

More Than Babble

The Power of Diverse Multiple Voices in the Innovation Process

BY DAVID BRYFMAN

Innovation beyond groupthink requires a multiplicity of diverse voices from people, experiences, books, conferences, etc. that blend together for common purpose through experiences of challenge, encouragement, frustration, and fun.

I'VE COME TO understand why apples are more likely to fall next to you than on you and that if you are ever unfortunate enough to be struck by lightning, it's unlikely to happen again. Similarly, it is not surprising few people can claim multiple breakthrough ideas. It's no further a surprise that even fewer are audacious enough to say innovation was the result of their work alone. And although many of my best ideas come in moments of solitude (in the shower, running...), I cannot force these breakthrough moments; if I do, I am invariably disappointed.

The real truths about innovation include: a good idea is not the same as innovation; coming up with a great idea is seldom a spontaneous event; innovation is rarely the work of an individual; and, as people like Benjamin Franklin acknowledge, innovation is more often than not, the result of many trials and tribulations. While initially these might scare people from embarking on an innovation journey—acknowledging these realities makes innovating easier.

In life before Project InCiTE (<http://www.projectincite.blogspot.com>), if I had a problem I couldn't solve, I'd ask for help from people easily reachable in the office or via e-mail. If their brainstormed ideas didn't provide

adequate solutions (and if geography and time allowed), I'd gather colleagues in a room to collectively bang our heads together. Frequently we would generate responses I felt (with no disrespect to my thought partners) I could have discovered myself. Today's technology (e.g., list-serves, chat rooms, blogs, and hash tags) allows me to reach larger and more targeted groups. But technology merely extends the process just described of choosing people based on affinity. Choosing known people feels comfortable and less threatening; it's safer. Yet, stop and think about it. Often we already know how friends, colleagues, and virtual "friends" think, how they'll react, what they can offer, and what their limitations are. Gathering like-minded individuals in real space or online often results in groupthink.

When the Project InCiTE Fellows first met, we asked them to consider new ways to engage Jewish teens. They generated a tried and tested list of classic programs—many of which were deemed unsuccessful, yet still continue because it's considered better to do what one knows rather than to try something untested and new. Eighteen months later, the list reads like a revamped eclectic grouping of cutting-edge, diverse, and (dare I say) *innovative* ways of engaging Jewish teens with Israel and the Jewish people in the twenty-first century. Now Project InCiTE is complete, I reflect upon what contributed to the shift, noting all the times we insisted the Fellows be exposed to others who were not their usual go-to people.

Of all inputs the Fellows received, none was more powerful than the multiple voices influencing their projects at every step. Coaches, supervisors, SIT (<http://www.sitsite.com>), Israel-trip educators, The iCenter (<http://www.theicenter.org>), The Jewish Education Project (<http://www.thejewisheducationproject.org>), Makōm (<http://www.jafi.org.il/JewishAgency/English/Jewish+Education/Strategic+Partnerships/Makom>), people from other fields and disciplines, the wide assortment of professional development oppor-

tunities, also books, articles, and conferences outside the traditional Jewish orbit, and the list goes on—they were exposed to a multiplicity of diverse voices. We became the conductor allowing each input to share its uniqueness before blending together as an orchestra.

SIT talks about a “closed world” where solutions to problems are found within resources already available. Answers often lie before you—not necessarily as a whole, but as the separation of the whole into its many parts. In innovation’s ideation stage, the closed world must extend to the limitless number of diverse people with whom we can connect.

The most important diversity we encouraged was the pool of Fellows themselves. We chose Fellows spanning educational settings (day schools, congregational schools, summer camps, Israel trips, JCCs, public school programs, etc.). We had Israelis and North Americans of multiple generations, of varied experiences and qualifications, and from across religious movements. Our only criteria were that they work with Jewish youth and consider Israel important to their Jewish educator role. In the end we selected an eclectic cohort with a common purpose.

What they brought to the fellowship exceeded all our expectations! While we gained satisfaction when a Reform Jew and an Orthodox Jew shared Shabbat dinner together, or when Jewish texts, classic and contemporary, are equally taught and respected by secular Israelis and orthodox Russian speakers, these were not our true accomplishments. The establishment of a cohort of diverse Jewish youth professionals, who support, challenge, encourage, frustrate, and laugh their way through every stage of the innovation process—this is the model of innovation Project InCiTE holds up as its success story for the Jewish community.

Project InCiTE reinforced that collective problem solving of like-minded individuals yields evident results. For true innovation to occur, we must fill our minds with inputs of the most diverse thinkers from the widest cross section of disciplines—quite simply, people who do not think like us. This requires humility—recognition that we only know what we know and that there are people with wisdom who can contribute to all aspects of our work.

If you’ve believed nothing else so far, not only is it more productive to innovate with others who are not exactly like you, it is also great fun interacting and exchanging ideas with people whose thinking you can’t anticipate.



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Perhaps having fun isn’t the greatest measure of success—but in our experience, true innovation is hard work and being engaged, and enjoying ourselves certainly contributed to our achievements.

This story of using multiple voices is not just about Project InCiTE or innovation. In the end it is at the core of Clal Yisrael’s future. The Jewish people’s very survival may depend upon using a diverse multiplicity of voices in every endeavor moving forward. We can wait for apples to drop on us or lightning to strike us—but it will be far more productive to utilize the multiple languages present at the Tower of Babel and transform some of that babble into innovation. ■

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