

KAI Foundation Five podcast episode 2

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DH: [0:00:00.0] Welcome to Part 2 of 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 about 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, why it's so powerful and indeed can be life changing for so many teams and team leaders.

Today's second episode is entitled 'Big Problems need Better Teams,' and during the next half an hour or so we're going to discuss problem solving style, and why for teams to be effective we need diversity in that style.

We'll also look at KAI measures that diversity, how we know it works, the proof and the rigour, if you will, and the importance of creativity – whatever your problem solving style happens to be.

My name is Dave Harries and joining me from the United States and Canada to talk about all of this I have two experts 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 also knows how to make that theory applicable in today's business world. In his own words, he turns potential into profit.

So welcome gentlemen, to this second podcast in the series. As we are talking today about problem solving styles amongst other things, I wonder if we could start with that. Maybe we'll start you, Curt, and you could tell us what is problem solving style? What does that really mean?

CF: [0:01:57.7] Sure. Thanks, Dave. If we go back to the essence of a problem, meaning something isn't working well or we need to get from Point A to Point B, in a broader sense something's not working well, a system's not working. Problem solving style is a preference of how to solve the problem, not how well we can

solve the problem. So it's a separation from what we would level or intelligence and capacity and contrast that with a style.

So the more innovative prefer to think differently and look out to swap out the system. So if a policy or a procedure isn't working well, let's stop doing this right now and start doing something else right away. They prefer to focus on different wide ranging views of how to fix the system.

The more adaptive would prefer to fix the system or get from Point A to Point B with more detail and focus, often with inside the box thinking to tweak the system to make it better. If the system isn't working, it's an improvement that they focus on to make the system work better.

And so we can all solve problems equally well, but we have a different style in solving problems. We can measure this style on a continuum ranging from 32 to 160 on the KAI. The average or the mean score of the KAI is 95. It's a normal distribution that cuts across many demographic variables, such as socio economic status, age, culture, ethnicity and so on. People who score from 95 to 160 tend to be more innovative in their preference for solving problems, and people who score between 95 and 32 tend to be more adaptive. But I will say that maybe how you identify as a problem solver, more adaptive or more innovative, it's much more about who you're with in the room.

So let's say, for example, I'm a 110, as a more innovative – and this is just an example – and I'm in a room with a 120 and a 145. Me, as a 100, I'm the most adaptive person in the room. So it's comparative or relative and it works on the other side, so if we have someone who is an 85 – let's say, for example, I'm an 85 and I'm in the room with a 74 and a 57 – I'm the most innovative person in the room. So it's relative to who I'm with.

DH: [0:04:28.5] Iwan, is it difficult to measure this? Presumably there's a technique, a method for measuring what somebody's problem solving style is, where they are on the Kirton scale. How do you do that and how do you know that your answer, the number you get for a particular person, how do you know that's reliable?

IJ: [0:04:48.9] As Curt has said, there has been a substantial amount of research now around how does an individual understand what their preferred problem solving style is? Am I one who likes to, as Curt was saying, think outside of the box, or am I one who prefers to have more structure and manage the risk around the way that I solve my problems?

What Kirton has done is he has developed what he calls an inventory, which is 33 questions – takes about 15 minutes to complete – and you answer those 33 questions and then you get a score which then places you on this spectrum again from 32 all the way up to 160. One of the things that Kirton has done is he's taken data samples from around the world and shown that this mean of 95 is consistent with any population regardless of culture.

So, for example, you may well have societies like the United Kingdom or the United States where high levels of innovation, doing things differently, are valued, and so you may say, "Okay, well the mean for that population then would be somewhere between 95 and 160. They're on the relatively more innovative side, but in fact the mean for the general population of the United States and the United Kingdom is 95.

Likewise, if you went to Japan, which is very structured in terms of the way the organisations work in terms of their academics and so on and so forth, you'd say, "Well, they are so structured, so tightly bound to policies and procedures that the mean for the Japanese population would be on the more adaptive side." Let's say 80 for example, but it's not. It's 95.

And so one of the things that Kirton's Adaptive Innovative inventory is measuring is it lies below culture and therefore it's consistent with human beings around the world. That's what the data says.

DH: [0:06:51.8] And presumably that's what makes it so powerful. It just works. Whoever you are, whatever your culture, whatever your background, whatever your education, it's going to work.

IJ [0:07:01.1] Correct. So the powerful point is here that it's applicable with whoever you're working with and the drivers that we were talking about earlier, that I want to be valued as a problem solver, I want to be part of a problem solving group and I want to be recognised within the problem solving group – wherever you in the world, if you're a human being, if you're a member of the human species, those drivers are the same.

DH: [0:07:28.1] Now this podcast, this episode, No 2, is called 'Big Problems need Better Teams.' So I think it's about time we addressed what a better team is. What do we mean by that? What are we talking about when we talk about a better team?

CF: [0:07:44.6] A better team is really a team that has a wide spectrum of diversity and embraces that diversity so there's no second class citizenry on the team. It's a team that has a place where people can come together in safety to share ideas – whether those ideas are more adaptive or more innovative – and they're coming together to decide on where is the best solution to move forward in solving problem A. Mitigating that diversity as things pop up from here, so that focus can be maintained on problem A.

Leadership in a team – and notice the word 'leadership,' not leader – leadership is when people come together to solve the problem together, managing or embracing the diversity so that the right person can focus at the right time to effectively solve problem A.

DH: [0:08:35.3] So I understand what we mean by a better team, but Iwan, I wonder if you could give me some examples of how that actually works in practice. Real life teams, if you like, that have been successful, that have been better because of this diversity?

IJ: [0:08:48.3] To answer that question, let's talk about sailing ships across the Atlantic.

If we look at adapters. Adapters are always wanting to take the existing and improve them. If you work in industry, things like Six Sigma, this aspect of continuous improvement, is very important in terms of how do we make things better based on what's worked in the past – because what's worked in the past has shown us some indication about how things can work successfully at the lowest risk.

For many years goods were being shipped across the Atlantic between the UK and the United States by sailing ships. They were forever improvements in terms of the sail design, the material that went into the sails to make them lighter but still keep the strength. For the different kinds of pitches to go on the outside of the ship that would then prevent fouling so that there would be no growth on the outside of the ship, so that the ship would be able to sail faster and faster across the Atlantic. These small tweaks of continuous improvement are very much associated with a creative, adaptive way of solving problems. How do we make things better?

And then somebody came up with a steam ship, but the problem was the first steam ships would often sink because the amount of coal that was required to keep the steam ships going was actually detrimental then to the buoyancy of the boat. But over time these steam ships that were invented by high innovators were starting to attract the interest of the more adaptive who would then improve the idea, make it practical and eventually then these steam ships were crossing the Atlantic faster than the sailing ships.

And so one of the things that you see then is the more adaptive tend to wait too late to make a shift to different and better technology and the more innovative jump to alternative out of the box, often too early. So what you're really looking for then are a balance of adaptors who are improving the status quo and innovators who are looking about the next thing, but they work collaboratively to do continuous improvement of the more radical stuff as they go along.

But that's not always easy because these diverse teams actually come at cost. If I want to do things differently, I look at you as an adapter as being an anchor that's weighing me down, being boring and stuffy. If I am an adaptor looking at you as a high innovator, I see you as always being wanting to do too much too soon, being radical for the sake of being radical.

And so in team leadership you're always looking about how do we make the most of the diversity to solve the problem that we're looking at – the problem A – but working with each other and valuing each other's contribution in such a way that we minimise the dysfunction or the problem B within the organisation.

CF: [0:12:05.3] I'll add, it's a bit of a paradox. We need each other to solve complex problems, but we don't get along so well especially if we have a difference in problem solving style in solving the problem.

DH: [0:12:17.2] So is there ever a situation where people are too far apart on the scale that they can't work together or is there always a way of making it work?

CF: [0:12:28.0] When you have a team who has a diversity of problem solving style scores, the team functions well when at first there's a focus on problem A and second, where there's mutual respect and humility involved of all the team players. And so with that mutual respect of 'I respect you and your diversity of thought and what you bring to the team, and you respect me and my diversity of thought and what I bring to the team' to create that same space of having ideas but also the humility of 'I know what I can do and not do well and rely on you to cover for me on the things I can't do well.'

Going back to the question of the size of a gap, if there is a sizeable gap but there's mutual respect and humility, the greatest of that team is they can solve a wider variety of problems because they can rely on each other to focus on all problems that could possibly happen – with spin off problems and such.

The narrower the team, if you have individuals who score very closely together, they get along well but the depth and breadth of problems that they can solve is limited because they see all the problems the same way and they don't know when to adapt, when adaptions needed or when innovation is needed.

IJ [0:13:48.5] So it goes back to this phrase 'if you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go further, go as a team.' Again, if you go as a team, let me tell you, you have to bite your tongue. You get irritated when you're in the car together and somebody wants to stop and pull over and open up the flask and have some cake. But collectively you go together, so there's cost as an individual then for some tolerating other people but you need to say to yourself, "Is the investment I'm making worth the return I'm getting?"

As Curt was saying, you can have a group of high innovators who then start a business together and it is fantastic. You have a great time. Every day's a party, but eventually you'll run out of cash.

If you have a group of high adaptors running a business, stuff will get down but eventually you will start to see a sales reduction because other better, more innovative products, come along and will start to steal your market share. So you're always looking then to have again the diversity approach.

Somebody once said to me, "The beauty of having a diverse team is that you can have radical innovation that delivers," but it's not always an easy place to work.

DH: [0:15:10.2] Can I ask you, Iwan, about creativity? Creativity is obviously important in problem solving and to the layman, or perhaps it's lazy thinking on my part, but it's easy to think, isn't it, that creativity is somehow tied up very closely with innovation, but that's not true, is it?

IJ: [0:15:28.8] No, no, and so part of this is down to the definition. If you laud creativity as somebody who happens to be very successful in the arts or the TV, you are basically saying to 95 per cent of the population, "You

are not creative.' That is also not right in terms of dismissing the 95 per cent of the population in terms of their problem solving capability, but it's actually incorrect because if you solve a problem – and it doesn't matter about the nature of the problem, doesn't matter how simple the problem is, whether it's switching on a light to look for keys in a room or solving Fermat's theorem or writing a new symphony – if you are creating something that solves a problem, you are by definition creative. What differs then is the style in which you're creative, the capability of technical skills that you are bringing, but everybody's creative. The important thing is we need to let everybody that they're creative and contributing to the group because that's the essence then of what drives human beings.

The key thing about the Kirton theory is people need to be part of a group and they need to be recognised to be part of a group to actually make the most of them. If you actually want to dismiss somebody, if you want to actually destroy their self-esteem, then you only need to do things. You either don't let them be part of the problem solving group or indeed within that solving group you shame them in terms of ridiculing their problem solving capability.

So that to me is a critical thing for leaders to understand. Quite often we hear this phrase about employee engagement. Employees don't want to be engaged, they want to be involved. They want to be part of the group, they want to contribute to the group and to have that contribution recognised because they are themselves creative problem solvers. That's the key thing that Kirton's work tells us – we want to actually involve people, not just engage them and that's the essence of diversity and inclusion.

CF: [0:17:36.0] I would like to add to what Iwan was saying and dissect the word 'innovation' a bit more. In popular culture and press we tend to conflate creativity and innovation and new altogether and we tend to use the word 'innovation' too much in my opinion. We put innovation on the word centres and we call innovative just because they're doing something exciting and different and new. But I'd like to push back on that definition a little bit and contrast level and capacity.

We're talking about innovation in popular terms. The word innovation is really about capacity, but going along Kirton's Adaption and Innovation theory we're talking about style. Actually when we contrast innovation with adaption we have more meaning towards what innovation and what new means because we can have innovation new ideas but we can also have adaptive new ideas. We can be creative both innovatively and adaptively. Creativity is a capacity, but we can do it within our own style.

DH: [0:18:43.3] I'm very interested and delighted actually that you have said that we're all creative. I think that's a very important point. I was thinking about the world of music, which I know a little bit about as a keen amateur musician. Within that world, musicians argue about who's the most creative. If you're a jazz musician, for example, you might spend a lot of your time extemporising. Some people would say, "That's creative because you're making this stuff up." Whereas if you're a classical musician as I am, you're reading black dots on a page and playing something that's been written by a composer probably hundreds of years ago.

You're still solving a problem interestingly even in that example, because you're solving the problem of how to take that music off the page and make it something beautiful. So even in that so called creative industry, there is

argument about which people in the industry are creative and which aren't. The reality is that, as Iwan said very well, and as you reinforced, Curt, we're all creative and that is a really crucial point, I think.

IJ: [0:19:50.4] If you look at Bach, you could say that Bach really extemporised off structure. That's why mathematicians love Bach because to some extent he's predictable. Even Mozart said, "Creativity (in the innovative sense) is overrated." He again would stick to certain patterns and then basically join existing dots in novel ways. He was never really doing anything as far as he was concerned that was extremely radical.

CF: [0:20:26.5] Yeah, in a contemporary version, looking at comedy. If comedy is a problem to be solved, the Adaption Innovation theory should apply. The essence of a joke and making someone laugh, and so comparing who I would argue as more innovative – the late and great Robin Williams who could bounce around from character to character to character in just a matter of seconds really. So if he's more innovative, the more adaptive comedian would be Jay Leno who could tweak any joke to fit any audience.

DH: [0:20:57.3] Yeah, that's a really good point, really good example. So what that really suggests – and I think we said this a little bit in the first episode as well – is that it doesn't matter where the team is, what industry they're in, what they do -sports, military, industry - whatever it is, these rules do work. They do apply. Perhaps 'rules' is the wrong word, but they do work.

IJ: [0:21:19.8] Two things got me passionate about Kirton's walk. First of all it allowed me to make sense of the world. All of a sudden I was going, "Ah, now I understand." The second thing which built on the first is 'Now I have the power to predict.' It allows you to start to see patterns in human behaviour and because going back to the first thing – while times change, human behaviours don't, - you are then in a position to be more helpful to others.

So, for example now, the current popular press is very focused on successful innovation, and again it's survivorship bias in terms of the things selected to be talked about. One in ten entrepreneurial organisations are successful. Nine out of ten fail, but it's that one out of ten which is a brilliant star that we focus on. Yet when you come back to it, nearly all of the major impacts that come from the world of science have actually been founded on somebody who has been more adaptive, more cautious, more structured in a lot of their research.

I think, Curt, were talking about Edison and Tesla. Edison, by far the most productive. Our world is an Edison world. I don't have the exact date in front of me, but he's got almost more patents than any other individual in the US patent office. A very highly adaptive individual.

If you look at the first woman to get a Nobel prize, In fact she may even have had the first PhD in France. The first woman to get a Nobel prize. In fact, the first person to get two Nobel prizes in different sciences, was Marie Curie. Very adaptive in terms of the way that she was doing her work, all around the periodic table, going through it in a very, very structured way. But the interesting thing about Marie Curie is she was married to a very innovative husband. Her husband never finished his PhD, and in fact he was killed by looking the wrong way

down a road in Paris and hit by a horse and cart. Fairly typical innovative behaviour. Innovators tend to die young.

So one of the things that we need to do is to recognise that wherever your problem solving style lies on the spectrum, you have a role to play not only in terms of survivorship of the species, but also in terms of building your own self-fulfilment.

CF: [0:24:01.1] Yeah. I want to add something to what Iwan just said about the predictive nature of KAI. We can predict because we made something well and we have a good theory to back it up. KAI is a little bit different in its approach to looking at how people think differently because it's based on Adaption Innovation theory. Many learning style inventories out there, personality assessments out there, they're focused on Young's work or derivatives of Young's work, which is 'if I understand myself better, I can become a better person and a better leader and I also can learn more about you and choose to accept you or tolerate you.'

But Adaption Innovation theory is a bit different. When Kirton did his first study he was actually looking at how teams work together to change and the theory is built around that notion that different people solve problems differently. If I know my score and I know your score, I can predict how we interact with each other in managing change. And so there's a bit of difference here in how we use the KAI in the science of teams.

IJ: [0:25:17.2] I agree with that, and actually I've found – without it sounding like a parlour game – I have found a good way of getting a very crude understanding of 'is my preferred style relatively more innovative or relatively more adaptive?' It was actually given to me by Thomas Edison, not personally but it was given to me by Thomas Edison. Thomas Edison said, "Genius is one per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration." That's a very adaptive perspective on the world because adaptors just want to generally get their head down, work within the system, not make waves – which is why often they don't stand out because they just want to be part of the group and get things done.

The reverse of that of course is 'Genius is 99 per cent inspiration, one per cent perspiration.' It just comes to you like a gift from the Gods, your radical thinking. That's on the more innovative side.

If you believe, like Edison, that genius is one per cent inspiration and 99 per cent perspiration, then you may have a more adaptive style. If on the other hand, you believe that genius is one per cent perspiration and 99 per cent inspiration, that it comes down as a gift from a God, then you are more likely to have a preferred innovative problem solving style. Having this information helps you then be a better contributor to your problem solving group and more useful to your colleagues.

DH: [0:26:46.9] You've been listening to the KAI Foundation Five Podcast Part 2 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 3 of the KAI Foundation Five Podcast – ‘Driving Innovation’ will be along very soon, so please subscribe and keep listening.