

KAI FOUNDATION FIVE – PART 3 (Shorter)

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DH: [0:00:00.0] Welcome to Part 3 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 is used widely to create cohesive and productive teams and effective leaders. It's been in use for over 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.

Today's third part is entitled 'Welcome to the Land of the Big Idea – The Creative Innovators,' and in it we're going to be looking specifically at the role and effectiveness of leaders and team members on the more innovative end of the KAI inventory and how such people approach order and structure and why it's vital they understand and appreciate the creative adaptors in their teams.

My name is Dave Harries and joining me today I have two guests who know a thing or two about creative innovation and are going to help us to explore this topic. Our regular guest, Dr Iwan Jenkins, is a Toronto based KAI certified coach 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.

Michael Weissman is the CEO of SYNQY, a retail media platform for retailers that hate ads, where we works with global brands such as Unilever, Pepsi, Nestle and Starbucks. Amongst many other achievements, he's a published author in seven languages believe it or not! And has managed and successfully grown five different start-ups, and turned around existing businesses too, creating over \$700 million in revenue growth in the process. He also happens to be KAI certified, and I'm sure he won't mind me saying that he's well over on the innovative end of the KAI inventory.

Michael, thank you for joining us and good to see you again, Dr Iwan Jenkins. Why don't we start this one by getting Iwan to just tell us what is a creative innovator? Let's start at the beginning.

IJ: [0:02:14.0] Let's introduce this concept of the paradox of structure. The paradox of structure as explained by Kirton in his theory is structure is both enabling and limiting at the same time. What he described is that creative adaptors like to use a lot of structure, history of past successes, rules and regulations, processes, to solve their problems, whereas creative innovators prefer to have less structure. They want to think outside of the box. They don't want to be in their view shackled by processes, so they will be more exploratory and come up with novel ideas.

Everybody needs structure, but adaptors need more structure than innovators and innovators need very little structure at all. So one of the things we're going to find out today is how do high performing innovators use a minimal amount of structure to get things done?

DH: [0:03:10.9] Well, Michael, I think that's a challenge to you then from Iwan there. How do you get things done?

MW: [0:03:15.8] I think let's start with a mindset. I find experientially that the average innovator has a high level of ADV. So the innovator default mindset is to be all over the place in terms of where the mind goes. There aren't constraints on the mind in the average just observation of life. So now you find yourself in a situation where you've been given some structure. If you want to make an innovator sweat, give that person a form, make them fill out

something that has rules and structure because the brain isn't designed that way. The brain isn't designed to be constrained, and when you're given a task to solve a problem you will use the natural default mindset – which is to let your mind create associations that are not necessarily limited to the structure in which you were given.

So, one of the things that Kirton talked about is that structure is enabling for an adaptor and it's enabling for an adaptor because what it is doing is reducing uncertainty, it's reducing scope, it's binding the problem, but for the innovator it is reducing the ability to be able to answer the question honestly because if I know that I can come up with an answer outside of the paradigm, and you are limiting my ability to look at questions or things that are outside that structure, you are going to restrict me and I'm going to rebel against those restrictions.

So that plays a very big role because in the course of my mind wondering, I am making observations that maybe others aren't making. I'm finding patterns of behaviour that happen – if you see a leaf and you look at the structure of a leaf and you look at the structure of a coast line, and you say, "Oh, these are a similar pattern." They're completely random, but you can see the similarities, so you learn over the course of your life to trust your mind to go into places it doesn't otherwise go, and then use those insights to guide what you're trying to do.

So I think that when a person is tasked with a problem to solve, they tend to go the natural predisposition of the brain to solve the problem as the brain has grown up solving problems.

DH: [0:06:15.3] Would you say that there is a benefit to that approach? I guess you would say that because that is the approach you take, so in some ways it's a bit of a daft question but what I mean by that is – is there evidential benefit to society, to teams in general, of that type of approach?

MW: [0:06:37.7] Okay, so let me dispel a myth that you said. It is not a choice. Kirton would argue that it is very early constructions in people's brains and while he did not purposefully go very, very early into childhood discovery, he

really believes that it is something that's hard engrained. So it's not a choice. I don't choose to think in a way that an innovator thinks, I just do.

Now, do I think it is superior in certain circumstances? Again, I think that Kirton is dead on right in that we as executives trying to improve the cognitive diversity of our organisations have to think about what is the right skill set for the problem space being solved? The criteria that Kirton used – which I think is dead on right – is that in times of high certainty adaptors are vastly superior decision makers because innovators will create disruptions that are unhelpful. But in times of high uncertainty or threats from external environments, innovators are vastly superior, and so it is always challenging to think about who is the best to handle what task?

I would say since learning about this principle and applying it in my businesses, I'm very purposeful about that.

IJ: [0:08:19.7] The piece of gold there that we just dropped that I've not heard expressed so elegantly and lucidly before is if you impose too much structure on an innovator, it reduces their opportunity to answer the question honestly. It's a very useful piece of insight.

Michael also said that there's a predisposition that you are born with around what your preferred problem solving style is. This has been supported then by so called test, retest data. In other words, if I take the KAI when I'm 12 and I have a score let's say of 86, and then I take it again at 22, at 32, 42, 52, 62 and so on, the data suggests that my score will be 86 plus or minus five points. I've seen that in my practice as well, so your preferred score, your preferred way of solving problems doesn't change over time, but your displayed behaviour actually can be different.

So for example now, Michael we've heard has been involved with start-ups and turnarounds. That requires some level of attention to detail, some filling in of forms around mergers and acquisitions, loans and dispositions and so on. For that period of time, a high innovator like Michael will display more adaptive behaviour but it comes at a cost. The further an innovator or an adaptor goes away from their preferred score, the more expensive it is psychologically and you pay for it in terms of motivation and time.

What good leaders do is they set up conditions to allow individuals to be in their preferred way of working most of the time and only going out of it for the minimal amount of time.

DH: [0:10:17.9] I wonder whether we could talk a little bit now to look at some examples of some perhaps famous creative innovators and how they have operated and how they have been successful or otherwise, thanks to their style of problem solving.

MW: [0:10:31.5] You can look in all domains and you can see people who are high on the innovator scale. You can look at somebody like an Einstein, you can look at somebody like a Steve Jobs or a Tesla, you can look at people like Pablo Picasso. There's a whole range of folks in music, Stravinsky or whomever, who within their domain was less constrained. But the innovator can live in that domain that takes two concepts or more and starts to put them against each other and tries to out of that emerge something new.

I personally look at somebody like a Tesla as a high innovator and somebody like an Edison as a high adaptor. People are very confused by that because they think that innovation equals innovator, and I think that's a very dangerous think to look at. To me, the tell for Edison is the quote that says, "I tried it a thousand times and it didn't work right." What did he do? He tested, he adjusted, he tested, he adjusted, he tested, he adjusted. He tweaked and tweaked and tweaked and tweaked. That's not an innovator's approach. An innovator's approach maybe says, "I'm going to come at this from a different direction."

DH: [0:12:07.7] I wonder whether we could talk a little now about how innovators work with adaptors, because obviously the reality is that we're all in this world together, we're often all in teams together, and so we do have to make this work however different our approaches are to problem solving. What is that relationship? Can there be adaption without innovation? Can there be innovation without adaption?

MW: [0:12:34.9] Kirton would say of course there is. We call most of those companies failures. Kirton's perspective, which I think is dead on right, is that the complexity of the world is such and the dynamism of the world is such that

you need cognitive diversity, and that the greatest weakness – even in this moment in time where there is a lot of cultural bias or cultural diversity issues or discussion of cultural diversity – I have not found cultural diversity to be meaningful in the workplace. What I mean by that is that doesn't create problems and that doesn't solve problems. I would rather have cognitive diversity because that is very important to the health of the business.

One of the things that actually is undocumented in entrepreneurial theory that I've ever seen is that the growth and the maturity of the processes - you've got a company that's got about 100 employees and are really now starting to build processes – what actually disrupts the growth is not the creation of processes, but the people in power are typically more innovative than the people who need to build the process are more adapters. So you have this cognitive conflict between the two as you build the infrastructure for a stable operating business. And so this is one thing that you've got to deal with.

The second thing that you have to deal with is Kirton's idea of Problem B. if you haven't explained it previously, Problem A is the problem that people come together to solve. Problem B is the problem that emerges with people of different cognitive style coming together to solve Problem A.

His belief – and I have 30 something years of empirical validation – that Problem B is always bigger than Problem A. What makes a successful company is allowing the cognitive diversity and managing to enable the diversity, not fight against it.

What most adapters misunderstand is style and preference versus motive – that if I am really bad at filling out my expense report or I'm really bad at filling out my such and such report, it is not because I'm not lazy, it is not because I'm disorganised (although I might be), it is because it is very painful.

So I think that on the other side there is an insensitivity that says, "Hey, we're going to have this structure." The reality is you can have that structure, but you will end up pushing out the innovators. They will not succeed in that environment.

And so we have to recognise that a lot of social hierarchies within organisations are grounded in cognitive style way more than they are in political style, but you find the groupings come together because of cognitive style. You just talk the same way.

So I think that if you go in with the mindset that you're going to run a meritocracy, you want people on the range of cognitive style so that you can handle the diversity of problems that we need to solve. I think that one thing that is easy for us to fall into is this pejorative mindset of 'I'm more superior than you because I'm more of an x than a y.'" I think this is probably the most destructive thing.

DH: [0:16:34.3] Iwan, that's a really important point, isn't it? The understanding, the trust, the respect for people who have a different problem solving style is clearly vital, isn't it, to the success of an organisation?

IJ:: [0:16:45.4] It is, and I think what Michael is highlighting there is understanding how different people think and then using their strengths with your strengths if they are different, for mutual benefit, is core.

I just want to come back to something that Michael said earlier about the way that innovators are inventive versus the way adaptors are inventive. You can think of innovators almost as magpies. There's a myth around that everything that innovators do is all brand new, but it's novelty in its true form. In fact, most of the brand new things tend to be initially incurred by adaptors and then brought together by innovators.

So, for example, if you look at Steve Jobs. What Steve Jobs did was he basically took dots of existing technology, mouse, user interface and so on, took the dots of existing technology, existing structure and pulled them together in an unusual way, which was novel, and then he worked with adaptors then to solidify those links and expand and scale what had been made.

From a marketing perspective, instead of using a demographic around age or gender, he actually said maybe unconsciously, "My target audience is folks

with KAI scores of 115 and above. “ So the thing is then if you solve – and this is where it’s a fantastic commercial example of how Problem B was reduced. He actually started to make a brand that resonated with a preferred problem solving style of a portion of the market, and as a result of that got him a huge amount – huge amount of royalty because people were saying, “He’s one of us.”

And then when you start to see with the iPhone and so on basically going to mass market, those high innovators were rebellious. “We’re losing our brand.” It’s very interesting.

MW: [0:18:59.5] Yeah, it is. One of the things that people talk about is innovative thinking considered preferred? In America, for sure it is. You have Robin William standing on the top of the desk saying, “Carpe Diem.” Seize the Day. The innovator stereotype who’s very strong in American culture.

Go to Japan. It ain’t the same! I worked for the Japanese for almost a decade. The nail that sticks out gets hammered down. It’s not the same.

What Kirton said is the normal distribution was similar globally, but the cultures were awarded and punished one method over another as a cultural, sociological construct, not a psychological individual construct. So you look at places like Israel. I’ve done lots of work with Israeli companies. I’ve been involved in at least three Israeli start-ups and advised probably 50 over the course of my consulting career, and guess what you find in Israel which is considered a start-up nation and it’s considered high on the innovator scale? You find lots of adaptors. Lots and lots and lots of adaptors, some of the most adaptor oriented people are the people I met in Israel. So the culture may reward or brand or stereotype the iconoclast, but that’s not the world. That’s just the marketing of preference.

DH: [0:20:43.4 [So before we finish, I wonder whether we could just talk about how adaptors can make the most of their innovator colleagues. Michael, could you address that one for us first?

MW: [0:20:55.1] Three things. Number one, when asking them to give ideas, try to get them to focus on adaptive ideas because those are the ones that you’re

most likely to accept anyway, but be open to a flood of ideas. Focus on the adaptive ones, they can do it. That's number one.

Number two. Don't be so concerned in the method. Let them use whatever cognitive style and approach they wish to solve the problem,

Number three. If the innovator is coming to you with an observation and a worry, and you don't understand, trust them because innovators see threats from outside the system. Adaptors see threats to the system. Both are useful, but if you are oblivious to the threats from outside the system because you don't have that world view and somebody comes and says that threat is happening, maybe that threat is not to the degree that the person says it is but don't dismiss it. Trust them a little bit and you might be protected from a divergent, unexpected threat.

As a student of history, there's rarely been a historical event that somebody did not predict. Very rarely, but the person who predicted it was not in power and was not listened to.

DH: [0:22:27.1] Iwan, have you got anything to add to that?

IJ: [0:22:29.3] So, three things. Number one, remember that if you're relatively more adaptive, remember that your relatively more innovative colleague is the same as you. They want to be involved in problem solving and they want to be valued for their contribution. So that's an important thing. They're not a foreign beast.

Number two. Relax. You'll find that innovators, their idea waist line will expand but it will eventually shrink back down to stuff that can be used. So just give them a bit of space because they need space to be able to think.

And finally, don't be afraid to slay their ideas because whilst we adaptors may have fewer ideas and they're more likely to be usable first time around, innovators are quite the reverse. They have a production line of ideas and they don't mind if you slay them, destroy them, because there are more coming along. So don't be afraid to critique your colleagues.

MW: [0:23:30.1 I would add, but be wise. What do I mean by that? Separate the idea from the issue behind the idea. When an innovator comes up with an idea that seems way out of the box, seek to understand what is the problem that you believe this solves and you might be surprised because as an innovator what you're doing in your mind is you're doing scenario planning. When I do this, I don't live with today. I live anywhere between 10 to 20 years from now. That's where my average day is. I'm always thinking about – 'if I do this, that leads to that. That leads to that, that leads to that' - and I'm 10, 15 steps, 20 steps down that road.

I see if we continue down this path, we're going to face this issue. So when I go and solve a problem, I'm solving a problem that's a residual fact two, three, five years down the road that you don't even know exists. And so if you just look at the idea and you don't understand what the idea was trying to overcome, you will not understand the real important thing.

The innovator will come up with another idea. Iwan's completely right about that. We're factories, we manufacture ideas a million times a second. It doesn't matter to us if you say no to the idea. What matters to us is you understand the underlying circumstance we're trying to get around. That's the thing that I'm going to fight hard about. Don't you understand this threat is coming from here? Or if we continue down this path we're going over a cliff? That's the thing that I'm going to fight for. The specific idea, the recommendation to overcome the problem, I'm much less concerned with, and that's a very important distinction.

DH: [0:25:26.7] You've been listening to the KAI Foundation Five Podcast – 'Welcome to the Land of the Big Idea – The Creative Innovators' with our special guests, Dr Iwan Jenkins and Michael Weissman.

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 4 of the KAI Foundation Five Podcast Series – 'Welcome to the Land of Getting Things Done – The Creative Adaptors' will be along very soon. So please subscribe and keep listening.