



## THINK TANK

# WHAT STYLE OF PROJECT THINKER ARE YOU?

*Some relationships on a project work brilliantly. Others don't. But why? The Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory provides insight on thinking styles used by project leaders, and can enable teams to work together more effectively, writes Paul Erricker*

**H**ave you ever been puzzled as to why some people embrace certain changes, while others create show-stopping resistance? Or perhaps you've struggled to understand why some working relationships feel 'in the flow', while others are more like swimming through treacle? On a personal level, despite your clear competence, you might find certain career paths and roles energising, while other roles sap your energy reserves.

These and many other critical project success implications do not lie in skills, project controls or yet more governance, but instead lie within your stable, measurable cognitive (thinking) style.

Let's take an example from the business world. Look at Sir Richard Branson and Sir James Dyson. Both are highly successful billionaire owners of businesses they created. One might think they share the same traits. Of course, they will share some – intelligence, determination and judgement – and no doubt both experienced some good luck along the way. But look deeper, and their thinking styles may differ.

Both Branson and Dyson have achieved a similar end goal – valuable business empires. Branson has created multiple different businesses. He starts businesses that seek to be highly disruptive to their market. Something of a maverick, Branson has been inspired by rebels against market norms, such as Sir Freddie Laker. Branson can get bored easily, seeking novelty once the initial problem-solving subsides. I would say that he is a highly innovative thinker.

Dyson is interesting. One might suggest he is innovative, but I would suggest otherwise. He has worked for almost his entire career on one key product (the cyclonic separator), which has then been 'adapted' across many thousands of prototypes into other products that fundamentally have a similar function. Like many inventors, he worked tirelessly at a single concept, spending five years refining the original design. He brought others into his business to drive marketing and sales, given his early personal challenges selling his idea. He is a good example, I suggest, of a more adaptive thinker.

If I were to work with both business leaders, I would seek to adjust my

communications to suit their differing thinking styles. That's where the Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory (KAI) comes in.

### PROJECT LEADERS EMBRACE KAI

Some 20 years ago, as a project leader, I was introduced to KAI, which provides an answer to some of the pressing questions about personality types and project management. In fact, KAI provides a key insight into how our thinking style impacts outward behaviours and subsequent project success. That's why it has become an important part of the UK government's Project Leadership Programme (PLP). The PLP aims to develop an elite cadre of professional project leaders to manage highly complex government projects, programmes and portfolios. Some 250 leaders each year are developed by The Project Academy, in partnership with Cranfield University and PA Consulting. The Cabinet Office's Infrastructure and Projects Authority spearheads the programme. Nearly 1,000 leaders have benefited from the PLP, which includes performance leadership coaching alongside academic study.

### KAI offers key insights into understanding self, others and organisational change

Here, KAI offers key insights into understanding self, others and how to better bring about organisational change. It is already making a difference for many project professionals. Frequently, project leaders who have been on the PLP subsequently call for KAI to be implemented within their project teams to accelerate team development and better manage behavioural diversity.

### ADAPTIVE v INNOVATIVE

Developed by Dr Michael Kirton and his occupational psychology team, KAI has had a profound impact on my own career. ►►

**ADAPTIVE OR INNOVATIVE: WHICH ONE ARE YOU?**

**Adaptive thinkers tend to:**

- produce fewer ideas, but their ideas are well thought-through, relevant, sound, safe for immediate use and have a high success rate due to thorough analysis;
- enjoy routine and prefer work that requires precision, a methodical approach and attention to detail;
- welcome change that improves the current paradigm or systems – ‘doing the same things better’;
- use rules to solve problems, and rarely challenge the rules, while seeking consensus;
- maintain continuity and stability in groups, welcome clarity of group norms, and be prudent with authority; and
- in organisations, play an integral role in managing current systems, but, in periods of radical change, struggle to regroup established roles.

**Innovative thinkers tend to:**

- produce many ideas that are less thought-through – some may be radical, possibly risky;
- accept the risk of failure for ideas, producing even more options in response;
- prefer varied work that avoids routine and enables tangential thinking;
- consider the big picture over detail;
- welcome change that is novel and breaks with the current paradigm or systems – ‘doing things differently’;
- alter, break or challenge rules and norms to solve problems;
- be a catalyst to settled groups, and be more comfortable speaking up within a group;
- be prepared to criticise authority when appropriate; and
- in organisations, play an integral role in managing radical change, but struggle to apply themselves in times of stability and to manage current systems.

◀ It observes the differences in our preferred thinking style, based within the rational, not emotional, part of our brains. While our thinking preference remains stable over time – from as young as 10 years old – our behaviour is flexible if fuelled by sufficient motive. No matter where we sit on the KAI continuum, we have strengths to offer. But equally, our strengths can create pitfalls in situations where we are required to behave outside of our preference when engaging others.

The KAI style range is over 100 points. However, a difference of just 20 points between individuals or groups can produce predictable collaboration issues. For example, in one instance in team coaching, I observed an increasing tension between the project leader and their technical team. The leader was consistently frustrated at the apparent resistance to implementing new technology, which the leader felt was straightforward and low risk. Their technical colleagues were resisting the changes, feeling them too risky, and too much of a break from current processes. What was radical to the technology team was seen as the industry norm to the leader. The KAI team coaching revealed that the leader was more innovative in KAI style, whereas all of the senior technical function team were medium-high adaptors. The KAI coaching ultimately eased this ‘style tension’, enabling the parties to better understand each other’s perspectives.

In my coaching work these types of style differences are frequently at the heart of team dysfunction – which is why it’s so important to understand them when working on projects.

Both adaptors and innovators run the risk of perceiving their different behaviours as a matter of competence level, not personal thinking style. This is dangerous, as collaboration breakdown can quickly follow. Adaptors may falsely judge innovators as sloppy, careless, reckless, inconsiderate of rules and group norms, and distracted from

the task at hand. Innovators may falsely judge adaptors as stuck in the weeds, slow to embrace change, unnecessarily inflexible and closed to new ideas. But once project teams understand their style differences, the diversity of the team becomes respected and used to great advantage.

**RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

Any project leader or sponsor who seeks to influence change will experience a rough ride. Why is this? Why do some people buy into a change while others resist it? While factors such as political posturing and personal needs impact resistance, personal thinking style plays a huge part. All people are eventually accepting of change. But they are not all accepting of the same type of change. More adaptive thinkers, as the name suggests, tend to welcome changes that adapt the current paradigm. Existing structures are maintained, with incremental enhancement deemed a potentially positive move. More innovative thinkers tend to welcome change that is novel and breaks current norms. What is radical to adaptors can be seen as mere tinkering at the edges for innovators. This frequently leads to frustration within organisations but is an essential dynamic.

Different communication approaches are required by change leaders and project teams to better influence their stakeholders.

While effective rapport-building skills are crucial, influencing can be aided by adaptors:

- emphasising the details of the initiative;
- showing how the change is well thought-through and planned;
- demonstrating how risks have been contained; and
- linking the change to the existing systems and ways of working.

On the other hand, innovators can assist with influencing by:

- emphasising the novel, leading-edge aspects of the change;
- keeping matters in the big picture;

**In many cases, transformations fail. Adaption-Innovation Theory offers us a key insight as to why**

- showing what is groundbreaking and new; and
- providing visual stimulation and avoiding wordy detail.

When it comes to designing and implementing a communication plan, project leaders will enhance their influencing ability by incorporating messages that cover the needs of both more adaptive and more innovative stakeholders. Good stakeholder engagement requires far more than categorising stakeholders by influence level and buy-in. It additionally requires rapport-building to uncover the thinking style of the stakeholder. Only then can increased influencing skills shine through.

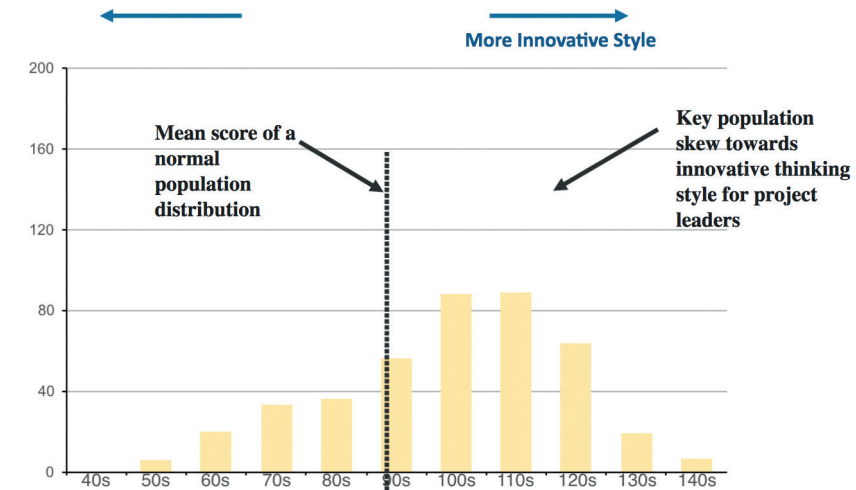
For example, in my own team, we take account of KAI styles through work allocation and communication. Being more innovative in style, I have learnt to adjust my behaviours when delegating work to more adaptive colleagues. I used to get frustrated with questions for more detail. Now I understand that, as a leader, I must provide more detail to generate the right conditions for adaptive colleagues to succeed.

**PROJECT LEADERS: INCLINED TO INNOVATION**

In measuring the KAI style of project leaders and their teams for more than 10 years, I have observed an interesting trend. Project leadership attracts more innovators than adaptors. Of course, both adaptors and innovators can make great leaders. However, the ‘style skew’ towards innovation for project leaders creates a challenge when influencing organisational change.

By contrast, operational, production and administrative roles attract more adaptive thinkers. This cognitive style gap between change leaders and change receivers can lead to poor communication of change, damaging buy-in to initiatives.

There is an observable trend in the projects profession to refer to most change proposals as ‘transformation’. This may sound good, but it is dangerous territory for those seeking organisational buy-in. Adaption-Innovation Theory predicts that what is perceived as radical to some is seen



Observed innovative preference in thinking style for project leaders. Operational and administrative functions tend to skew to adaption, leading to a critical style gap between project leaders and their stakeholders.

as mere tinkering to others. To package a change as ‘transformational’ immediately risks alienating the more adaptive audience. Plus, innovators may enjoy going head-to-head with senior change leaders. The promoters of this transformational labelling may find increased resistance, possibly seen as threatening to the existing paradigm. No matter what logic is now displayed to justify the change, a lack of clear anchoring to the existing ways of operating may damage buy-in.

Naturally, the temptation to bring about ‘transformation’ is appealing to senior management. After all, what new CEO, director or head of department ever considers their new promotion as anything but a call to transform all that has gone before? To succumb to this temptation is potentially strategic suicide for the enthusiastic new organisational leader. After all, many transformations fail. Adaption-Innovation Theory offers us a key insight as to why.

**PERSONAL AND TEAM RESILIENCE**

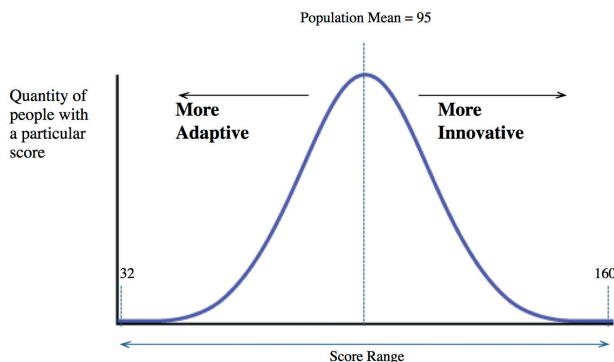
One of the key themes observed in more than 2,500 project leader coaching sessions is how critical personal and team resilience is to project success. Too many professionals are approaching burn-out. But why? Many factors are at play, including the temptation to act as a tactical, not strategic, project leader. Also, ineffective delegation can lead to becoming trapped by detail that the team should be handling. This is a key risk for more adaptive leaders.

Adaption-Innovation Theory offers an additional explanation. The broadening stakeholder landscape on projects means dealing with greater numbers of people who have a thinking style different from our own. This leads to increased coping behaviour to engage stakeholders, where we find it necessary to behave differently from our brain’s preference. But coping behaviour is expensive, both emotionally and physically, and must be fuelled by sufficient motive in order to generate the extra energy. Yet, few project leaders that I coach pay sufficient attention to their own, and their team’s, strategies for coping.

Team resilience can also be damaged by inappropriate delegation style. Leaders tend to delegate in accordance with their own KAI style, which is often a flawed approach. Adaptors may provide too much structure for innovators. Innovators may be too loose in their instructions, providing little useful clarity on process. Team performance is then compromised, as the best is not being drawn out of individuals.

Wise project leaders take style differences into account when building collaboration and bringing about change. Successful change is achievable – but only when the thinking styles of the stakeholder landscape are well understood and catered for. 📌

● **PAUL ERRICKER** IS DIRECTOR OF THE PROJECT ACADEMY AND A PERFORMANCE COACH TO PROJECT LEADERS AND THEIR TEAMS. HE ENABLES ORGANISATIONS TO ADOPT APM’S CHARTERED PROJECT PROFESSIONAL STANDARD



KAI style is ‘normally distributed’ in large populations, ie there are fewer people with extreme scores towards the high adaptor/high innovator ends. Large style skews can occur in smaller groups, such as project teams, creating significant team dynamic implications.