Agile Innovation Emergent Teams: How do they do it?

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Agile Emergent Innovation Teams are groups of individuals - who have different perspectives, little shared experience, and little familiarity with each other - who are able to come together emergently to quickly solve a problem innovatively. Such teams are becoming an increasingly important postmodernist organizational structure as environmental turbulence and market-based boundaries become increasingly complex.

Organizations able to consistently employ such teams over time in responding to and anticipating turbulence develop dynamic capabilities that enhance their competitiveness. Groups in open source development, disaster response, new product development, and internal corporate strategizing often act as agile emergent innovation teams to be able to leverage the opportunities provided by mass collaboration technologies, virtual collaboration technologies among geographically dispersed, and global commerce. Without the preconditions of most innovative teams such as shared work practices and common ground, such teams run the risk of having great difficulties in quickly innovating.

We are just beginning an exploratory investigation to study these teams and their characteristics that allow individual successes to be transferred to other teams within the same organization over time. We continue to iterate our theory development as we spend time in the field. As of the time of this abstract, we have developed a theoretical framework for explaining how these teams create innovative solutions: a) the use of artifacts that have been structured to help team members engage each other in the type of mutual learning process that sets the stage for innovative breakthroughs, b) coupling the artifacts with a set of proactive experimentation-oriented behaviors, and c) a team adaptation process in which boundaries between parties are continuously oscillating, which create the need for new artifacts and reflection, which in turn create the need for turning the artifacts into decisions and actions. Emergent team members will begin their work together with these characteristics chaotically organized, i.e., different members will have different artifacts, behaviors, and adaptation processes suited for different personal views of the critical boundaries to be crossed. As boundaries are crossed (as between the team and the client; or between different team members; or between different problem reframing) and re-crossed and provided the artifacts, behaviors, and processes are sufficiently precise, team members will be forced to observe discrepancies between the members, which will induce the creative problem-solving required. The more frequently these boundaries are crossed, the more quickly the teams will be able to innovate. As of the time of the presentation, we will be able to illustrate our framework based on interviews with a well-known auto-design center and several new product development teams.