

Food for thought...

'Rebel Ideas' by Matthew Syed

The underlying theme of 'Rebel Ideas' is that we should promote, and surround ourselves with, diverse thinking. The book contends that we are naturally drawn to people who think like we do. If they look at problems in the same way as us, and identify the solutions that we would identify, then we are quick to notice their perceptiveness and insight!

The drawback of everyone looking at a problem from the same vantage point, is that this limits problem-solving capacity and does not provide us with a comprehensive, objective world view.

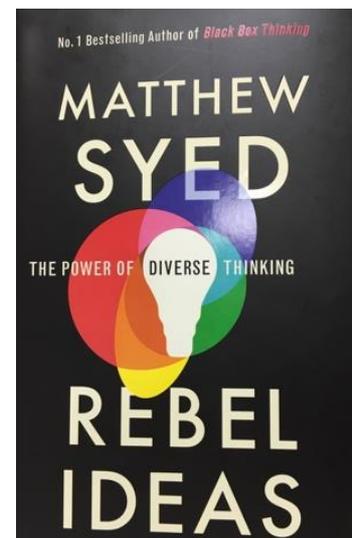
Syed uses the September 11th tragedy as an example to support his point. In short, this act of terrorism came about because the CIA didn't see it coming. They didn't see it coming, not because they were ill-prepared or bad at their jobs. Rather, it was because the CIA's recruitment procedures and culture tended to favour white, middle-class men who were unfamiliar with Islam and Islamic extremism. Had the CIA team been more diverse, some may have identified the warning signs missed by others.

This example appears to argue for greater cultural diversity, which may be helpful for any number of reasons, but is not the main point. It is the different perspective and dissimilar thinking afforded by cultural diversity that is what matters in this instance. If we surround ourselves with people who are like us, and think like us, we may simply not see new ways of looking at a problem.

Furthermore, if we only favour ideas that seem like good ideas because they seem like the ideas we might come up with, then we're in danger of creating an echo chamber. When that happens, people feed themselves with likeminded views and opinions. They stop taking note of any dissenting views and come to believe that everything's great. The problem with this is the growing distance between perception and objective reality.

We need to take issue with each other and to come up with alternative ideas that challenge the status quo. These are Syed's rebel ideas.

Elsewhere in the book, Syed uses the example of another tragedy to highlight the importance of rebel ideas and the need to voice them. In May 1996, a group of experienced climbers ascended Everest. The group was led by a skilled and well-prepared climber who had led expeditions up Everest on a number of occasions. He was a natural leader. Syed calls him 'one of the finest mountaineers in the world'. Members of the group were clear about

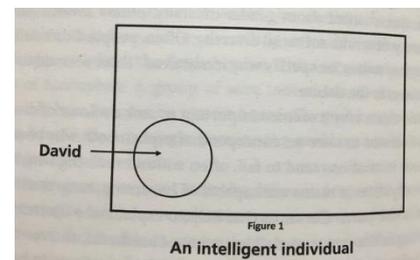


the leader's expectations and what was required of them. A clear hierarchy was in place, as it is during most human organisational activities. However, the expedition ended in disaster with many members of the group losing their lives.

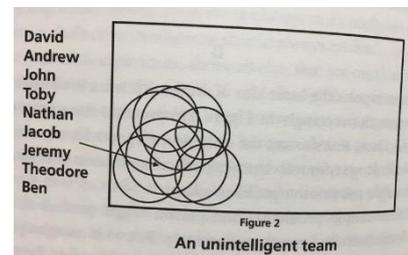
Syed argues that this was because valuable information about changing weather conditions was not shared among the members of the group. Even if they possessed key insights or thoughts, group members did not express them because of an irresistible acceptance of the hierarchy and confidence in their leader. The team was galvanised behind its leader. Nevertheless, as Syed puts it, 'No amount of commitment can drive effective decision-making in a situation of complexity when diverse perspectives are suppressed; when critical information isn't flowing through the social network.'

So, rebel ideas are important. They provide the different perspective, keep information flowing and counter the dangers of the echo chamber.

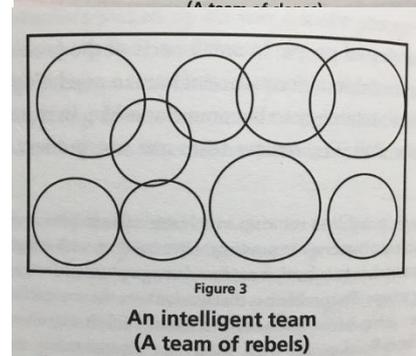
Syed represents diversity science in the form of diagrams. Each rectangle below represents the universe of ideas where problems exist to be solved. One person might possess the necessary knowledge to solve a simple problem, but some complex problems require the insights of more than one person. In the diagram below, David knows a lot but does not know everything.



In the next diagram, we have a group of people who think in the same way. Every individual is intelligent, but they know similar things and share the same perspective. This was the problem in the case of the CIA example.



In the final diagram, however, this team is best placed to solve a given problem because each individual thinks differently; they bring different perspectives and insights. In these discussions there is more challenge, divergence and cross-pollination. The team is collectively more intelligent, even though no individual is any cleverer than the individuals in the diagrams above.



In this book, Syed puts forward his own interesting ideas. We should consider how receptive we are to different ideas, how we use them to fashion solutions to problems and the extent to which they shape and mirror our objective reality.

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