



# Ignition Teams: Rising to the Challenges of Innovation

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**A**n entrepreneur assembles a founding team that will help realize her vision and balance her blind spots. A corporate executive selects the right mix of internal executives and external hires to explore a radically novel direction for their company. An industry titan starts a foundation to tackle an intractable global problem. While at first their respective situations look different—their budgets, modes of working, and complexity of operations span orders of magnitude—their challenges are fundamentally similar.

In our work with start-ups, corporations, and foundations, we've come to call groups built to face such tasks "ignition teams." These are teams that pursue big goals beyond their initial reach, requiring them to confront significant unknowns, develop capabilities they don't have at the outset of their journey, and inspire others outside the team to change the way they think and act. Howard Stevenson defined entrepreneurship as *the pursuit of opportunity without regard to resources currently controlled*<sup>1</sup>—and, we might add, without regard to knowledge one currently possesses, since a key part of this work is crafting a path where none yet exists.

Great advancements are often attributed to exceptional individuals—scientific geniuses, catalytic political leaders, extraordinary entrepreneurs. While such individuals are certainly important, in our experience these leaders more often than not rely on the collective intelligence of a closely-knit team to turn their vision into reality.

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. Such a task requires what Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith call a "real team"—a fortuitous combination of skills, perspectives and experiences of a set of accomplished individuals within a real-time collective effort.<sup>2</sup> Since there are significant process costs to aligning large groups of people, such a group has to be kept fairly small—J. Richard Hackman's recommendation is that teams comprise a low number of people for the optimal combination of maximum diversity with minimal process losses.<sup>3</sup>

In our work shaping entrepreneurial endeavors, we've repeatedly experienced the importance of teaming well. 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. Multifaceted problem-solving requires a *diverse team with a common commitment*. Diverse skills and perspectives don't create value by themselves. The team needs an effective discipline to achieve *collective intelligence without groupthink*. This discipline can be drawn from a leader acting as the "master integrator," a schema that orchestrates the team toward the goal (e.g., design sprints), or a process that creates enough iterative loops for the team to refine their way to a big advance. Whatever the source of discipline, ignition teams need to stay at the intersection of *bias for action but room for reflection*, neither paralyzed by the gap between what they know how to do and what they need to achieve, nor getting distracted from the real goal by frantic doing. Through the stress and challenge of the work, the ignition team must sustain *dynamic cohesion*, uniting behind the goal without letting the wrong kind of harmony blunt their edge. As the team builds the partnerships outside its circle needed to achieve big goals, they need to *lean out and lean in*, metabolizing opportunities to be seized and external conditions to be surmounted, while persevering as a team to break through the dilemmas that those competing demands and constraints present.

## 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.

Most creative ideas represent the fusion of two or more

precedents that already exist but haven't been brought together before in pursuing a specific outcome. The broader the collective experience set, the more combinatorial potential exists in the intersections between team members. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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

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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.

When a leading apparel company asked us to help them build a team that would shape and lead their efforts to become design-centric, we approached this task as a team selection problem. We helped select a team strongly committed to design and innovation and sought demonstration of their willingness to put in time and effort into this work at the expense of many other activities they had as senior leaders in their organizations. We carefully selected people from across different brands, different design and innovation disciplines, as well as senior business leaders across a set of functions. This team rapidly identified key challenges, shaped a path forward, and built organizational momentum, drawing on a holistic understanding of design imperatives and organizational context in a way that was both aspirational and realistic.

## 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

There are three basic ways to design for this critical and sometimes seemingly ineffable work of synthesis.

- **Leader as integrator:** In this model, it is fundamentally the work of the leader to bring together a multitude of inputs into one big advance. The leader, in this conception, is like the conductor of an orchestra: unable to achieve the goal without the musicians, but playing the role of the master integrator.
- **Schema as integrator:** In this model, there's a schema for the work that guides the group to integrate in the right ways at critical moments. In this conception, the group relies on the process to do the “weaving,” rather than on any one individual. Design sprints are one common example of this kind of schema.
- **Compounding iteration:** In this model, the team works through many, many iterative loops. Knowing that no loop can be relied upon to drive the required magnitude of progress, the team relies upon the high compound probability of a big advance over many attempts.

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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.

In our work with a leading foundation tackling U.S. youth unemployment by bringing employers to the table as partners and problem-solvers, we integrated the foundation's deep understanding of the problem space with a view of the diverse challenges their grantees were facing on the ground. This ground-level, “through the eyes of a grantee” view helped us constructively challenge the operational feasibility of early proposed solutions. Initially, this form of challenge increased differentiation and divergence on the team. Over time, however, we succeeded in building a deep, shared understanding

that created clarity about the best path forward, avoiding a set of costly investments that would have been unlikely to lead to our desired outcome.

### 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.

At Incandescent, we frequently break down the path toward a major strategic goal into a set of eras, each of which has its own internal logic. At the outset, the eras beyond the current one will look somewhat vague, serving mostly as conceptual placeholders. Yet, they allow us to usefully break down a faraway goal into a set of actions that can be pursued immediately, in pursuit of objectives which are already within reach, while remaining cognizant of the future eras that will need to be reached.

One of the ventures in our portfolio has built a platform technology that promises to change how people experience information on the screens they use in their living rooms, in their offices, and out in the world. A technical milestone in the development of cloud computing created an opening for the small team spearheading the development of this company (a combination of the technical founder and a set of outside advisors and investors) to accelerate the work of forming the partnerships required to compete as a “David” in a space dominated by “Goliaths.” Seizing the window of opportunity required a rapid back and forth between making the most of the opportunities this core team could generate, both to make progress and to surface clues about what it would take to break through (“bias for action”) and assembling a realistic, often sobering picture of what would truly be required, in terms of partnerships, capital, talent, and so on to compete at the level required (“bias for reflection”).

Over a few months, these two perspectives converged, and the venture was able to ink strategic investment from one of



the major semiconductor companies. This represents a powerful first link in the chain toward achieving the very big vision. The team switched fully into action mode as this deal came into view, moving back into the mode of reflection with the deal closed. The remaining links in the chain, now that much nearer to view, are still to be envisioned and forged.

#### 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.

To accomplish this, teams need a chance to settle. Human relationships of trust and mutual accountability require a passage of time and experience, and changing the team too frequently disrupts this, as Hackman notes.<sup>5</sup> Venture capital investors often focus on the strength of bonds between co-founders and their joint track record as the best predictor of their ability to sustain the difficulties that are sure to come.

It's also important to balance what Chester Barnard calls

"effectiveness" (is the team progressing toward the goal?) with "efficiency" (are the needs of the members sufficiently addressed to keep them on board?).<sup>7</sup> This balance can feel easy when everyone is confident the goal can be achieved. Everyone's happy to be part of a team's imminent success. Ignition teams inevitably go through crises in which it isn't obvious that the goal *can* be achieved, which threatens the willingness of members to stay dedicated to the team and to commit the resources—time, imagination, relationships, capital, and so on—essential to the team's success. Ignition teams that confront and negotiate these potential impasses stay in the game. Those who do not can fly apart, or can become "teams in name only," in which the members don't bring to the table what they must in order for the ambitious goal to be achieved.

We had the privilege to be part of an ignition team that included funders and leaders of four organizations focused on the ambitious goal of increasing more than tenfold the number of young Americans performing a year of service. As we confronted the barriers standing in the way of achieving this goal, there was great temptation to make the wrong compromise: articulating a strategy that wasn't ambitious enough to achieve the goal or couldn't be implemented, or making small modifications to the work of the existing organizations and bringing funders on board for incremental investment. Instead, a small core team faced up to a hard truth: that it would take a dramatically better-resourced organization to have any shot at achieving this ambitious goal, beyond what any of the four chartering members of the alliance could plausibly achieve. This led to difficult work, over several months, through which the organizations together came to the view that they needed to form a stronger whole. Three of the four organizations merged to become the Service Year Alliance, a single entity positioned to lead the field to a new level.

The barriers to a merger were significant—commitments to each organization's mission, concerns of their boards, and so on—and this step forward toward the larger goal was only possible through careful work to ensure that Chester Barnard's considerations of efficiency (could the needs of each actor be addressed just enough, without undermining what was needed for the new organization as a whole to be positioned for success) were addressed at each step along the way. Mergers among non-profits are rare not because there aren't great opportunities for mergers to advance big missions in the social sector, but because it is so rare for a team of people to sustain dynamic cohesion all the way from conceptualization to realization: staying together in pursuit of the big goal, while doing the hard problem solving and hard negotiation involved in addressing the many constraints and pitfalls along the way.

#### 5. Lean Out and Lean In

Ignition teams need to advance a broader 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 world to act differently: investors, customers, legislators, judges, journalists—whoever the key constituencies are who hold

keys to the doors that must be unlocked along the way to the goal.

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. Teams inevitably face the temptation of “deciding they’re right” and persisting on the fuel of this conviction, without even getting close to signing up the critical stakeholders on whom their success ultimately depends.

Success, however, is never a matter simply of understanding the needs and demands of others and saying yes. When all the needs and demands—both those that flow from the team’s own goal and the requirements of others—are heaped up on the table, they’re apparently impossible to fulfill together. The team must *lean in* to put together the puzzle pieces represented by everything the members have heard and learned, and with these pieces—and the new pieces they realize they must discover—figure out a way to escape the boundaries of what appeared possible at first.

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. This dance of leaning in and leaning out, when it goes well, creates a spiral of increasingly broad constellations of collaboration as the core ignition team progresses toward its goal. Michael Arena and Mary Uhl-Bien, focused on innovation inside large organizations, 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.<sup>8</sup>

In all of the examples we’ve explored here, the ignition teams each needed to create some form of adaptive space, creating a new “we” in the process of leaning out that could lean in together and solve for shared success. The Rockefeller Foundation/Incandescent team working on youth employment, for instance, needed to create such a “we” with change agents inside several large corporations, with members of the Obama administration shaping the First Jobs Compact, with other funders building the 100,000 Opportunities Coalition, and many others. Crucially, the work required not only *forming* each “we” but determining how the opportunities and challenges encountered in each of these contexts—often pointing in apparently contradictory directions—could be integrated into a coherent body of work to define and promote impact hiring.

## 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 world but stay integrated.

The challenge of innovation presents not just difficulties but impasses and dilemmas. This is the terrain ignition teams confront.

Whether through process or through experience and intuition, successful ignition teams practice the art of balancing. They wrest coherent, elegant advances from diverse ideas deeply in tension with one another. They stay together, cohesive in their commitment to a shared goal, even as they step into the conflict that inevitably flows from competing ideas and disparate interests. They move back and forth between the tactical work of today and reflection on what could advance goals far beyond their current reach. They lean in and lean out, expanding the “we” advancing their work as they engage the world and as they work through the divergent needs and issues this broader “we” presents.

What innovation demands is not, of course, a recipe—but a pattern. What forms that pattern takes is what each ignition team must discover, each in its own crucible. ■■

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