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Book Cooks Up Recipe for Innovation

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Inventors Thomas Edison, left, and Charles Steinmetz in a laboratory; the date of the photo is not known

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Welcome to THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English. I'm Shirley Griffith.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. This week on our program, we hear from the author of a book about the makings of innovation. Then, we learn how a Native American is bringing back the art and culture of his tribe from Alaska. And later we tell you about an American naturalist and the results of his work in Africa.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Simply put, innovation is doing something new that works. Steven Johnson has written a new book called "The Innovator's Cookbook." Mr. Johnson says all progress depends on innovation and creativity.

STEVEN JOHNSON: "There is no kind of occupation that can't be improved with innovative thinking."

Are there secrets to innovation? Mr. Johnson talked to a group of innovative people. They included businesspeople, software designers, artists and musicians.

Among them was composer Brian Eno.

STEVEN JOHNSON: "One of the great things that he does is that when he sits down in the studio to start working on an album, he often has the band switch up their instruments."

So think of the drummer playing guitar and the keyboardist playing violin. How does it sound? Pretty bad at first, Mr. Eno admits. But he told Mr. Johnson that the process is liberating.

STEVEN JOHNSON: "They end up generating new sounds, new ways of playing together they wouldn't have gotten to otherwise. That's a great metaphor for what you want to do in your own life. Go and try things that you haven't tried before, and don't worry about sounding bad because what may happen is you're taken to some new place."

STEVE EMBER: Being open to new things also helped IDO, a design and innovation company in California, to expand around the world. Mr. Johnson talked with IDO co-founder Tom Kelley for his book. Mr. Kelley described a weekly meeting, held every Monday morning, for the company's top managers.

STEVEN JOHNSON: "That meeting, for twenty years, has started with show and tell. People are asked to present interesting things they stumbled across that weekend. Someone would say, 'Hey, I went to see a movie with my kids last night' or 'You guys seen this new game my kids are playing?' or 'I went to an art gallery the other day and it's really interesting.' Tom said it ends up triggering all these new associations and there is something unpredictable about it that leads to new ideas for their actual business."

Steven Johnson shares his interviews in "The Innovator's Cookbook." It also includes nine essays written by business researchers. These essays explore the conditions that can either allow creativity to grow, or kill it.

One of those essays is by Teresa Amabile, a Harvard Business School professor and co-author of the book "The Progress Principle."

TERESA AMABILE: "It is absolutely possible to kill creativity. In fact, it seems to be more common inside most workplaces for the work environment to undermine creativity, to kill it, rather than to stimulate it and keep it alive."

In her essay, Professor Amabile offers guidelines for supporting innovation in the workplace.

TERESA AMABILE: "First of all, people need to feel that they have some degree of

autonomy in what they are doing. They also need to feel personally involved in what they are doing, that they find it in some way interesting, satisfying, enjoyable and personally challenging. When people are in that mindset, they're much more likely to come up with new and useful ideas. People also need to feel, across the organization, they have encouragement for coming up with new ideas."

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Innovator's Cookbook" author Steven Johnson says creative minds also need to work together, to collaborate.

STEVEN JOHNSON: "You think about Apple, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founding that company. Very different people; a brilliant engineer and a brilliant visionary and salesman, two totally different kinds of minds, and they needed each other."

True. But author Susan Cain wrote recently that "If you look at how Mr. Wozniak got the work done -- the sheer hard work of creating something from nothing -- he did it alone. Late at night, all by himself." Ms. Cain, writing in the New York Times, noted Mr. Wozniak's own words to would-be inventors: "I'm going to give you some advice that might be hard to take. That advice is: Work alone."

Susan Cain has just published a book called "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking." She wrote in the Times: "Most of us now work in teams, in offices without walls, for managers who prize people skills above all. Lone geniuses are out. Collaboration is in.

"But there's a problem with this view. Research strongly suggests that people are more creative when they enjoy privacy and freedom from interruption."

In other words, there can be too many cooks in the innovator's kitchen.

(MUSIC)

STEVE EMBER: David Boxley is a member of the Tsimshian tribe. The tribe's home state is Alaska. Mr. Boxley is a dancer, songwriter and wood carver. He is also an ambassador for Tsimshian culture and heritage.

DAVID BOXLEY: "We call it art now, but it was a way for people to say, this is how I am. This belongs to me, or this is my clan, this is my crest, this is my family history, carved and painted in wood."

Mr. Boxley was raised by his grandparents. He says the influence of Christian missionaries was strong while he was young, so he learned little about his native culture.

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David Boxley works at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington on one of the totem poles that he created with his son

After college, he went to work as a teacher. He also began to research Tsimshian wood carving in museums and other cultural collections. In nineteen eighty-six, he left teaching to spend his time on wood carving and bringing attention to Tsimshian art and culture.

DAVID BOXLEY: "I guess I came along at the right time. Our people really needed a shot in the arm. Our culture wasn't very prominent after all that missionary influence, and years and years of not having anybody be in that kind of position to guide."

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: That was almost thirty years ago. Since then Mr. Boxley has created seventy totem poles. Totem poles tell a story. Several months ago he began carving his most recent totem pole from a seven-meter-long piece of red cedar.

DAVID BOXLEY: "We don't use sandpaper. We use the knives and the chisels to get it as smooth as possible. Get the lines clean."

He worked on it at his home near Seattle, in the northwestern state of Washington. Then the totem pole was shipped by truck across the country to the other Washington. It will stand in the permanent collection at the National Museum of the American Indian.

DAVID BOXLEY: "The title is Eagle and the Young Chief."

The totem pole tells the story of a young chief who rescued an eagle caught in a fishing net. Years later, when the chief's village was starving, the eagle repaid the chief for his kindness.

DAVID BOXLEY: "A live salmon fell out of the sky, and he looked up and he saw the eagle flying away. And every day for days and days, the eagle brought salmon to feed the village."

STEVE EMBER: David Boxley has other wood carvings in the permanent collection at the museum. His dance group of family and friends performed for a crowd on the day the totem pole was presented to the public.

(SOUND)

Mr. Boxley says a totem pole that he carved in honor of his grandfather is closest to his heart. But this new one, at the museum, is a close second.

DAVID BOXLEY: "This one is going to be seen by millions over the next hundred years. And it is not just me and my son; it is all of my people that are proud. My tribe."

We have a video about David Boxley and his work at voaspecialenglish.com.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Mike Fay calls himself a "nature boy." Mr. Fay is a naturalist and explorer. His work has been supported by organizations like National Geographic and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

In nineteen ninety-nine, Mr. Fay began a fifteen-month project called the MegaTransect. He walked more than three thousand kilometers across the Congo basin to study plants and wildlife. Mr. Fay and a team of Pygmy guides crossed the dense tropical forests of the Congo and Gabon.

MIKE FAY: "You know, we were [on] like an epic voyage out there. Every day you have to find food for thirteen people, you have to keep everyone healthy, you have to be the mother, the father, the coach, everybody, for all these guys."

Veronique LaCapra
Mike Fay

Mr. Fay was gathering information about the plants and animals of the last untouched forests in west-central Africa. He says he wanted to bring international attention to the rich biology that was being threatened by the logging industry. But he admits that the local guides on his team did not really know what they were getting involved in.

At one point, they stopped at a small village. Mr. Fay warned his group not to drink the water because of the risk of disease.

MIKE FAY: "And sure enough, one of the Pygmies gets hepatitis like probably two or three weeks later. And the first reaction of those guys to something like that is to scarify them with razor blades and bleed them, you know, to get the bad blood out. And so here you've got this highly infectious guy, who all of a sudden everybody's touching his blood, and I just had these nightmares of the whole crew getting hepatitis."

He says it took about a week to carry the sick man to a river. Then they used a dugout canoe to transport him to safety.

STEVE EMBER: Mr. Fay documented his experiences on the MegaTransect. He used a satellite-based positioning system, digital cameras and a laptop computer. He and his guides cut through dense vegetation and crossed rivers and deep, muddy swamps. Along the way, they saw elephants, aardvarks, gorillas and other wildlife. They also saw roads and machinery that logging companies were using to remove trees.

MIKE FAY: "It was hard. But we didn't lose a single person, and it was an expedition of a lifetime, for sure."

The knowledge that came out of the trip, and the attention it received, helped lead Gabon to create thirteen national parks. These placed more than four million hectares of forest under protection.

Mr. Fay moved to Washington to write his findings after he finished the MegaTransect in two thousand. But he says he had a difficult time re-entering city life after sleeping outdoors in the forest for so long.

Mike Fay is now in his fifties. Since the MegaTransect he has completed other surveys of biodiversity. His latest trip was in two thousand seven. He hiked three thousand kilometers through California's redwood forests. But wherever he is, he says, he still tries to avoid sleeping inside.

(MUSIC)

SHIRLEY GRIFFITH: Our program was produced by Brianna Blake, with reporting by Faiza Elmasry, Jeff Swicord and Veronique LaCapra. I'm Shirley Griffith.

STEVE EMBER: And I'm Steve Ember. You can find texts, MP3s and podcasts of our programs, along with English teaching activities, at voaspecialenglish.com. Join us again next week for THIS IS AMERICA in VOA Special English.