But you can't stop there. In order to maintain a balance, you need to make sure that you retain the "odd suits" in your organization.

If your company culture is goal-driven by design (Club-dominant), you need to make sure that you nurture the needs of the other styles, and especially the opposite style (in this case, Diamonds) to maintain a balance. If your company's business is research-intensive (Spade-dominant), you want to attract and retain the more empathetic Hearts. Unfortunately, the *outliers* (those with styles opposite of your company's norm) tend to feel ostracized and will eventually leave if you don't show them genuine appreciation. If you lose too many of one suit, your company will swing out of balance over time, regardless of your hiring practices.

In short, we want people who are like us. Unfortunately, when recruiting this way, we create an organization that is wildly out of balance…

When playing Personality Poker, a key insight to remember is that not everyone is like you, and as a result, they shouldn't be treated like you. In that way, businesses, in essence, need to do the *opposite* of the Golden Rule.

There are many ways to treat others as they want to be treated. One place to start is to recognize that everyone receives feedback differently. With that in mind, when you give people recognition for a job well done, make sure to give it to them based on their *style*.

To illustrate this point, my colleague and good friend, Alexander Kjerulf, once used me as a guinea pig. Knowing that I'm a Diamond, Alex demonstrated one way of giving me praise that was more befitting of my opposite style, a Club.

"Steve," he said, "I really like the way you ran this project. You did everything by the book. You followed the process the whole way."

Alex then suggested that although it was good and specific praise, it would mean nothing to me because I wasn't being recognized for what I valued, and he was correct. If I received feedback like that, I'd be left feeling flat. He then tried a different type of praise.

"Steve," he said, "you did a fantastic job coming up with a totally new concept that no one else ever would have thought of."

Now that was praise that mattered to me and appealed to my Diamond style!

People tend to praise others according to what is important to the praise-giver, but that doesn't work well. Instead, tailor your praise to the style of the *recipient*. Praise them according to what's important to them.

Praise Clubs for coming up with a plan, staying with the plan, and getting things done right. Praise Spades for having a complete grasp of the facts and for knowing exactly what's going on. Praise Hearts for caring about others and for knowing exactly what's going on inside the heads of others. Praise Diamonds for the cool new stuff they do and the new ideas they generate.

The bottom line is this: *Ditch the Golden Rule!*

Feedback is an important part of the professional development and innovation process, and you'll be more effective if you provide feedback that's pertinent to the style of the other person.

Dealing Out the Work and Shuffling the Deck

Once each individual is playing to their strong suit and the organization is playing with a full deck, the next step is to "deal out the work." That is, you need to place each person in the right role.

Spades are most helpful with the up-front data analysis, while Diamonds are best at developing breakthrough solutions. Clubs are masterful at implementation, while Hearts can engage everyone necessary to move those innovations forward. The four suits relate to the four innovation styles, which in turn relate to the four phases of the innovation process.

When work is divvied so that each person is maximizing their contribution, it's important to make sure that you don't create silos of styles that never communicate. Although each style has a primary phase it participates in, each style should participate in every phase. This is called "shuffling the deck." It means oscillating back and forth between individual effort and collaboration.

Diverse points of view must be brought together at every step of the innovation process. For example, black cards (Spade and Clubs) can and should participate in creative idea generation. However, they must be certain that their "yeah, buts" don't stifle the creative process. Also, while red cards (Hearts and Diamonds) can contribute to implementation, they must make sure that they don't let "bright shiny objects" derail progress.

Beating the House

The business world is filled with misconceptions, with some myths more important to dispel than others. If you want innovation to flourish in your organization, you need to recognize that opposites don't attract and that the Golden Rule is tarnished.

It takes effort for opposites to work together efficiently and to appreciate the contributions of others. To fully engage every employee, you need to treat each individual as they want to be treated.

Innovation is based on diversity, and when your organization is effectively "playing with a full deck," your innovation efforts will consistently "beat the house." 🔖

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen Shapiro is one of the foremost authorities on innovation culture, collaboration, and open innovation. Over the years, Stephen Shapiro has shared his innovative philosophy in books such as *24/7 Innovation* and *The Little Book of BIG Innovation Ideas*. He has also trained more than 20,000 consultants in innovation during his 15 year tenure with Accenture. His latest creation, *Personality Poker*, has been used by more than 25,000 people around the world to create high-performing innovation teams. In addition to being an advisor, speaker, and author on innovation, he serves as the Chief Innovation Evangelist for InnoCentive, a pioneer in the burgeoning field of open innovation.

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