

IDEO CEO Tim Brown: T-Shaped Stars: The Backbone of IDEO's Collaborative Culture

By **morten t. hansen** - January 21, 2010

IDEO is a world-leading design firm, with offices in Palo Alto, San Francisco, London, Boston and Shanghai, among other places. Consistently ranked as one of the most innovative companies in the world, IDEO is famous for its method of innovation based on intense cross-disciplinary project work. To pull this off, the company has long practiced the art of collaboration and the development of a certain kind of talent: T-shaped people.

In the interview to follow, IDEO CEO Tim Brown talks about this radically different approach to talent management.

What's a T-shaped person?

T-shaped people have two kinds of characteristics, hence the use of the letter "T" to describe them. The vertical stroke of the "T" is a depth of skill that allows them to contribute to the creative process. That can be from any number of different fields: an industrial designer, an architect, a social scientist, a business specialist or a mechanical engineer. The horizontal stroke of the "T" is the disposition for collaboration across disciplines. It is composed of two things. First, empathy. It's important because it allows people to imagine the problem from another perspective- to stand in somebody else's shoes. Second, they tend to get very enthusiastic about other people's disciplines, to the point that they may actually start to practice them. Tshaped people have both depth and breadth in their skills.

Can you give an example of empathic behavior?

For instance, in brainstorming sessions, good brainstormers build on other people's ideas. So if I throw an idea out at the brainstorm, you won't immediately throw out your own competing idea; you will look at my idea and say, "Well, if I build on that, here's my idea that builds on your idea." This requires active listening. That's one form of empathy.

Many CEOs reward individual contributors, so-called I-shaped people, who have a depth of skill but who are not necessarily collaborative. What's wrong with that?

Most companies have lots of people with different skills. The problem is, when you bring people together to work on the same problem, if all they have are those individual skills-if they are I-shaped-it's very hard for them to collaborate. What tends to happen is that each individual discipline represents its own point of view. It basically becomes a negotiation at the table as to whose point of view wins, and that's when you get gray compromises where the best you can achieve is the lowest common denominator between all points of view. The results are never spectacular but at best average.

What if people only have the crossbar of the T-they're very collaborative but don't have a real skill to contribute?

It's just as bad. Somebody who's just got the cross of the T-it's an empty experience. In our environment, we're only effective if we get things done. We have to design things. Much of that is based on people using their individual skills to

get things done, whether it is prototyping or engineering something. Occasionally, we have people who don't really have a depth of skills, and they really struggle. They don't get respect from the group.

But as a CEO, can't you run an organization with I-shaped people and then some "integrators" who bring it all together?

There is a role for people like that. Think of professional facilitators. They are very good at stitching a conversation together without necessarily contributing to it. But if you have a company full of T-shaped people, you don't need the facilitator, because everybody can do it anyway.

Let's take a look at the various ways a CEO can foster T-shaped behaviors. Getting the right people to begin with seems crucial. How do you screen recruits?

The reality is that when people come out of school, they're often I-shaped. Our challenge, and anybody's challenge who is looking to use this idea to collaborate, is to look for people where there is a nascent T-shaped potential.

How do you detect that in the interview process?

You see it right away when meeting them. That's why you can't judge just on their resume. You see it in terms of how they talk about other people they collaborate with. When you sit down with somebody and ask them about what projects they have done, and all they talk about is what they have done, that's a problem. The right person for us will talk about how other people have helped them do what they have done. There is some evidence there of empathy, collaboration and interest in working with other people.

Also, you obviously look for evidence of working on team projects, even if it's at school. One of the reasons we take so many people from the D-school [The Hasso Plattner Institute of Design] at Stanford is because they are being taught to be T-shaped.

Let's face it: Hiring T-shaped people is more complex than hiring I-shaped people. The more complex your requirements are for people, the more contact you need with these people before you hire them. That's why intern programs are crucial. We have lots of interns to get to know them before hiring.

Many CEOs are asking, how can a leader find out whether an employee is good at collaboration? Do you ask peers?

To some degree it is about asking. But I think you need to have some evidence. For instance, if someone is a really popular member of a project team here, when people are always trying to get them assigned to their project, that's a pretty good clue that they are good at their content and that they are also collaborative.

Also, we have a Web 2.0 knowledge system; it has wikis, blogs, pages for people, projects and clients. We look to see how people are participating in that system: Are they publishing their thoughts? Are they contributing to others in different

places? You start to accumulate evidence of how people are acting.

How do you review progress and decide to promote a T-shaped person?

We don't have a "T-shaped grade," we're not that explicit. We have an ongoing 360-degree review approach. We're asking: How have they developed their skills in content? How have they developed their skills in collaboration? How have they developed their skills in communication of their ideas? And what's the evidence of that?

What happens if someone is deficient in collaborative behaviors at IDEO?

We try to make it so that they will self-select and leave the company. They usually do because they get so frustrated. We have had people at IDEO who are stars in their chosen discipline, really truly talented. But in the end, they have gotten frustrated enough about how we require them to collaborate that they end up taking their talent somewhere else. And that's fine by us. At any given moment here, there is some percentage of people who are incurable I-shaped people, but they are not necessarily the people who stick around here for 20 years-not even five years.

But if the noncollaborative people do stick around, do you ask them to leave?

We don't have a lot; they are in the single digits in a given year. There are two reasons why you ask them to leave. Either they are so intolerant in their inability to collaborate- that doesn't happen too often because we're reasonably good at screening them on the way in-or they are not getting deeper and stronger in their talent, the vertical part of being T-shaped.

What are some companies you have seen that get collaboration and the notion of T-shaped behaviors, even if they may not use the term explicitly?

Procter & Gamble, Nike, Apple, to mention a few. They know what they are about, and they collaborate around that.