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## Building great teams

What do Hewlett-Packard, Walt Disney and Apple Computer have in common? They all began life in garages, according to Warren Bennis, the US-based management writer, who has been examining the chemistry behind some of the world's greatest teams.

Mr Bennis, whose reputation was established in a number of influential books on leadership, has turned his attention to a study of great teams for a book he has co-authored with Patricia Ward Biederman, a Los Angeles Times journalist\*.

Humble surroundings, tatty offices and threadbare furniture, they note, are common factors of many pioneering programmes in the US. These include Black Mountain College, which inspired a generation of artists, and the "skunk works" programme that developed the technology for the US Stealth bomber in a windowless building next door to the airport in Burbank, California.

"Many of these groups feel like they are winning underdogs," says Mr Bennis. "They need an enemy. Right now in Silicon Valley almost every upstart company has a dartboard with Bill Gates's face on it."

In the case of the Manhattan project to develop the atom bomb in the second world war, the enemy was very real. The fact that the Germans were also seeking to create their own bomb helped the American team deal with the morality of their invention. But although the secret project had a deadly purpose, the work was characterised by a sense of humour, he says. This extended to one scientist inventing an explosive device to blow down trees so the team could clear a ski run at the Los Alamos site.

The average age of the scientists assembled by Manhattan project leader J. Robert Oppenheimer was 25. Youth was a noticeable defining feature in the study. "In most of these groups, 35 was regarded as elderly," say the authors. This raises a dilemma for the boards of big companies, many of which are packed with ageing executives. On the one hand they need experience but on the other hand they need to "cultivate innocence", says Mr Bennis, who is working with a number of top US boards.

"Look at the McDonald's board with 18 to 20 members. It is too large. The average age is about 67. The average length of time spent on the board is 14 years. Where do they get fresh ideas from? It's too old, it's been in office too long and it's too big, that's its problem.

"Boards have forgotten why they are there. Aside from their fiduciary responsibility and finding a successor, they need to ask discerning questions and they need to reaffirm what the company is about and make people feel good about what they are doing. Too often this isn't happening."

In some teams, such as the one that created the Apple Macintosh, there is an "adolescent subculture" often marked by a lack of experience and an unrealistic view of what they can accomplish. "Not knowing what they can't do puts everything in the realm of the possible," say Mr Bennis and his co-author.

Steve Jobs was in his mid-twenties when he took over the Macintosh team at Apple, creating the atmosphere of a rebel band and hoisting a pirate flag over the offices.

Mr Jobs was inspiring but the authors criticise his "immature leadership style", suggesting that it could have slowed down the programme. "Decency in the workplace, especially one that depends for its success on the talent and devotion of its employees, isn't just the right thing to do. The talent is your treasure. You don't chew it up."

They say all the groups in their study had a product and many had a deadline - both important ingredients for bringing out the best in people. Walt Disney argued with his brother Roy about the need to correct a slight imperfection, a "shimmy" in the prince's speech at the end of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs . Roy Disney, worried about cost over-runs, finally lost patience and pleaded with his brother: "Walt, let the Prince shimmy."

Even Disney, however, has struggled to keep its best animators. Peter Schneider, head of feature animation, said during the research that the studio had been losing talented animators because of family priorities, which make creative collaboration less attractive.

Given the factors involved in successful collaboration - youth, naivety, product creation and deadlines - is it feasible for companies to put together creative teams?

"I don't think great teams can be put together. They can be encouraged and permitted to happen and then nurtured," says Mr Bennis. Companies, he says, will need to work on such developments. "I believe these great groups are going to be the new social architecture for the kinds of organisation that are going to succeed.

One of the biggest concerns for those running businesses, he says, will be to look at the "content of the purpose" of the business. People, he says, need some meaning to their work.

Another concern for society is the inequality of talent, says Mr Bennis. "We have never faced up to the issue of how in a democratic society we deal with an inequality of talent.

"What we are seeing now in my own country is the 'Brazilification' of society into 'haves' - those who are comfortable with technology - and the 'have nots' - those who won't make it in this world. I think we avoid this issue tremendously."

\*Organizing Genius, The Secrets of Creative Collaboration, by Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman. Published by Nicholas Brealey Publishing, price £18.

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