KAI PODCAST SERIES – FOUNDATION FIVE PART 1

'From Cave Dwellers to Cosmonaut – A Manual for the Brain'

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DH: [0:00:00.0] Welcome to the KAI Foundation Five Podcast Series, our five part introduction to building better teams and great leaders with the Kirton Adaption Innovation Inventory.

KAI is the world's foremost measure for problem solving style. It's used widely to create cohesive and productive teams and effective leaders. It's been in use for around 40 years and is supported by a large body of academic research from around the world.

In these five podcasts we want to provide you with an understanding of why KAI is so effective, so powerful and indeed life changing for so many teams and team leaders. We've entitled today's first episode – 'From Cave Dwellers to Cosmonaut – A Manual for the Brain' – and it's really an introduction to KAI, what it is, what it's all about and why it works.

My name's Dave Harries and joining me from across the Atlantic to explain all of this, I have two very distinguished guests. Dr Curt Friedel is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Co-operative Problem Solving at Virginia Tech in the USA where he is also the Director of the KAI Certification Course.

Dr Iwan Jenkins is also a KAI expert and describes himself as a practitioner of the practical. He understands cognitive theory and complex system science, but more importantly he knows how to make that theory applicable in today's business world. In his own words, he turns potential to profit.

So welcome both of you to the podcase. Iwan, if I could turn to you first, could I get you to tell me what exactly is KAI and why are you so interested in it?

IJ: [0:01:42.7] What drew me to KAI was, I was quite interested in how leaders persuade other individuals to take a physical action that was for mutual benefit. Even that sounds a bit jargony but the way it was summarised to me was a phrase by a famous American advertising gentleman called John Caples who once said, "Times change, but people don't.' The last part of that sentence about people not changing and basically being the same for at least millennia during written history, that got me quite interested to try and understand, "Well, what aspects of humans have not changed and how can I help others with that information to be better leaders of themselves and others?"

If you read things like Shakespeare or the major poets or indeed the great theological texts, they seem to be focusing in on two things – and that is that people at their essence want to love somebody else and also be loved by other people. And so this insight, what attracted me then to KAI was, I wonder if there is… I could see a glimpse in the theory that would allow me to understand in a more rigorous way about why people want to belong to an organisation or to a group, and how they want to stand out in that group. The magic part for me about KAI - and I've become quite passionate about it over the past almost 30 years now – is it allows people to understand how they can be better supporters of themselves and better supporters of other people. So the theory does in the end support Shakespeare. Shakespeare was right.

DH: [0:03:30.9] Well, that's good to know. I've always wondered whether he was right or not.

Curt, I don't know if you're a fan of Shakespeare, but tell me about your perspective of KAI. Do you see it in the same way that Iwan has just described it there?

CF: [0:03:44.6] Thanks, Dave. I really do. From my perspective as I see it, the brain hasn't really changed for the last 100 or even 1000 years. We tend to think the same way as we did, and if you look at literature that shows that all the way from Shakespeare to Prado and Socrates, of course the culture has changed, society has changed – and that's what I love about KAI. A lot of our work is at the intersection between psychology and sociology. Our brains don't change and with respect to KAI we're measuring problem solving style which is independent from intelligence, motivation, values, culture and ethnicity.

For this I'd like to highlight culture. Sometimes we might see cultures that might be more adaptive or more innovative, but the problem solving style, mean or average, if you will, among those different cultures are still the same. It really is fascinating. I get a lot of questions about the millennial generation, for example. I would argue that of the millennials or generation Y or Z, their brains haven't changed but the culture has, and so we can still measure KAI problem solving style accurately. People are still solving problems the same way with different preferences but culture has changed, expectations have changed.

DH: [0:05:08.9] And Iwan, talking of culture changing around us even as our brains don't particularly, presumably that includes the tools that we have for communication, and that must be an important part of it as well because obviously people talk about social media now and the effect that has and the fact that news or fake news can travel around the world so fast and that sort of thing – does that have an influence on the way we look at problems and the way we perceive them, do you think?

IJ: [0:05:37.7] Yeah, it does, Dave. It may be useful now to draw a link as to these two drivers for human beings about wanting to be loved and also to love others, why those drivers are important to the survival of the species, what's this got to do with the problem solving stuff we're talking about today and how important it is for things like language and social media because they all build on each other.

So, for example, we seem to have this driver that people like Shakespeare and other writers of literature have found that Capel summarised that we want to be part of a group, but we also want to stand out in the group. Why has that been part of human nature now for 100,000 years let's say?

Well, actually at the root of it is it's important for our survival. What Kirton did is Kirton recognised that and has given us some useful insight to take these two drivers and exploit them – I'll use that word in a positive way – exploit them for the benefit of humanity. No human being can answer every single problem around survival, reproduction and so on that they meet, so it's critical for us to work with others to solve these so called problems, and what Kirton's work did is very much focusing on humans coming together to solve problems. We have no instincts, human beings have got no instincts. We're not gifted like birds or we don't have talons like some mammals. We've got the same bodies and brains that we've had, as Curt says, for 100,000 years, so we actually have to work with each other, to collaborate with each other, bring skills to a group for mutual benefit that allow us then to solve problems. In fact, as human beings as a species, we are by far the most the successful species that's ever been on the planet. A lot of the things that we're collaborating are with each other now are to deal with some of the spin off problems of the success that human beings have had as working collaboratively in the past. It's telling that the name of the department that Curt is heading up around co-operative problem solving is so important because we have to co-operate in problem solving units to solve problems for mutual benefit.

Organisations come together to solve problems for profit as well as then the benefit to the employees, but actually working with each other is critical to the long term success of the species.

DH: [0:08:17.6] Curt, we have called this episode, this first episode – 'From Cave Dweller to Cosmonaut.' Would it be fair to say that those cave dwellers when they were solving the problems of where the next meal was coming from or whatever, do you think they are facing the same basic problems in terms of problem solving and innovation as the people who are working out how to get us to the moon or to Mars in the future and that sort of thing? Are those two things really comparable?

CF: [0:08:49.2] Yeah, I would think so, or I should say I do think so. We're all solving problems all the time every day and so we face problems from what am I going to wear to express myself or to keep my temperature hotter, warmer or colder depending on what temperature zone you live in, how am I going to get from point A to point B, how am I going to feed myself, how am I going to take care of my family or significant others, how to show affection. Sometimes we have problems that are problems we don't want to talk about like I'm unhappy with my body image, how do I address that, or how do I work with other people who I disagree with? So yes, we do have problems that don't seem to go away any time soon.

I like that Iwan highlighted instinct. If we had instinct, these would be problems that are a whole lot easier to solve. We would just rely on instinct and instinctively respond, but there's no manual, there's no instinctive characteristics that we have as humans to say, "Okay, I'm going to do this because everyone else does it this way."

DH: [0:09:59.7] Iwan, I'm glad that Curt raised that issue of instinct because that struck me when you said that we don't have instinct, because I think we often assume that we do, that we work on instinct. We claim to have instinct about meeting people and deciding, yes, we can get on with them, they're friends or whatever, or we make decisions based on what we perhaps think of as instinct. But I accept totally your point that actually problem solving is about collaboration and all that sort of thing, but what does it mean in real life? If I could move the conversation on to how is used on a day to day basis? If you can give me examples of that. I understand that I can't solve all these problems on my own, so what's the approach that a human being should sensibly take, if you like?

IJ: [0:10:46.9] Let me answer that, Dave, by just talking about defining what a problem is because quite often we think about it almost in a mathematical sense.

If I go into a room and the room is dark, and I'm looking for a set of keys but I can't see them, then I have a problem. If I then switch the light on so that I can then find the keys, then I have created a solution. So in a very, very simple way I have solved the problem and created a solution. Therefore by that definition I am being creative.

We are all creative in some way, shape or form but what differs though is the style in which we are creative and also maybe the intellectual capacity or the knowledge and experience that we bring to solving the particular problems. Humans, because we're not hard wired to solve all of these problems, we have to then tap into the problem solving capabilities of others.

So, for example now, if I have an idea now that I want to make furniture, like sofas, and I know how to market them but I don't know how to make them, I would then collaborate, co-operate, with a carpenter because she or he may have the skills that are necessary to solve the overall problem of how do I provide furniture for comfortable seating in somebody's homes.

That's when were we start to work with each other then to collaborate and in fact because we don't have any instincts and as Curt says, we're not born with a manual, we actually have to learn how to work with each other for mutual benefit, and so human beings spend more time being nurtured and taught how to problem solve – that's why we spend 18 years or so in primary education – in order to then be effective problem solvers to allow the species to continue to be successful.

DH: [0:12:51.3] I was very interested, Iwan, in what you just said about the simple problem of finding the keys and switching on the light and shedding literal light on the subject so you could find the keys. Obviously that's a very everyday problem that one has solved, but it struck me there that clearly although you're not collaborating to solve that problem, in a funny way you are because you're sort of standing on the shoulders of giants, as it were. Many, many people in the past have worked on problems - inventing electricity, inventing light bulbs, wiring the country, getting the electricity into houses – so that we have the convenience to be able to solve the problem by flicking a light switch. I wonder if that is collaborative problem solving albeit in a time distanced way.

IJ: [0:13:38.0] So if you think from a biological perspective, a biological perspective is our genes don't care about us as individuals. They're only interested in can the behaviours that we're putting into place, can they perpetuate the species? And so because again we don't have these instincts, one of the ways that humans perpetuate the species is by being very effective problem solvers, which means this is a capability which is a value then in each individual because it's a way they can contribute to the species surviving.

What we're doing now is we are starting to see that for all the solutions that have been put into place in the past, there are now spin off problems starting to occur. So whilst we are able to exploit such as the electricity now, there are spin off problems which we are now having to deal with – increased pollution, plastic everywhere, etc – so we're standing on the success of previous generations but we're now actually having to be even better co-operate, collaborators because not only are we having to deal with the consequences of some of the earlier successes, the pace at which they're coming to us is increasing and becoming more complex.

One of the things why Kirton's work is so important is Kirton shows you how to be a better, more co-operative problem solver and we need that capability in order to be able to deal with some of the problems that we're now starting to face.

CF: [0:15:13.4] Yeah, and if I could jump in here a bit. I really like the idea that Iwan has provided about trying to find the keys in a dark room. What you're mentioning, Dave, is this idea that I'm standing on the shoulders of giants, that our capacity has increased, our capacity has improved. It's much easier to find the keys when we have electricity. However, what Kirton has offered is in finding the keys we each would have a different approach to finding the keys, being more adaptive or more innovative. The more adaptive individuals might be a bit more methodical in finding the keys. They might have a certain place where they always set the keys. How they begin looking for the keys might be retracing their last steps. This is all a bit of speculation, but the more innovative might be a little bit more random in looking for the keys where the keys might not be, if you will, and hone in to where they could be.

That's fine when only one person is looking for the keys, but when you have two people looking for the keys then we have disagreements on how to best solve the problem of finding the keys. As you can imagine, we can measure the differences between the more adaptive and the more innovative. If there is a gap between those two approaches, we tend to have more disagreements than focus on trying to naturally find the keys.

DH: [0:16:34.8] And this, if I've understood this correctly as this is an introduction as I said at the beginning to the KAI system, what you're talking about there is problem A and problem B. I wonder whether you could illustrate that for me and explain that a little bit for our listeners who don't perhaps know about that.

IJ: [0:16:55.5] Absolutely. Problem A is a task at hand. It's why groups come together. We're motivated to come together to solve common problems that we agree need to be solved. Problem B is all the distractions from problem A simply defined.

And so as two people come together, just by their diversity of each other being in the same room looking for the keys, problem B starts to happen. What we like to do is maintain the focus on solving problem A because we need the keys. Problem B is all the different approaches, but also we might have gaps in different aspects of values, motives, status. I might have more status in finding the keys than you do because they're my car, not your car and so on, so problem Bs tend to crop up every now and then in the focus of problem A. But the goal of the team then is to focus on problem A so that we can find the keys.

DH: [0:17:55.9] And the business of solving problem B so that you can solve problem A is what, Iwan, this is all about really, isn't it? It's what KAI is doing?

IJ: [0:18:06.8] Yeah. I think we could bring this alive with an example. Can we talk about Steve Jobs and Tim Cook? Steve Jobs was an amazing problem solver. Very, very successful. But the way he would typically try and solve problems would be what the modern parlance would be 'thinking out of the box.' He would want to do things differently. Even if it wasn't successful in the first place, he would always want to be breaking the rules.

So this approach to problem solving Kirton calls 'relatively innovative.' They want to think out of the box, they want to break down the way things have been done in the past. They don't want to be anchored to the past.

You look at Tim Cook who's now the current CEO, who when he solves problems, is very, very structured. Together they were a superb team in Apple in the late 90s.

Apple in the late 90s basically only had about 60 days' worth of cash on hand. It would take three months to make a computer whereas everybody else was able – Dell, in particular, was able to do it in less than a month. So without some kind of structure, without spotting the bleeding, without managing the chaos, Apple would have gone bust. So what Steve Jobs did is he brought in somebody who was better at solving problems in a way that was relevant to the task at hand, and over time these two diverse approaches – one, seeing the vision, wanting to change the way things are done in the market place and the other one, having control over the manufacturing and the cash flow systems – allowed the two to work together. But it was not an easy relationship. And what Curt pointed out then is understanding how you could actually have a clash of styles that actually solve the problem collectively is another part of leadership, particularly in the modern world.

So let's take Steve Jobs. Now let's go back to the late 90s now. Steve Jobs has this problem A. He wants to bring out a new approach to computing but he doesn't have the skills to be able to actually bring it to life. He then starts to work with Tim Cook, and as soon as you start to work with somebody else, you then introduce a new problem – how do we work with each other, which is called Problem B. Teams that are unsuccessful spend more time solving problem B than they do trying to solve problem A. Every ounce of energy expended on solving problem B how do we work each with other is an ounce of energy that's not expended on problem A,, why did we meet in the first place. in this particular case to rewrite the rules of the computing industry?

What Steve Jobs and Tim Cooke were able to do is they were able to find a way of working with each other that their difference in style was valued in order then to be more effective at really changing the world. That's the challenge that leadership faces now. How do we focus our energy on problem A and reduce the amount of energy on problem B and what Kirton does is Kirton unlocks for leaders today on how to do that.

DH: [0:21:32.1] Curt, presumably there are lots of examples in the arts, in the military, sports. Obviously sports rely on teams.

CF: [0:21:41.3] Yeah. You tend to see a problem A and problem B everywhere. Amongst them my first research was looking at problem A and problem B in the classroom. If you have differences of problem solving style between a teacher and a student, how does that affect student engagement, student stress, student motivation?

What we found is teachers who were successful in the classroom did a really great job of focusing on learning, the problem A of the classroom. Teachers who were less successful weren't able to manage the diversity of the classroom well and problem B ensued. I think Iwan has a great example of Steve Jobs and Tim Cook. They had mutual respect for each other and a bit of humility in understanding their limits of what one can do and what the other could maybe do better.

An example where you have someone who is more adaptive and more innovative that didn't work well together would be Thomas Edison and Nicole Tesla. Tesla worked for Edison. Edison being the more adaptive individual, Tesla being the more innovative and they couldn't see eye to eye and eventually parted ways.

DH: [0:22:51.8] As these podcasts go through the five episodes, I'm sure we're going to bring up lots more examples and it's really good to bring real life examples to bear because it helps people like me who don't have a background in this, and don't understand it all. It helps a great deal.

Before we finish this first episode, I wonder whether we could think about what are the takeaways? What are the things we can think about before episode 2 comes along in terms of what this all means for us as humans, and for us in business as well? Iwan, would you mind summing that up for us, if you could?

IJ: [0:23:28.2] I think the key takeaway here is that human beings, we're all problem solvers and each one of us wants to have our contribution valued and recognised. That, I think's the key thing, particularly for those who lead in organisations. Using your problem solving capability is something which is learnt so you can always improve and when you work with colleagues, you need to recognise that they can also improve as well.

The third thing then is we each have a preferred problem solving style which we need to present to the group as being useful at the lowest cost to the group because we want to solve problem A. We don't want to be seen by our colleagues as being a problem B.

And the final thing then is you can actually learn how to do that. The Kirton Adaptive Innovative theory actually will allow you to get inside how you can be a better problem solver leader for yourself and for others.

DH: [0:24:25.9] You've been listening to the KAI Foundation Five Podcast – Part One, with our special guests Dr Curt Friedel and Dr Iwan Jenkins. If you found the discussion interesting you can find out more about the KAI system and its first class team development potential at www.kaicentre.com

In the meantime, Part 2 of the KAI Foundation Five Podcast – 'Big Problems need Better Teams' – will be along very soon. So please subscribe and keep listening.