

It's great to be recognized as an expert. And experts do bring value to organizations that need their specific expertise. But sometimes experts are so focused in their field that they are practically unintelligible to the rest of us.

Generalists, on the other hand, can bring value by connecting the dots across disciplines to get diverse functions to work together. But the jack-of-all-trades hits a wall when a master-of-one is needed.

I recognize the value of both experts and generalists. But if I'm building an organization I'll place the highest value on the team members who have "T-Shaped Skills".

T-Shaped Skills

Although it isn't the earliest reference to the T-Shaped concept, I first discovered it in Dorothy Leonard-Barton's 1995 book, *Wellsprings of Knowledge: Building and Sustaining the Sources of Innovation* (Harvard Business School Press). The concept is to have a skill where your expertise goes deep (the vertical bar of the "T"). The horizontal bar represents a working knowledge in a range of skills outside your primary domain of expertise.



T-shaped individuals have the advantage of being able to recognize more quickly the potential applications of their deep expertise across the organization. They are also better able to communicate what they see to those who don't share their expertise. And they tend to engage more effectively as part of a team to shape solutions.

Developing T-Shaped Skills

Here are a few tips for encouraging the growth of T-shaped skills:

- **Encourage cross-discipline training.** Talk with team members about areas of interest outside of their core job description. If, for example, someone in HR expresses an interest in marketing, encourage (pay for) them to take a marketing class or attend a marketing conference. If you see someone whom you think may have a knack for another skill, suggest it to them and let the idea grow on them. Department heads should let each other know when they have someone who might benefit from some cross-functional engagement. I once brought someone into IT (who eventually became IT Director) because our Customer Service VP gave me a heads up about her Call Center Supervisor's IT potential.
- **Intentionally make assignments to develop skills.** When an assignment comes up, we naturally tend to give it to the best equipped (and probably already busy) person to do the job. But rather than letting the expert be a bottleneck, consider whether this would be a good assignment to stretch someone else to grow. Perhaps let your go-to-person function as a mentor to someone else – even if it's someone from a different department!
- **Talk about it.** Let people know why you think T-shaped skills would benefit the organization and the people in it. Encourage them to share ideas. Reward success and share those stories as they occur.

The Best Place to Start

Creating a culture that values, builds, and rewards T-shaped skills will increase the innovation and resilience of your organization. And, of course, the best place to start building T-shaped skills is with yourself...