Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration
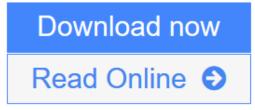
Robert Keith Sawyer

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Creativity has long been thought to be an individual gift, best pursued alone; schools, organizations, and whole industries are built on this idea. But what if the most common beliefs about how creativity works are wrong? In this authoritative and fascinating new book, Keith Sawyer, a psychologist at Washington University, tears down some of the most popular myths about creativity and erects new principles in their place. He reveals that creativity is always collaborative-even when you're alone. (That "eureka" moment in the bathtub couldn't have come to Archimedes if he hadn't spent so many hours arguing and comparing notes with his fellow mathematicians and philosophers.) Sawyer draws on compelling stories of inventions and innovations: the inventors of the ATM, the mountain bike, and open source operating systems, among others, to demonstrate the freewheeling ways of true innovation. He shares the results of his own acclaimed research on jazz groups, theater ensembles, and conversation analysis, to show us how to be more creative in collaborative group settings, how to change organizational dynamics for the better, and how to tap into our own reserves of creativity.

Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration Details

Date   : Published June 5th 2007 by Basic Books (first published January 1st 2007)
ISBN   : 9780465071920
Author : Robert Keith Sawyer
Format : Hardcover 288 pages
Genre   : Business, Nonfiction, Psychology, Academic, School, Management

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Heather says

Sawyer explores collaborative creativity in this monograph and breaks down the crucial elements of a successful creative, collaborative environment. He discusses the importance of listening, keeping an open mind, combining/fusing ideas, improvisation, and flow. He provides a lot of examples of successful companies and not so successful collaborations. He also includes a lot of helpful secrets or hints to successful collaboration.

Robert Bogue says

If you look behind the curtains of any genius you'll usually find hidden ways that they were propelled forward by previous discoveries or through their work with others to create something that they couldn't have thought of on their own. Whether it's the remarkable advances of the renaissance kicked off by the Medici family bringing together great minds (See The Innovator's DNA for more) or the "individual contributions" of the folks (Mozart, Freud, Woolf, and Gandhi) that Howard Gardner discusses in his book Extraordinary Minds, or the Wizard of Menlo Park – Thomas Edison – and his surrounding himself with experts in Gas lighting (see my review of Find Your Courage for more on Edison). Group Genius: The Creative Power of Collaboration seeks to debunk the standard myth of a solitary inventor and a flash of insight.

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Erik says

This was a book I read for work (provided by my manager) about innovation and how it is groups that are truly creative, not individuals. Most of the book is very interesting. It is pretty clearly contrived in many cases (how often are there exactly 10 reasons something is true?), is very obviously tilted toward companies that obviously prove his points (shock), and goes a little too crazy in trying to generalize his ideas to humanity (apparently we must innovate optimally to survive -- I'm certain I don't agree with that)... but I believe there is some good information in this book. It definitely makes you think about how processes or teams or companies could change to improve creativity. If you are interested in ideas about organization and ways to foster innovation, I think this is a good read.

Rio Limadinata says

Yeakss, very unclear explanation

Amir Hossein Fassihi says

This book contains a very interesting and thorough research about the way a group can be creative. This is mostly included in the first half of the book. The second half focuses mostly on creativity itself while relating it again to the effect of collaboration and communities. The fact that this book focused on the effects of collaboration for creativity was rather fresh for me.

Jon Thompson says

Fascinating, mind-expanding, many "are you kidding me?" moments… Sawyer presents what he has found to be the "real truth" (226) about creativity: improvised collaboration generates innovation. The concept of the "lone genius" is myth because, as Sawyer argues, "innovation always emerges from a series of sparks - never a single flash of insight"(7). Sawyer provides examples of innovations widely considered to be products of incredibly talented individuals – such as the telegraph, the light bulb, the ATM, mountain bikes, the Monopoly board game, Darwin's theory of evolution, the novels of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, television, e-mail, Linux – and demonstrates how they all resulted from extended periods of collaboration between multiple participants. I found Part 2 of the book especially fascinating, where Sawyer shares research on "the brain processes that drive creative insight"(xii), which reveal that our choices and problem solutions made on a daily basis are not isolated insights or "sparks", but are also highly influenced by our past interactions and experiences. Sawyer suggests methods for establishing ideal environments for cultivating "group genius" (a term that I think is synonymous with collaboration in this context) on team, organization and societal levels.

Leah Wescott says

A scholar who immerses himself in improv comedy, jazz and intellectual creativity? My kinda guy. Keith Sawyer's style is easy to read, understand and implement. Unfortunately for my students, as I read Sawyer's book, I simultaneously rewrote the classes I was teaching in order to accommodate Sawyer's ideas. Lucky for me, my students were brave enough to let go of their assumptions and fears in order to strive for transformative group flow experience. As a result, divergent, kooky and brilliant ideas emerged. Sawyer's work provided an academic and practical foundation to support dramatic risk taking.

I realize I'm so caught up in my application of *Group Genius* I haven't touched the content. Read it yourself. You'll believe almost anyone can contribute to remarkable ideas that no individual could have ever imagined.

Charlene says

Definitely leaps and bounds better than The Global Brain by Howard Bloom. Still, it's very clear this was written in 2007. This is a *really* great book for 2007, but there are more exciting books out there now. I would definitely read something new by Sawyer. He has 2 newer books that I will try to read soon.

Maarten Volders says

Chapter 2 is what the book should have been all about. Although he's only skimming the surface of his research it provides some unique insights into the Collaborative Mind. Unfortunately he tries to map his knowledge about the mind to the connected age and anything that can be defined as innovation. From that point on the book is all about well-known stories that are nice to read but no real evidence in what them make unique. Being a lean / agile practitioner his idea of 'leaning organizations' are way to shallow and also a bit outdated. He should have written an entire book about chapter two, that would be rated 5-stars all the way. The issue I have with all these famous stories is that we have all heard them before and we all know that there is more to it than two lines of text unfortunately many of them are being oversimplified and just filling up the white space. I was also missing the entire concept of Play/Fun/Game thinking in the book, perhaps a next book :)

Guy Posts says

Let's brainstorm. Or so I thought.

Open brainstorming sessions, as explained by Keith Sawyer in Group Genius, achieve less than we might think. When a group's focus is on simply getting ideas onto paper, their output is less effective than if led with a strict instruction to focus on generating quality ideas. A creative group needs a facilitator, someone to define the problem and direct people to come up with solutions, someone who says, "No idea is ever worth anything unless it has been well thought out... We want good, practical ideas. Let's try to avoid stupid or silly ones... the emphasis is on quality not on quantity."

But, after all, this is a book about collaboration. Sawyer wants to destroy the myth of the "solitary flash of insight" and demonstrate that true creativity is a process of small sparks linked together over time. He uses the telegraph as an example. Henry Morse didn't invent the telegraph overnight, or even in a year. It took over a decade:

"His 1844 telegraph line depended on many insights contributed over time by many people. At every stage, Morse worked with others—Jackson, Gale, Vail—drawing on their expertise and collaboratively developing the next link in the chain. What made Morse successful was the twelve years of hard work required to iron out the technical problems, and the many small subsequent ideas that made the original idea possible."

This concept of a steady flow of progress underlies Sawyer's primary thesis on creativity. "Creativity isn't about rejecting convention and forgetting what we know. Instead, it's based on past experience and existing concepts."

Creativity emerges as one gains a greater understanding of how different people, ideas, and technology link together. Put another way, Sawyer suggests that creativity is about applying past experience to the present. "To be creative, you need to be aware of as many potential analogies as possible; and when faced with a problem, you should try as many analogies as possible."

In the most convincing section of the book, Sawyer delves into studies that test the solvability rates of certain puzzles. As background social clues and hints were introduced to the test subjects, they solved the problems at much higher rates. Additionally, the more people were exposed to difficult problems, the better they

became at solving similar problems in the future. While the studies suggested that people derive their answers from social contexts, almost all the subjects from these studies, when asked how they reached the solutions, referenced a solitary insight. "This is a perfect example of the phenomenon psychologists call confabulation," Sawyer explains. "People have no trouble coming up with explanations for behavior after the fact. They believe they had a solitary insight, but the real story is that a social encounter was responsible for the idea."

These findings lead Sawyer to the conclusion that because "innovation emerges from the bottom up, unpredictably and improvisationally," institutions must be structured to best capture and combine the sparks that end up changing the world. Here he begins to lose himself. He champions Linux and Wikipedia as models of open collaboration. In spirit, the examples may be adequate, but in reality, Linux has yet to conquer Microsoft, and Wikipedia struggles to maintain a level of quality deemed acceptable for scholarly and professional work. Linux and Wikipedia are like open ended brain storming sessions. Linux comes up with more features at the cost of many mediocre ones. Wikipedia presents good information at the expense of erroneous entries. Quality monitoring and filtering out the good from the bad is the cost that will continue to hold each of them back from conquering their for profit competitors.

Alberto Lopez says

What an awesome book! It packs plenty of depth to the point of perhaps being a little too technical to many. Nonetheless, I feel that ANYONE needs to read it. Mr. Sawyer's concepts are very relevant to both our jobs and our lives; so I read it twice!

Scott Wozniak says

Solid book on the benefits (and challenges) of getting groups to be creative together (and not slide into mob mentality). It has solid research, good examples, and some practical applications. It's best for leaders who get to organize people into groups, a little less useful for people who are in the group but not in charge--still useful, though.

Jenni says

Group Genius written by Keith Sawyer, challenges commonly held beliefs about the path to creative innovation. Sawyer draws upon historical, as well as current day, events and practices to illustrate his belief that "the lone genius is a myth." There is no inventor sitting in his room toiling away at creative thought, but rather creative thought stems from people's experiences in life and the influence others have had upon it. Relevant to anyone wishing to bolster creativity in their business practices, it provides a fresh insight and urges innovation in the working environment.
The prevailing theme throughout the book is the idea of innovation emerging from a series of sparks, one idea igniting another. That innovation is the result of constant education, adaptation and thirst for improvement. Sawyer illustrates this concept by explaining the evolution of the mountain bike. A product which slowly evolved over time by groups of people simply wanting a better bike. Later in the story Sawyer brings about the idea of brainstorming sessions in which studies show that more creative ideas are fostered than from one man sitting at his desk and attempting to come up with ideas. This occurs because ideas are

constantly bounced back and forth, growing with each new comment.

In the creative thought process many young ideas are born. The majority of these ideas will fail, or never go anywhere, but it is through these failed ideas that the winning idea, concept or product may be created. This proves to be a problem in businesses because many businesses strive to reduce risk and punish failure. This does little to promote free radical thinking and often inhibits creative thought for fear of retribution. Sawyer comments that the way for people in business to overcome these obstacles is by learning from all of the experiences they have had and applying it to the next practice. The goal for creativity in business is to create enough structure to support improvisation without smothering creativity.

The organization of "Group Genius" is streamlined and easy to follow. Sawyer begins by explaining why group collaboration is important and then showing how it has succeeded throughout history. He gives detailed examples on how successful companies have incorporated it into their business practices and then teaches the reader how to use it to succeed.

The most empowering thought in Group Genius is the concept of a new working environment. Desks are built on wheels so that things can be changed at a moments notice to promote conversation and idea generation among different groups of people. Sawyer gives an example of the company Semco who stated, " There's not a lack of structure, just a lack of structure imposed from above". By providing employees with an opportunity to converse and open their minds to new points of view and environmental stimulation it helps to foster growth.

Group Genius is appealing to all people looking for a new way to inspire innovation and promote creativity. In clear concise direction it teaches the value of collaboration, urges the individual to open themselves up to new ideas, and reminds you to nurture the environment you work in to promote conversation and outside stimulation.

Gloria says

Admittedly a quick read through, starting with part 2, moving to part 3 and going back to part 1.

Part 2 is perhaps the meatiest of the sections. But it was in part 1 that I gleaned that I should be thinking about this in terms of verbal (versus visual) brainstorming and group work. So that was pretty important.

Lots o' examples which I skimmed, being familiar with many of them. Nice development of taxonomies. Useful. Because of that, the four (instead of three) stars.

Oh, yes. The long description of how there aren't real individual geniuses working alone, but rather building on the work of others.... blah blah blah. Yes, I think that is common sense (although not often used when developing things such as tenure criteria). It was hard to read that section, given my knowledge of things like tenure processes, and the inability of people / society in general to find metrics to "value" the collaborative work which is life. As Donald Norman (yep that Donald Norman) said to me when I was an assistant professor, don't do collaborative work before tenure (or something to that effect) as the system can't handle it.

Jon says

The premise of this book is intriguing. Genius and innovation rarely, if ever, happens as a result of a single

person acting alone. Sawyer brings to light many examples of "genius" that seemed to happen alone, but didn't. Bell, Edison, Einstein and others who in reality acted in concert with others, not alone. This idea that people working together always generate the greatest innovation. Sawyer can get bogged down in a bit too much detail for me, but the topic, and his grasp of it, keep me in. Great stuff.