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Think Tank Leadership: How Smart CEOs Build Brains, Not Hierarchies

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As AI accelerates business complexity (https://www.success.com/generative-ai-advertising-strategy/), leaders need collective intelligence—not top-down control—to make better, faster decisions. Traditional

hierarchies are out, and collaboration, critical thinking and collective foresight are in.

More companies are opening communication channels by setting up brain trusts, a concept introduced by Ed Catmull, co-founder of Pixar and co-author of *Creativity, Inc.*, to encourage more productive team feedback, solve complex problems and anticipate disruption. Here we explore what it means to have a brain trust for CEOs, benefits of brain trusts and how to create a brain trust in your company.

What is a brain

trust?

"A brain trust is built on the idea that decisions are better when you tap into the collective knowledge and unfiltered opinions of a group," says Tim Berney, CEO of VI Marketing and Branding (https://www.vimarketingandbranding.com/). It's really about getting beyond one person's perspective and drawing on the wisdom of many.

"You bring together a small group of leaders, each with their own experience and point of view, to dig into a specific challenge," explains Berney. "The goal isn't just to give advice. It's to help the person asking the question to see new angles and possibilities they might not have

considered on their own." The best type of brain trust for a business involves building a diverse group of individuals from across the organization, regardless of title or hierarchy.

What benefits do brain trust sessions provide?

A brain trust helps the team make more informed, effective decisions for the business. "One person brings [a challenging] question to the group, and instead of trying to solve it, everyone shares insights, examples and ideas that help expand the way you're thinking

about it," explains Berney. The benefits result from considering diverse perspectives throughout the decision-making process. "It's not about everyone agreeing; it's about everyone contributing. When you build that kind of dynamic, you start to see problems and opportunities from angles you would've missed on your own," he adds.

Brain trusts also help members widen their networks, creating opportunities for new [partnerships (https://www.success.com/how-to-create-strategic-partnerships/)](https://www.success.com/how-to-create-strategic-partnerships/) and resources. They also offer a level of emotional or moral support when everyone on the team shares their challenges, ideas and successes in order to learn and grow. "Everyone's

there to be honest—to share what's really happening and to help each other think better," Berney says. "There's a real level of vulnerability in that. You have to show up as your full self, be generous with what you know and [be] just as willing to listen as you are to speak."

 At NU Media, for example, an internal brain trust model "flattens hierarchy and amplifies the collective intelligence" of the team, leading to the best solutions possible. "Every major campaign… starts with a cross-department 'innovation council' of strategists, designers and data analysts," says Ada Hu co-founder and CEO of NU Media (https://www.nu.marketing/). "This

structure helps us identify opportunities faster and avoid blind spots that come from top-down decision-making....” says Hu. “By empowering emerging leaders (https://www.success.com/next-generation-leader/) to challenge ideas and co-create strategies, we’ve strengthened both innovation and retention.”

How the brain trust model is helping to solve complex problems

The future of leadership (https://www.success.com/values-of-a-good-leader/) isn’t about

control. Instead, transparency and input are creating the conditions for teams to solve complex problems together, says Berney. Members of a brain trust from various departments, levels, skillsets and backgrounds work together to engage and brainstorm in order to determine the most effective solution possible.

"Instead of everyone staying in their own lane, they're forming small, cross-functional groups…" explains Berney. "You'll have someone from operations, someone from creative, someone from data, all looking at the same challenge from different angles…. More and more leaders are moving away from silos because

they see that transformative ideas happen when people challenge and inspire each other's thinking."

Brain trusts can also be valuable when trying to anticipate disruptions in the market, such as AI growth. "Brain trusts are a reminder that the best solutions often come from people—not just from asking a tool like ChatGPT," says Berney. He believes that we all have blind spots, especially when the market is changing so quickly, and it's beneficial to discuss these concerns as a group.

"Having others shine a light on what you're not seeing allows you to plan ahead and better manage whatever is being changed or transformed."

This might look like identifying risks and opportunities about what will be disrupted, such as increased automation or job elimination, and what actions to take to adapt successfully.

Building a brain trust

Building an effective brain trust involves taking time to set goals, strategically plan and handpick brain trust members that will make the most out of this collaborative opportunity. Here is a step-by-step framework for forming an internal brain trust at your company:

1. Identify corporate goals and challenges that need the most attention.

2. Invite a diverse group of experts who have a mix of skills, experiences and perspectives to join the brain trust. "Start small: bring together five to seven people from different teams who think differently," suggests Hu.

3. Formalize the relationship by clearly outlining expectations, participation rules, roles and time commitment. "Create cross-functional teams where everyone has an equal voice, and make it safe to disagree," advises Berney.

4. Meet regularly in-person or virtually to establish a rhythm for the group. Hu recommends meeting every couple of weeks to review major initiatives or challenges.

5. Keep it fresh by rotating brain trust members every few months so new perspectives are considered, says Hu.

6. "Capture ideas: Use shared boards or AI tools to summarize and track decisions."

7. Try incorporating an AI brain trust to act as another 'chair in the room' by using ChatGPT, Gemini, Miro's AI, Notion AI

or other tools, but be careful to balance technology and people. "Let AI handle data, but rely on people for insight, creativity and context," recommends Hu.

8. Implement feedback for effective change. Be sure to celebrate ideas and wins, says Berney. "When people realize that insight matters more than hierarchy, that's when they

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