Education, population, poverty, tax…getting views on topics like those in Jersey isn't the difficult part – but have you ever noticed how many people sound eminently credible when talking about them, even though they may actually be basing their views on conjecture, false facts and blind guesswork?

There is a real danger in making the 'facts' fit the opinion, rather than the other way around – which is exactly the point at which someone with an eye on the latest buzzwords will smugly insert the phrase 'post-truth' into the conversation, imagining its actually helpful.

So, we've asked the Jersey Policy Forum to add some robust material to those crucial local debates – the point is not to provoke agreement or acquiescence; it is to provide reliable material on which others can build their views.

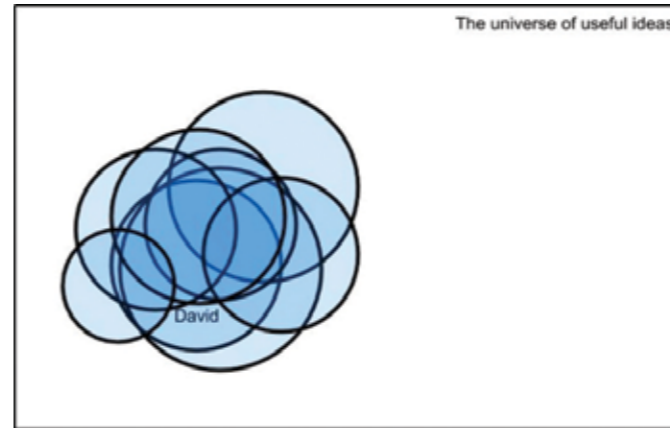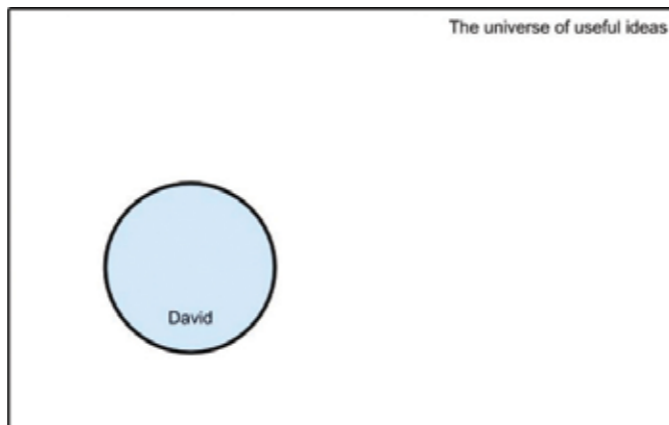By Gailina Liew, Executive Director, Jersey Policy Forum

Rebels, clones and hiPPOs

What do you think of when you hear these words? Let's use 'rebels' as an example. Some people might say "rock band", some "teenagers" or "insurgency", others "Star Wars", still others "anti-establishment", and the possibilities could go on. Why is this interesting and perhaps even crucially important to explore when we are confronted with challenges? Well, as Matthew Syed describes in his book, Rebel Ideas – The Power of Thinking Differently, it might help us to develop better solutions, and might have even averted some disasters that resulted in significant harm and lost lives. So, what is he talking about?
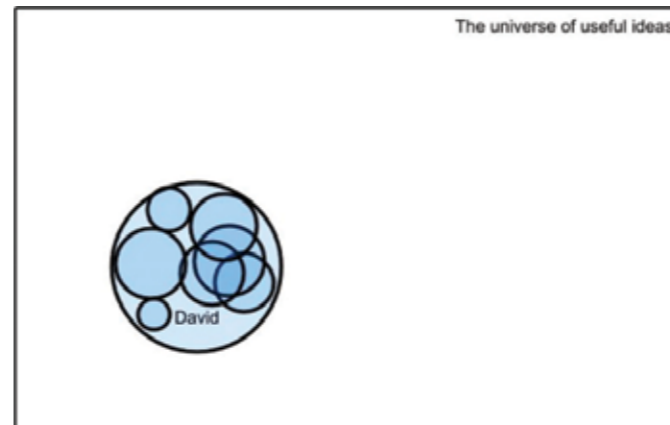
The book's main theme is about the importance of cognitive diversity in a team setting and how the dynamics within the team can enhance or destroy the ability of the group to solve complex challenges. It sounds complicated but Syed found a way to use simple diagrams to explain.

Let's say that the rectangle below shows the 'problem space' or the 'universe of useful ideas' that captures all of the thinking styles, experience, knowledge and insights that are relevant to solving a problem. David is the circle – he's super smart and very experienced but he doesn't know everything in the universe.
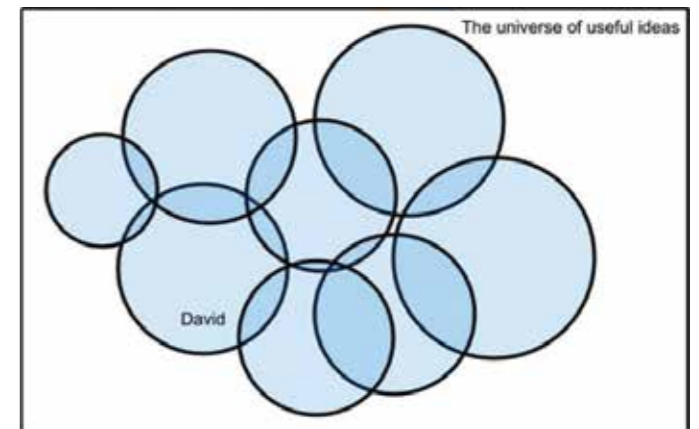

David reaches out to his mates – perhaps they went to school together, grew up in the same immigrant community, or worked in similar occupations – to build his team. This team might be visually diverse with people from different genders and ethnicities but they probably approach problem-solving in very similar ways. Syed calls this a team of clones. Each member of the team might also be super smart but they collectively cover very little of the overall universe of useful ideas and don't know what they don't know. The collective intelligence of the group is not much greater than David's alone. Syed attributes the CIA's failure to recognize Osama Bin Laden as a threat leading up to the 9/11 attack in the United States as an example of this team dynamic.

The collective intelligence of the team is further reduced if David is at the top of a hierarchical structure where he exerts his dominance and doesn't tolerate different opinions from his own and/or he only hires

team members who have less knowledge or experience. This is the HiPPO scenario where the 'highest paid person's opinion' defines the limits of the team's collective intelligence. According to Syed, teams with HiPPOs and clones tend to be collectively blind. So, how do we cover more of the universe of useful ideas in our problem-solving?

A team where members have different areas of knowledge and experience that have some overlap with various team members but can work constructively together and focus on a common objective, will be able to cover more of the problem space. These are rebels with a cause. The team interaction might not feel as good as it might in a team of clones. Because each member has a different perspective, each also has to work hard to listen to and understand the perspectives of fellow rebels but the outcome is generally better because more of the universe of possibilities is covered, This team is collectively intelligent.

But, diversity that is not relevant or germane to the challenge does not lead to better solutions. Grouping together an expert skateboarder, a builder, a waiter and a nurse – even if they span a range of ethnicities, genders and ages – will not likely lead to better economic forecasting. Syed would say that these are rebels without a cause and they would be collectively unintelligent for the problem at hand because their areas of expertise lie outside of the rectangle.

This is just a sampling of the content covered in Syed's book – definitely worth a read if you're interested in understanding how people can work more effectively together.