SUCCESSFUL TEAM MEMBERS DON'T DO THE SAME THING AT THE SAME TIME. THEY DO THE RIGHT THING AT THE RIGHT TIME. AND WHILE TEAM MEMBERS WORK TOGETHER TOWARD A COMMON GOAL, INDIVIDUALS STILL MUST PLAY THEIR SEPARATE PARTS. AS ORGANIZATIONS RELY MORE AND MORE ON TEAMS TO INNOVATE, PROBLEM-SOLVE, PRODUCE, AND COMPETE AT THE SPEED OF CHANGE, UNDERSTANDING AND CAPITALIZING ON INDIVIDUAL APPROACHES TO GROUP PROCESSES IS THE BOTTOM LINE ON CREATING HIGH-PERFORMANCE TEAMS.

CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION ARE HOT TOPICS THESE DAYS. FOR THE SAKE OF THIS DISCUSSION, LET CREATIVITY BE THE PROCESS OF GENERATING SOMETHING NEW, WHILE INNOVATION WILL BE THE RESULT OF CREATING SOMETHING OF VALUE TO AN INDIVIDUAL, ORGANIZATION OR SOCIETY.

CREATIVITY FLOWS AS A NATURAL SEQUENCE TO INNOVATION: FROM THE GENERATION OF A CONCEPT TO THE ALL-IMPORTANT STEP OF IMPLEMENTING THAT CONCEPT IN A WAY THAT ADDS VALUE. WE'VE LONG BEEN AWARE THAT THE HUMAN MIND IS CAPABLE OF EXTRAORDINARY CREATIVITY. GIVEN A SET OF PROBLEMS, HUMANS WORKING SINGLY OR TOGETHER CAN COME UP WITH SEVERAL VIABLE NEW CONCEPTS TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM. BUT WHAT THEN? FAST COMPANY MAGAZINE SUGGESTS, "THE ISSUE IS NO LONGER ABOUT HOW TO GENERATE NEW IDEAS, RATHER THE ISSUE IS HOW TO GET GOOD IDEAS IMPLEMENTED QUICKLY."

MANY ORGANIZATIONS NOW EMBRACE INNOVATION AS A CORE COMPETENCE, BUT FEW HAVE CONCRETE METHODOLOGIES TO IMPLEMENT INNOVATION, PARTICULARLY WHEN IT COMES TO TEAMS. SO I WENT ON A TWO-YEAR JOURNEY TO STUDY WHY SOME COMPANIES...
were more innovative than others. I sought answers to key questions. How is innovation different from creativity? How can we integrate the principles of innovation with systems thinking? What practical methodologies exist that support teams working on innovation projects?

This is when I came across the Team Dimensions Profile® and Z process, a tool to help each person do what they do best, and then hand off tasks to the next person. In other words, “Do your best, hand off the rest.” I started using the Team Dimensions Profile immediately with my clients who struggled with their team process.

Here’s what it looked like put to use in the Information Systems Division of one of the world’s largest food and beverage companies. Direct reports of the CIO (Chief Information Officer) were required to design and implement IT solutions for the CIO and the business. The group generated sound ideas for business solutions, but they were slow in making decisions. They tended to focus on individual projects without linking them to business strategies and priorities. Since they lived in a culture that highly valued relationships and harmony, team members were reluctant to ‘rock the boat’. So business items were continually tabled, rather than being rejected in favor of another solution. As a result, they rehashed old ideas without progressing. They seldom got beyond brainstorming and critiquing, which not only wasted time, but with their aversion to conflict, left them with only traditional solutions.

Over the course of two off-site meetings, team members first developed their mission and determined interdependent priorities. They defined roles and responsibilities, then set out to determine effective communication mechanisms, setting the stage for what I call Team Innovation using the Team Dimensions® profile and process.

The Team Dimensions® profile opened the second session. This online tool, designed to help individuals identify their strengths, describes an individual as one of five roles, Creator, Advancer, Refiner, Executor and Flexer. The profile also provides a specific methodology called the “Z” process, which maps the flow of assigning roles, completion of tasks, and hand-offs of tasks to the other team members. In this relay process, tasks are passed from Creators to Advancers, from Advancers to Refiners, and from Refiners to Executors. Flexers keep the process moving by filling gaps in the team.

The profile is a very powerful and personal tool. Based on an individual’s responses, it identifies the most natural role. That people think and behave differently is a given. Understanding how differences can be categorized opens a new pathway to harnessing them. A linear thinker will not be as effective, nor as happy, generating new ideas and concepts as a thinker who uses intuitive methods to leapfrog from one idea to the next. The intuitive thinker who is happiest playing with concepts will likely chafe when it is time to examine all possible obstacles. Administering the profile and looking at the results allowed the participants to see the team in an overview so that each member could be positioned in the role that made the best use of his/her strengths.

The Team Dimensions® profile helps people identify roles, provides a concrete methodology for handing off tasks, and helps the team move to an Action Plan that provides a template that describes members’ roles, lists the tasks assigned, and anticipates barriers. Put into practice at the end of the second off-site, the teams came up with one core issue that
everyone felt was a logjam. The issue was whether or not to implement VPN (virtual personal network to allow employees to work virtually and access the company's intranet). There were grave concerns about security.

The team divided into groups according to their natural roles and began using the “Z” process. A lot of cross-germination took place as the team failed ideas faster and came up with a quality solution to the VPN issue. Creators generated ideas. Advancers took the ideas to Refiners. The refiners poked holes in the Creator's ideas, but since the Creators were not in the room at the same time, no conflict erupted. Instead, the Refiners were praised for their work. Advancers then moved back to the Creators and presented the challenges the Refiners found. The Creators then came up with ideas to overcome the challenges presented by the Refiners. At the very end, when the Creators and Refiners were on the same page, they passed their solution to the implementation team, the Executors. Not everyone worked on the same thing at the same time, which saved a lot of time. People were freed up to do other work when not engaged in the task of their own group.

Here’s how the team’s Director summed up the Team Innovation experience:

Our team left energized and amazed that in one day we had made a decision about a business issue we had struggled with for over a year. We quickly learned a model for team innovation and decision-making and applied it to a perplexing business issue.

Best were the comments from the team describing their experience:

...shows how we arrive at decisions.

...refreshing to see us using an orderly process.
...much less adversarial than I thought.
...we clarify roles and appreciate differences
...look for innovation roles when hiring.

That last comment illustrates how this process opens itself to other applications. In this particular case, the Director reported that the quality of projects increased, and the team and business results were such that the Team Innovation process was immediately integrated into training programs and became a mainstay in the division’s ongoing meetings.

Organizations using the Team Dimensions Profile® and Z process can expect to:
- Identify individual approaches to innovative teamwork
- Match individual strengths to team roles
- Reduce team stress and conflict
- Foster trust and build mutual support
- Fail ideas faster
- Shorten the cycle time of idea generation to results by 70% 

Take a moment and imagine what your business could accomplish if you could cut the time it takes to implement creative new ideas by a whopping 70%. You’d be a fast company, indeed.