

ISSUE  
2

JEFF DeGRAFF

HOW TO

# ASSEMBLE + MANAGE

YOUR INNOVATION SUPERHERO TEAM



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# A SUPERHERO IS ONLY AS GREAT AS HIS OR HER TEAMMATES—

the equally, if not more, powerful heroes he or she surrounds him or herself with. The same is true of innovators. An innovator is only as great as his or her brain trust—the circle of mentors and consultants who nurture and enhance his or her ideas.

Assemble a group of bright, energetic thinkers you can trust. Use them to brainstorm and bounce off ideas. Make these co-creators your confidants—advisors who you can go to before you go to the other people in your organization.

Seek out people with extensive experience in their fields. Experience can come in many forms—from the theoretical knowledge of a researcher to the practical mastery of an engineer. Remember that experience does not necessarily mean age. In fact, if you were building a project around an emerging trend or a new market, youth would be an asset on your superhero team.

# HOW DO YOU SELECT YOUR INNOVATION SUPERHERO TEAM?

To know what kinds of people to recruit for your innovation team is to know your own weaknesses. Identify your blind spots: the areas of strategy, planning, or execution that you struggle with. These are almost always related to your strengths. For example, if you're a natural out-of-the-box thinker who quickly and excitedly brainstorms radical ideas, you might struggle with establishing and following concrete rules. Conversely, if you thrive in a tight, bureaucratic setting, imagining alternative solutions might be a challenge for you.



Your ideal teammates are the people who can do the things you can't. You need to use people who will fill in your gaps, make up for your shortcomings—whose strengths complement your weaknesses.

The goal is to assemble a diversity of perspectives and expertise. Recruit individuals who have different visions of your company—some who see it as a radical organization moving toward the future, others who see it as a highly efficient operational machine, and yet others who see its internal culture.

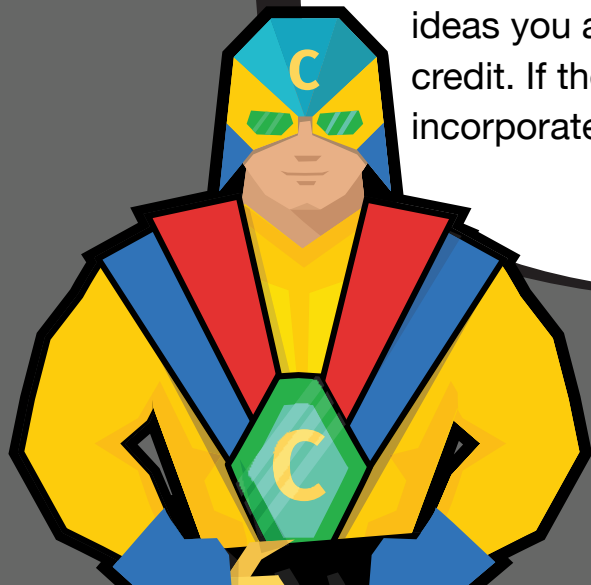


Look in both likely and unlikely places for your future collaborators. They might be inside your organization—but they might also be elsewhere, out in the real world. Everyone is a superhero in some context—and inept in a different context. A Harvard Ph.D. candidate in Medieval History who's recently become a father could benefit from talking to a stay-at-home mother of five children. That same mother, who wants to finish her novel-in-progress, could benefit from talking to the Ph.D. candidate's good friends who work in publishing.

**THERE IS A SEQUENCE, OR A SERIES OF GUIDELINES, WHEN IT COMES TO ENROLLING PEOPLE ON YOUR TEAM:**

Start with **communication**: Let other people talk about your ideas in their own terms. This makes them feel comfortable and personally invested and helps you build a rapport with these potential teammates.

If communication doesn't work, try **participation**: ask the people you're trying to recruit what *they* would do. If they share with you ideas you already had, give them credit. If they offer criticisms, incorporate those into your project.



**Facilitation** is a strategy of enrollment that introduces a third party. This impartial third-party individual acts as a mediator between you and your prospective collaborators.



The final step in team enrollment is **negotiation**. People often resist supporting innovations because they have something to lose if they join your project. If you want to win them over, you need to remedy this: give them something to gain.

HOW DO YOU

# MANAGE

## YOUR INNOVATION SUPERHERO TEAM?

Every kind of superhero has a different way of speaking—and when we approach people who aren't like us, we need to adapt to their mode of communication. We need to speak their language. Appeal to their values and interests and present questions and projects in their terms.

Quick thinkers get to the point, so frame your initiative to them as a win-or-lose situation with a concrete payoff. Use quantifiable facts to illustrate your point. Show the logical necessity of your project.

Patient thinkers gather together and talk about their feelings, so take your time and get to know them on a personal level. Put them at ease and talk about life experiences. Establish a sense of community when asking them to join your team.

Pragmatic thinkers share data, so give them statistics and concrete information when describing your project to them. Offer them a sense of the step-by-step process behind your initiative. Provide details and explain things in a sequential order.

Big-picture thinkers engage in experiments and express themselves in creative outlets, so be enthusiastic and energetic when talking to them. Ask open-ended questions. Stress the radical potential and possibility of new solutions that comes with your project.

**AS AN INNOVATION LEADER, IT IS  
IMPORTANT TO TAKE AN INSIDE-OUT  
PERSPECTIVE IN DEVELOPING YOUR TEAM.**

First, look at your own skills as an innovation leader and decide objectively where you think you might be incompetent. Give those kinds of tasks and responsibilities to another member of your team.

Next, look at the areas where you are merely competent and assign these actions to other members of your team to supplement your own competency.

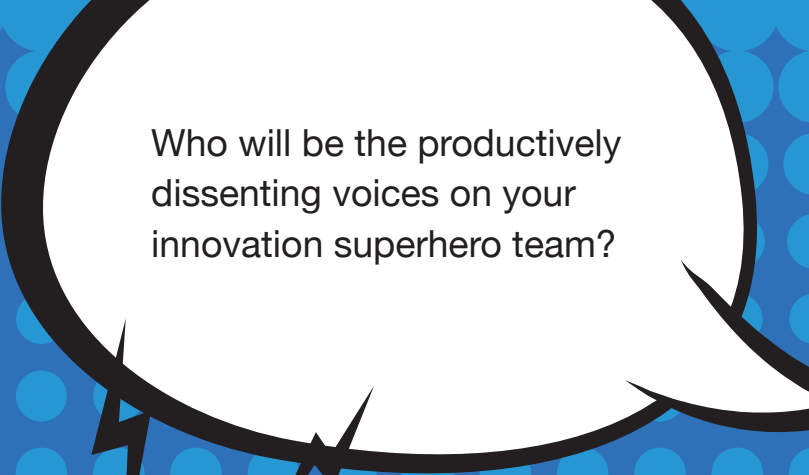
Then, find the areas where you are masterful and choose a member of your team whom you can train as your understudy in those tasks.

Finally, determine the areas in which you are unique—your one-of-a-kind gifts or skills. Here is the part of the innovation leadership proposition that you need to focus on. This is the way to maximize your own value to the team.

Teams are works in progress. They are dynamic groups that you need to add to and take away from as you move along in your project and see what you need more of and less of. The same people who are great at starting a project are probably not the same people who are great at getting the project to scale.

Conflict is inevitable when you put such a wide variety of perspectives on one team—and that's a good thing. Harmony is overrated. Simple accord won't yield any new or unexpected ideas. It is, after all, in the white spaces between disciplines where innovation happens.

**THE OBJECT IS TO ACHIEVE A  
POSITIVE TENSION—  
A CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT  
THAT LEADS TO HYBRID SOLUTIONS**



Who will be the productively  
dissenting voices on your  
innovation superhero team?



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