

People know more than they think they do, study finds

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Group of Utah business students involved in problem solving exercise. Credit: David Eccles School of Business.

(Medical Xpress) -- The process of melding individuals into effective, problem-solving groups should involve empowering individuals to realize they have important ideas to share.

Dr. Bryan Bonner, an associate professor at the University of Utah's David Eccles School of Business, believes the first step to building successful organizations is deceptively simple: self-realization by each participant of his or her unique knowledge and experience.

Bonner co-authored "Leveraging Member Expertise to Improve Knowledge Transfer and Demonstrability in Groups" with Dr. Michael

Baumann, an associate professor of Psychology at the University of Texas in San Antonio. The study, published in February's edition of the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#), concludes that "for groups to be successful, they must exploit the knowledge of their (individual) members effectively."

"It doesn't take much. All you have to do is have people sit there for a while and think, 'What is it I already know about this, and how can that help find the solution?'" Bonner says. "People find they often know more than they think they do; they realize that they might not know the whole answer to the problem, but there are a couple things they do know that might help the group come to a solution."

The researchers used 540 University of Utah undergraduate students, assigning half to three-member groups on one hand, with the remaining 270 participants working as individuals. Their task: arriving at estimates closest to the correct answers to such questions as the elevation of Utah's King's Peak; the weight of the heaviest man in history; the population of Utah; and the minimum driving distance between Salt Lake City and New York City.

"We solve problems by using the many examples, good and bad, we've gathered through hard-won experience throughout our lives. The problem is that we're not nearly as good at applying old knowledge to new problems as you'd think," Bonner says. "Research over more than a century has tried, without much success, to figure out how we can do a better job."

Bonner and Baumann, however, are convinced their study shows that "although the sheer amount of brainpower it takes to consistently and effectively transfer learning from old to new is beyond many individuals, groups of people working together can actually be very good at it."

The answers to those study [group](#) questions? Kings Peak, the highest point in Utah, is 13,528 feet above sea level; the heaviest man of all time was 1,400 pounds; Utah's population, at the time of the study, was 2,389,039; and the shortest route between Salt Lake City and New York City is 2,174.41 miles.

More information: To read the paper, visit: bit.ly/yHEruM

Provided by University of Utah

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