

## Deep Dive! A Rigorous Team Process to Drive Innovation and Execution

**Andrew Boynton**  
Professor  
of Management,  
Director of  
the IMD Executive  
MBA program



**William A. Fischer**  
Professor of Technology  
Management



What is a Deep Dive? It's about making team-based real innovation happen. Not just hoping it happens. Teamwork and innovation are strategic for virtually any large-scale organization. Rarely does innovation happen with sole genius. Even Edison led a powerful team. Teams are also at the heart of attacking many managerial issues and challenges firms face. Yet most teams create modest results at best. Teams are everywhere; be they charged with creating new and innovative strategies, organizational designs, systems, products, or services required by the firm.

Despite their centrality to making change and driving new and innovative ideas into organizations, scant attention has been paid to processes and tools to help teams create innovative yet executable solutions to managerial issues. Teams are launched without attention to the team process that is instrumental in influencing the outcome the team delivers. Organizations spend inordinate amounts of time on processes and tools to manage cash, materials, and customer information. Yet teams, at the heart of so many initiatives, are left to flounder. Some innovate effectively, most don't.

The Deep Dive harnesses the idea-power of everyone on a team in a focused, creative, energetic, fun and ultimately useful way. It is a very effective process for quickly generating great design solutions and then rapidly challenging their suitability to evaluate whether they are worthy of continuing commitment. If teams are important in your firm, you should pay attention to what a Deep Dive

has to offer. Its power is in the range of issues and the flexibility inherent within how managers can apply it.

A Deep Dive can be done in two hours or two days, or even a week. Our experience is that a Deep Dive can accelerate solutions that teams come up with by about 1000 % and improve their quality by about 500 %! Big claims? True. But our experience is that teams, on average, are so underleveraged, and the Deep Dive is such an effective team driver that these claims are not unrealistic. The Deep Dive is not a casual brainstorming session by any means. It goes far beyond that. The Deep Dive requires adherence to the process steps and demands. But despite that limitation, it offers a powerful advantage for teams that want to do serious work for serious results.

### Already proven in practice.

Components of the Deep Dive are borrowed from IDEO for product and service design projects<sup>1</sup>. We have "reinvented" and fine-tuned the Deep Dive and adapted it for teams to solve managerial applications. To date we have successfully used managerial Deep Dives for:

- A large telecom services provider to propose improvements in a variety of areas, from pricing to market coordination.
- A global engineering services firm to redefine their corporate values and redesign their strategic planning system.

1 IDEO is one of the world's leading product and experience design practices, headquartered in Palo Alto, California. Between 1998 and 2003, it won 30% of Business Week's gold medals for design, and 18% of all of its awards.  
[www.ideo.com](http://www.ideo.com)

## Deep Dive! A Rigorous Team Process to Drive Innovation and Execution

*“The power of Deep Dives lies in their ability to go well beyond brainstorming to provide a complete process for a team to drive innovation.”*

- The new management team of an international aid agency to construct the management agenda for the first 90 days of their new administration.
- The European region of a global hi-tech manufacturer as the basis for their quarterly strategic planning discussions.

The power of Deep Dives lies in their ability to go well beyond brainstorming to provide a complete process for a team to drive innovation that can be executed within the firm. Though no doubt they exist, we know of no other team approach that resembles a Deep Dive.

### Ideas in action: An illustrated example of a Deep Dive.

We have written an in-depth user's guide on the Deep Dive and there is other supporting material, including a video, which can be purchased. For our purposes here, we think it most useful to illustrate the Deep Dive in such a way so as to engage you into the steps in the process, key elements of the process, the movement of ideas, and the roles the facilitator and team participants play. **The Ideas in Action** illustration, created in collaboration with our colleague Kevin Woodson, shows the journey that teams take when engaged with Deep Dives.

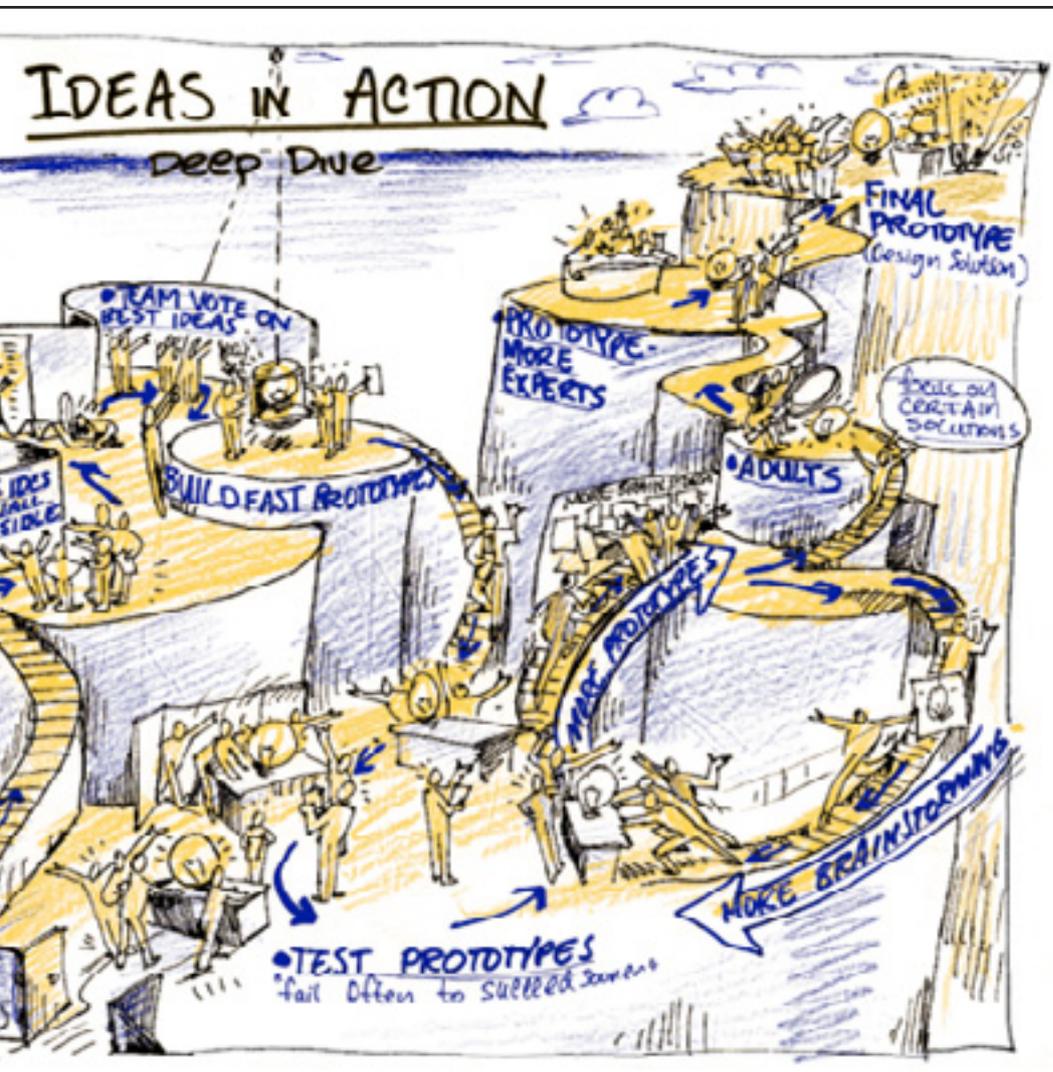
Let's take that journey now. Put yourself in the role of a manager faced with a need to lead a team on a new product launch, an internal reorganization change, or any such project. You have the license to choose your team members and you have six months to complete the project. The Deep Dive can help you get a fast start and keep the momentum going, and the Deep Dive journey seen in **Ideas in Action** illustrates how.

You build a team that has significant intellectual diversity and variety, experts in a variety of fields and cultural perspective, and people who you trust to work well together. The team is brought together for a one day Deep Dive to jump-start the project. A room is chosen



with lots of wall space to post ideas and concepts, and an environment for smaller teamwork, lots of flip charts, pens, sugar and light.

You've done your homework and have a clearly articulated goal for the project and you understand the constraints the team has to operate under. You formulate and reshape the project goal into a "design challenge". This challenge is the goal of the project. You are giving the team two days to solve the project's objective. Impossible? Yes! But in two days the team will create a "prototype solution", identify key issues, build a team culture, and move a long way towards an answer that will really deliver for the firm, and for you, the leader of the project.



Along with the design challenge, you create crystal-clear “objective constraints”, which you’ll review carefully with the team to start the Deep Dive. These constraints provide the realistic and pragmatic boundaries for the team conversation, idea generation and prototyping. A facilitator, probably not yourself, is chosen from the team to lead the conversations.

The team launches into the Deep Dive by getting “expert information” and bringing ideas into the discussion from outside the knowledge of those on the team. The team actively reviews information you’ve prepared and contacts colleagues you’ve identified from inside the organization. They bring the “expert” ideas back into the room and post their findings on the

wall, for all to see. Discussions ensue. Learning occurs. New ideas implode into the team’s frame of reference.

The search for solutions to the design challenge follows. The team brainstorms possible ideas that meet the constraints, yet are often wild and crazy. The brainstorming energizes the team, but it occurs with a clear focus. A clear end in mind: that design challenge and constraints. It is not brainstorming for any idea: it is goal directed brainstorming. Voting on the best ideas allows the team to avoid the “not invented here” syndrome and who owns what ideas. At this point, it usually is not clear where the ideas came up with him from or who said them. The idea becomes the currency for the conversation, not personal ownership property.

*“The team launches into the Deep Dive by getting “expert information” and bringing ideas into the discussion from outside the knowledge of those on the team.”*

## Deep Dive! A Rigorous Team Process to Drive Innovation and Execution

*“The notion  
fail early  
to succeed sooner  
is essential  
and a key element  
of the managerial  
Deep Dive.”*

Rapid prototyping – pictures, models, frameworks, words, role-playing – follows. The prototypes are meant to represent key aspects of the design challenge (while meeting constraints). The team breaks into three sub-teams of four people each. Each team will create a prototype solution. The first prototype has to be completed in one hour. Each is a complete prototype that illustrates the sub-team’s solution for the design challenge and building on ideas launched during the brainstorming/voting phase, where the ideas are narrowed down.

The one-hour prototyping session is followed by a “Frenzy”, where the prototypes are compared between the teams in a what appears to be a chaotic set of discussions. Each team is licensed to get feedback on their prototype, and they have to give feedback on other prototypes. Feedback is direct. Not necessarily polite. Teams do not defend or argue or explain their prototype. The point is to build the prototypes, test them with everyone. Fail. And learn. Fast.

This notion, fail early to succeed sooner, is essential and a key element of the managerial Deep Dive. The Frenzy lasts perhaps 30 minutes. Each team then creates a second prototype. Rapidly. Perhaps 45 minutes are allocated. This is followed by another Frenzy, where more learning occurs and because prototypes are compared, ideas are moving like wildfire between the teams. Time pressures and a sense of competition lights a fire under everyone. People are tired, but the energy remains high. The first day nears its end with perhaps three prototypes being tested and tried.

The final prototypes from each team are presented over some food and drinks. Teams are paying close attention to what the final prototype features meeting the Design Challenge look like. Similarities between prototypes become clear. Few surprises occur, since they’ve all experienced the iteration of the prototypes. The day can end with voting on the very best prototype (solution) elements. Issues for further inquiry can be

identified, such as looking into some particularly important aspect of the prototype (solution).

Further investigation will be required. The team goes back over the constraints and makes sure the solutions are sound within the organizational realities.

After one day, the team has brought back a host of expert information. Brainstorming dominated the early stages and occurred during the prototyping phases to increase creativity. Prototyping the solutions resulted in a limited set of powerful ideas. The team now has six months to finalize its prototype, but it is off to an amazing start. Another Deep Dive is scheduled to accelerate the project again a few weeks. In the meantime, these prototype ideas will be investigated and new information will be generated.

One day passed, and about three weeks of work was accomplished. Results. Innovation. Focus. Teamwork. Deep Dive.

IMD

P.O. Box 915, CH-1001 Lausanne,  
Switzerland

Tel.: +41 21 618 0342

Fax: +41 21 618 0715

info@imd.ch

<http://www.imd.ch>

Editor: Roger Whittle

© IMD, June 2004. No part of this publication may  
be reproduced without written authorization.

