



Ignition Teams:

Rising to the Challenges of Innovation

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Teams that pursue innovation are faced with a difficult task – delivering big goals beyond their initial reach, confronting significant unknowns, developing capabilities they don't have at the outset of their journey, and inspiring others outside the team to change the way they think and act.

Such tasks make it impossible to rely solely on the strengths of a good executive – industry expertise, strategic planning, resource management, stakeholder alignment. While these skills are helpful, they are unlikely to enable a team to craft a path where none yet exists. Tasks of managing and tasks of creating are too different to allow for a smooth transition.

In our experience, the team is the real hero here. The work of achieving a big goal in the face of severely limited resources and knowledge necessarily extends beyond any single individual's capacity. In our work with start-ups, corporations,

and foundations, we've come to call groups built to face such tasks "ignition teams." Deep insights, industry-defining innovations, and well-timed strategies are powerless if they aren't executed by a team capable of productively confronting the uncertainty, tension, and promise that is the essence of any novel venture.

In this article, we distill five balancing acts that ignition teams need to navigate, which together can spell the difference between breakdown and breakthrough. Executives who design for and pay attention to these key aspects of the innovation work are much more likely to have the right team doing the right work for the right reasons – and thereby increase the chances of success.

1. Diverse Team with a Common Commitment

Ignition teams face problems that can't be solved through a single way of thinking. It is critical to select people that bring a diverse set of strengths, perspectives, and experiences to bear on the challenge at hand. Like any traveler preparing for a trip into the unknown, ignition teams need a diverse set of general tools to survive and thrive.

Scott Page, who applies the science of complex adaptive systems to the study of diversity, describes five types of cognitive diversity that team members can bring to bear: information, knowledge, heuristics, representations, and models/ frameworks.⁴ For teams that maximize cognitive diversity across these dimensions, chances of finding a path forward increase exponentially.

While it would be easy to conclude that maximizing diversity is the right approach, diversity also requires increased time spent on alignment, communication, and negotiation—and too much diversity can make it hard for the team to cohere in the right way. It's key to balance cognitive diversity with strong shared commitments, values, and a level of personality fit that ensures productive relationships. Testing for this strong shared commitment is often done

best just by evaluating a member's desire to join an ignition team, since the inherent risk also serves as an excellent test of the depth of commitment.

2. Collective Intelligence Without Groupthink

The right diversity doesn't generate value in itself; it simply supplies the ingredients. In some contexts, leaders can apply a "Swiss army knife" approach, encountering challenges sequentially and choosing the right blade for each by calling upon a team member with the requisite skills and knowledge. Ignition teams aren't generally like this. The kind of expertise most relevant at any given point may not be obvious. Different strengths and perspectives may need to be integrated to deliver something more than the sum of their parts.

Collective intelligence, to build on a useful formulation from James Surowiecki, demands a range of perspectives—team members see things that others don't—as well as a broad set of specialized skills and local knowledge. Individual team members need to think with enough independence to actively bring these "building blocks" to the table and keep in the fray until the best of their perspectives have been incorporated,

addressed, or thoughtfully set aside. These inputs then can be integrated or (more frequently) transformed to yield a solution that none of the members of the team could see when the work began. In other words, innovation requires discussion.

Integration efforts need to be balanced with the avoidance of groupthink. Frequently, the best way to ensure that the team avoids converging too easily on a flawed solution is to encourage criticism, fact-based perspectives, and dissent. Again, this could be either the role of a leader or built into a process with specific roles (e.g., "red teaming"). It may seem that ignition teams are already confronted with challenges too great to allow for much internal dissent. But testing and sharpening the concepts is actually the cheapest and fastest way to avoid much bigger mistakes.

3. Bias for Action, but Room for Reflection

The goals of an ignition team live beyond the specific paths of action its team members can visualize at the outset of the journey. That means that ignition teams can't plan their way to success. Instead, they must apply a bias for action, taking steps to unlock discoveries—new insights, new capabilities, new or transformed relationships—that bring the team closer to achievements previously out of reach. The bias for action is crucial as ignition teams navigate this white space, largely driven by their own momentum.

However, while intense focus on the best next action now is essential, it isn't sufficient. Just as much, ignition teams need a discipline of frequent reflection to confront the big gap between their

current trajectory of progress and what the goal requires. Confronting this gap openly and directly leads both to decisions about the best available actions to advance the ball—even if those actions likely aren't good enough—and to focused, alert receptivity to the serendipitous connections and insights that might enable a breakthrough.

Good teams balance these two modes: iterating deliberately to make advances, working session by working session, and getting as specific as we can about where we're stuck or need new insights in a way that maximizes the likelihood we'll see things that we don't know exactly how to look for. Holding each of these modes in balance drives consistent "local progress" toward the bigger goal.

4. Dynamic Cohesion

Ignition teams are by nature stressful. They need both to sustain intensity of focus on the immediate horizon of action, while also staring at the painful gaps between what they know how to do and what the ultimate goal demands of them. Most things are harder than they look. Most things don't work. Some things that work are the product more of luck than skill. Faced with this, teams can lose both their heart and their head.

At an emotional level, individual team members and the team as an organic unit need to balance passionate optimism and resolve ("we must and will achieve the goal") with a sober, skeptical confrontation of the current position ("we're not yet achieving the goal and haven't addressed these gaps").

To absorb such emotional stresses, ignition teams need to create conditions for resilience: strong mutual relationships of respect, trust, and accountability. At the same time, they can't gloss over conflicts or fall into compromises with one another that compromise the goal. Situations in which there's a readily available compromise that suits the many interests at stake and constraints in play don't require ignition teams at all. Dynamic cohesion lives right at the boundary between a team that splinters and a team that allows itself to become comfortable too easily or too soon.

5. Lean Out and Lean In

Ignition teams need to influence the broader corporate system to achieve their own goals. They need resources and knowledge they don't have, which can only be generated in partnership with other actors. In order to "ignite," they have to get the organization to act differently. Successful ignition teams lean out: teasing out the signal from the noise of what they hear from constituents, then understanding what this signal implies they must deliver in order to obtain the commitments they need.

Ignition teams often experience a rhythm of moving back and forth between leaning in to develop a powerful idea, leaning out to test what it will take to forge the partnerships required to realize the idea's potential, leaning in to resolve the challenges and contradictions that these complex needs imply, and so on. Michael Arena and Mary Uhl-Bien write elegantly about the importance of "adaptive space"—a bridge space between pockets of entrepreneurial activity and the core of the organization that allows new ideas to be shared and tried, and connects these new ideas to possible sponsorship in the larger organization.

Conclusion

In sum, ignition teams face a set of unique teaming tasks:

- They need diverse team members but can't specify required skills in advance.
- Members need to consistently align and iterate, and yet keep their independence.
- They need to do the work they can't yet plan for.
- They need to absorb significant stress and tension yet also challenge each other constantly.
- They need to be open to the organization but stay integrated.

Whether through process or through experience and intuition, successful ignition teams practice the art of balancing. To build and run such a team requires a set of habits and approaches uncommon in most organizations – and requires team members to unlearn at least as much as they need to learn. If they are successful in maintaining these balances, they will not only move the organization towards innovation but also experience the formative experience of being a part of a “real team”, successfully confronting a seemingly impossible task.

About Incandescent

Incandescent is a strategy consulting and venture development firm. We advise leaders, develop our own ventures, and conduct research. As advisors, we serve CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in financial services and across a range of other industries, founders of early- and growth-stage ventures, and visionary leaders in social sector organizations.

In our work with a wide range of business leaders, we endeavor to help them chart an extraordinary path – charting new territory, embracing new goals over long time horizons, shaping strategy iteratively over time. This extraordinary path requires both leaders and teams to grow in fundamental ways, to define and acquire new capabilities, and to develop a new constellation of practices rather than relying on best practices. Our work with clients often centers around building strategy for these kinds of challenges, and helping clients chart a path to large, ambitious goals over multiple time horizons.