← These are Personality Poker® cards.

Each suit stands for a different way of thinking.
The book, and this manifesto, are built on that idea.

IS YOUR ORGANIZATION PLAYING WITH A FULL DECK?

Stephen M. Shapiro

The person who drove me the craziest turned out to be the one who saved my career.

A number of years back, I founded and led a 20,000-person process and innovation practice at the consulting firm Accenture. For my first project, I was given a $30 million budget. The magnitude of that number intimidated me, so I decided to bring on a co-leader to share the responsibility, and I chose my good friend John.

John and I got along great. We were two peas in a pod: imaginative, energetic, and people-focused. The chemistry was perfect, and we were sure it would lead to perfect results.

There are three things I can honestly say about this project:

1. We developed fresh and game-changing ideas that had never been explored before.

2. The team had a blast and loved us because we spared no expense.

3. It was a colossal waste of $30 million.

John and I were so focused on ideas and people that we forgot we needed to produce something of value. We had flip charts, whiteboards, and sticky notes everywhere, but we failed to deliver a product in a usable form.

It was a complete failure. No one on our leadership team cared enough about structure, deadlines, or execution. And when we pulled together the team, we brought on people similar to us.

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Then came my next project. My budget was cut to $6 million. This time, I didn't get to pick my co-leader. They gave me Ray.

Ray was a detail-oriented program manager. He lived for deadlines and schedules. Every day he asked, "Where's the deliverable?" "Why are we over budget?" "What's the status?"

As I am someone who likes flexibility and novelty, Ray drove me crazy. I could feel my blood pressure rising.

One day, I snapped and pulled him aside for lunch. After we sat down, I looked at him and said, "Ray, I don't like you." Without missing a beat, he shot back, "Steve, I don't like you either." We laughed. Then I said something that changed everything, a realization I had after the $30 million fiasco: "I may not like you, Ray. But I need you. I failed on my previous project because I didn't have someone like you."

That was the turning point.

For the next three hours, we talked about how we would drive each other crazy, the value each of us would bring, and how we could work together more effectively. He brought structure and kept me grounded. I brought creativity and loosened him up. We found a way to make it work so both of our needs were met.

The result of that appreciation and collaboration?

We launched a wildly successful program that was delivered to all 20,000 consultants in only nine months, and the impact lasted for years. We created a movement that got the company thinking about innovation and impact, not just software and implementation. That project became one of the proudest achievements of my career. People still talk about it nearly thirty years later.

We succeeded not *in spite* of our differences, but because of them. It wasn't because of me. I failed when I had a budget five times larger. Our success came from Ray and the magic we created together. The coworker who drove me crazy turned out to be the ace up my sleeve.

That's when it hit me. Most of us are not playing with a full deck. We are missing the perspectives that matter most.

THE COWORKER WHO DRIVES YOU NUTS IS YOUR UNFAIR ADVANTAGE

What if the coworker who drives you crazy is the most valuable person on your team?

Not valuable *despite* being annoying. Valuable *because* they think in ways that make you uncomfortable.

I've spent decades studying how organizations innovate, and I've seen the same pattern destroy performance at companies of every size, in every industry, and on every continent. It's not a talent problem. It's not a strategy problem. It's a thinking problem. And it's baked into the way most organizations operate.

Although you may have heard the expression "opposites attract," there is irrefutable scientific evidence that opposites don't attract. They detract. They repel. The reality is, birds of a feather flock together.

The people you find most difficult to work with are usually the people whose thinking styles differ most from yours. The analytical thinker gets frustrated by the touchy-feely people person. The action-oriented doer clashes with the big-picture dreamer.

Given this, what do most of us do? We hire people who fit the mold. But if you only hire people who fit the mold, eventually your organization will grow mold. Stale and musty ideas will prevail while the hidden gems remain uncovered.

We promote people who communicate like us, and then we wonder why our teams can't solve complex problems or generate breakthrough ideas.

We're not playing with a full deck. And in most cases, we designed it that way.

In most organizations, the missing cards are surprisingly predictable. We underweight one or more of four essential ways of thinking: people who imagine what could be, people who analyze what is true, people who focus on what others need, and people who push ideas into action. Innovation suffers when any one of those voices is missing, ignored, or crowded out by the others.

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CULTURE STARTS WITH CULT

I once worked with a logistics company that wanted to reinvent itself. Growth had stalled. We gathered the top twelve executives and did a simple exercise. I asked each C-level executive to pick one word from a list that represented what the company was good at and what it recognized and rewarded.

Then they picked a second word for what they weren't good at, what they didn't reward, and what not having it was costing them.

For the first word, everyone in the room chose action-oriented words: structured, systematic, or methodical. They were execution machines, process-driven and disciplined. And for the second word? Nearly all picked words related to creativity and open-mindedness. The one card that stood out most was "experimental." That was the wake-up call.

The culture excelled at execution and dealing with complexity. But it struggled with experimentation and ambiguity. They had never created the space or incentives for trying new things. That was the blind spot. Seeing what was missing allowed us to build programs to develop that muscle.

A strong culture can be an asset. It creates belonging and stability. But the word "culture" literally starts with "cult."

And when everyone thinks alike, acts alike, and rewards alike, you're closer to running a cult than a culture. Cults feel powerful. They create loyalty and identity. But they shut the door on difference, and that's when innovation fades. Over time, organizations hire, promote, and reward people who think the same and work the same.

I saw this happen at a major pharmaceutical company. The longtime CEO loved data and expertise, and his leadership team mirrored him. PhDs and number crunchers dominated. Every decision required endless analysis. It worked for a while. Then it didn't. When one of their drugs came off patent, the breakthroughs stopped coming. Creativity dried up. Progress stalled. So I ran an assessment on their top 100 leaders. Ninety-eight were "rational" thinkers. They had analysts in spades. What they lacked were "relational" thinkers: the people who connect dots others don't see, and connect people who wouldn't otherwise talk. The company had spent years hiring its way into a corner.

Most organizations treat different thinking styles as an individual awareness exercise. They run personality assessments, pin the results to a wall, and expect everyone to magically collaborate better. It doesn't work that way. You can't fix a systemic problem with individual awareness.

The real issue is that your culture, your meetings, your rules, and your hiring practices are all quietly filtering out the range of thinking you need. Not because anyone planned it, but because it's the natural result of systems designed by people who all think alike.

The challenge isn't getting people to understand their differences. It's redesigning your culture so those differences actually show up in the room.

And having all the styles on your team isn't enough. You need to create the right environment for everyone to thrive.

RULES MATTER MORE THAN ROLES

Most leaders focus on matching people to tasks. Designers design. Builders build. Creative people do the upfront thinking, and action-oriented people do the implementation. But this logic misses the real driver of performance.

It's not the task that matters. It's the environment.

When employees struggle, don't fix the person; fix the system.

A leadership course at Eckerd College in Florida proved this in an unexpected way. Managers in the program were tested to determine their style. The "innovators" thrived on doing things differently and breaking rules, whereas the "adapters" excelled at doing things better with structure and by following rules.

The managers were then split into teams for a problem-solving exercise. Each team had two groups: "designers," who created the solution, and "builders," who implemented it.

There were three setups:

- **Team One** used innovators as designers and adapters as builders.
- **Team Two** mixed both styles together in both roles.
- **Team Three** flipped it around, with adapters doing the design and innovators responsible for the build.

In addition, the design task was highly structured, with seven rules that had to be followed. The build task had almost no rules.

Which team do you think was most effective?

When I ask audiences this question, no one picks Team One. Yet that's how most organizations build teams. They put the creative people on the front-end work and hand everything off to the project managers.

Most people pick Team Two. It should work. It's the "full deck" approach, right? But Team Two was the least effective. They didn't have the tools to collaborate. Every time a creative idea surfaced, a structured mind shut it down. Every time a rule was proposed, a free thinker pushed back. Communication collapsed.

Surprisingly, Team Three won by a mile.

Why?

The adapters worked best in the structured design role, whereas the innovators thrived in the flexible build role, where there were almost no rules.

The lesson? When people are matched to the right environment, they excel. When they're dropped into the wrong one, they flounder.

Creative individuals prefer environments with little structure. They enjoy shaping the unknown. Process-oriented workers, on the other hand, perform best when the rules are clear. They thrive in structured environments.

It's not the task that matters. It's the environment.

When employees struggle, don't fix the person; fix the system.

Get this wrong and you frustrate everyone.

Put a creative person in a rule-bound process and they suffocate. Put a structured thinker in a wide-open space and they freeze.

Get it right, and the magic happens.

Too many companies match roles to traits: creative people brainstorm, structured people implement. It sounds logical, but it reinforces the silos that keep people from contributing beyond their default style. What if every task were designed with the right rules so everyone could contribute? Design brainstorming sessions with enough structure so analytical thinkers can shape how ideas get implemented. Design status meetings so they aren't a string of monologues, but real conversations where creative thinkers can push for better solutions.

THE INNOVATION PARADOX

Here's the paradox at the heart of all of this: the drive to optimize for efficiency is one of the biggest killers of innovation and growth.

When you optimize a team for efficiency, you get people who think similarly, work similarly, and approach problems similarly. That's great for execution. It's terrible for figuring out what to execute next.

Innovation requires creative conflict. It needs someone to say, "Have we thought about this from the customer's perspective?" Another to say, "The data doesn't support that assumption." A third to ask, "What if we approached this completely differently?" And a fourth to say, "Let's stop talking and build a prototype."

None of those contributions is more valuable than the others. But most organizations have unconsciously decided that one or two are "how we do things here." That's culture. And it's why so many innovation programs fail.

Every stage of work needs a different kind of thinker. You need creative thinkers to spot the opportunity, analytical thinkers to validate it, people-focused thinkers to understand whether anyone actually wants it, and action-oriented thinkers to make it real. If you are missing any of these, great ideas die on the vine, or bad ones ship.

WHY AI MAKES THIS URGENT

Many think AI is reducing the need for human input. The opposite is true. Answers are now cheap and instant. Need data, a financial model, a marketing plan, a working prototype? You can generate it in seconds. The edge that used to come from knowing more or analyzing faster is evaporating. Soon every company will have access to the same capabilities.

So what's left? What will differentiate one organization from another when everyone can buy the same answers?

The human side. The parts no algorithm can replicate. How you interact with customers. How you read what the data doesn't show. How you decide which question to ask the machine in the first place. And how the people inside your organization collaborate, challenge each other, and turn raw capability into real results.

AI is just a tool, a powerful one. But like any tool, its value depends on who's wielding it. Put it in the hands of a team that all thinks alike, and all you get is mediocre decisions made faster.

Hand it to a team with the full range of thinking styles, and something different happens. The creative thinker uses AI to explore ten possibilities no one else would have considered. The analytical thinker uses it to pressure-test assumptions. The people-focused thinker uses it to understand customers more deeply. The action-oriented thinker moves from idea to execution faster than ever.

What will differentiate one organization from another when everyone can buy the same answers?

The human side.

The organizations that win the next decade won't be the ones with the best AI. Everyone will have the same tools. They'll be the ones whose environments let humans use those tools well.

Miss even one of the styles on your team, and you're not just leaving ideas on the table. You're giving up your only lasting source of differentiation. In a world of infinite answers, the companies that play with a full deck will thrive. The ones that don't will fade.

STOP FIXING PEOPLE. FIX THE SYSTEM.

If you're a leader reading this, here's the uncomfortable truth: your organization's performance ceiling is set by the range of thinking styles your culture allows to flourish.

You don't need another personality assessment or workshop on empathy. You need to look at your systems and ask a different set of questions.

Look at your hiring. Are you selecting for culture fit, or for cognitive contribution? Culture fit sounds positive, but in practice, it usually means "thinks like us." The teams that perform best aren't the ones where everyone gets along naturally. They're the ones where people have learned to harness their differences toward a shared goal.

Look at your environment. Are you using a one-size-fits-all approach? Or are you creating approaches that match the style of each worker and let everyone contribute to a variety of tasks?

Look at your innovation efforts. Do you have all of the styles on your team? If you are missing just one style, innovation will stall.

These aren't soft questions. They're strategic questions. And the answers will tell you whether your organization is playing with a full deck or leaving its best cards on the table.

Just like Ray was for me, the coworkers who drive you crazy might be critical to your success. But only if your organization is designed to let them play to their full potential.

Info

Ready to dig deeper into the book?

Buy a copy of You're Not Playing With a Full Deck.

Want copies for your organization or for an event?
We can help: customerservice@porchlightbooks.com
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephen M. Shapiro is the author of You're Not Playing with a Full Deck: Why the Coworkers Who Drive You Crazy Are Your Unfair Advantage. He founded and led a 20,000-person innovation practice at Accenture. He is a Hall of Fame speaker who has presented his counterintuitive perspectives on innovation in over 50 countries. His Personality Poker® system has been used by hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

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