

SERIAL INNOVATORS AND THEIR MANAGEMENT WHEN CREATIVITY HAS TO DELIVER, WHEN INNOVATION HAS TO BE PRODUCED

Maryse Curutchet discusses some of the outcomes of a study she conducted in 2002 of a company for which Innovation is core business - a Technology and Innovation firm in Cambridge which derives its revenues principally from creating and developing business opportunities, products and services for clients.

Increasingly businesses see innovation as the highway to recovery, growth, survival, value and wealth creation. Those that are spectacularly good at innovation, the likes of Apple, Google, Pixar, Amazon, Nike and Xerox have become case studies and role models to the rest.

In a 2007 survey of 601 senior executives in late 2007, Accenture found that “most of the companies surveyed are pursuing business strategies that depend on a stream of innovation. Eighteen percent say that they intend to totally transform their businesses over the next few years. Another 44 percent say they use innovation to drive high growth rates and continually renovate the core business.”

Advice to those who strive for successful innovation abounds. A recurring theme is the need for top management commitment: top management will make available the necessary budgets, foster a culture which supports creativity and facilitates innovation.

As Dr Graeme Codrington tells us in the July-September 2008 edition of the Wits Business School Journal “Just like there is nothing we can do to make plants grow, there is nothing we can do **directly** to make innovation happen. The best we can do is ensure that all the ingredients are in place and that the right conditions for growth exist, and then stand back and wait...”.

Certainly, experience and research both indicate that in the absence of these “ingredients” people are unlikely to deliver useful innovative solutions.

Yet large budgets are no guarantee, culture and processes not sufficient. Whether or not innovation will result is still somewhat of a gamble.

The question is, once the pre-requisites are in place, how do we enhance the odds?

For some companies Innovation is core business - such as the Cambridge Technology and Innovation firm studied in 2002 which derives its revenues from creating and developing business opportunities, products and services for clients.

For such businesses the need to get innovation right is unrelenting. Creativity has to deliver, Innovation has to be produced within defined periods - and it does, month after month, project

after project. Delving into such a company, we found a combination of factors that work together to deliver innovation month after month.

Firstly, the members of the teams that are put together to innovate (the innovation teams) share individual characteristics that differentiate them clearly from the general norm.

Secondly, the members of the company's management team too share very distinct profiles. As a group they are clearly different from the general norm. They are similar to the innovation teams in some important ways, and sharply different from the innovation teams in other respects.

Thirdly the kind of interactions and collaboration that these characteristics on each side enabled were key to delivering profitable innovation.

THE INNOVATION TEAMS

What do these people who regularly produce profitable innovation (the members of the innovation teams) have in common that is different from the general norm?

Here are some of the things they are STRONGLY inclined to:

- Think things through in depth and in detail, reject sloppy thinking
- Enjoy solving problems, the more "impossible" the better
- Immerse themselves in a problem area thoroughly
- Evaluate problems and opportunities carefully

At the same time:

- Make extensive use of existing know-how however dated, in the creative process
- Be drawn to fast changing environments
- Take risks, play with ideas.

For example PARC, Xerox's Palo Alto Research Centre, has work-practice specialists who noticed that 40% of the paper used in offices typically went into the garbage at night. This led to the invention of re-usable paper - write notes on it today, tonight it's blank - use it again tomorrow...It is an invention without current commercial use - but interesting to our serial innovators...

- Cooperate.

They are NOT inclined to:

- Control, monitor the work of others or give feedback
- Compete, win races, beat deadlines

Our serial innovators also have interesting attitudes towards authority, consensus, collaboration and empathy. Put together, the preferences, characteristics and attitudes described above seem to aid their innovativeness. It takes specific management talent and behaviour to enable them to produce high levels of *commercially viable* innovation.

THE MANAGEMENT TEAM

So what do those who manage innovative teams successfully have in common that distinguishes them from the general managerial norm?

They are STRONGLY inclined to:

- Make decisions, take charge, assert their authority, address conflict (e.g. for resources), create focus and direction, address paradoxes, set limits.
- Compete, strive to win
- Delegate meaningful and motivating assignments
- **NOT** provide systems or methods

In these dimensions they differ markedly from the innovative teams they manage. They differ from their teams also in that they only have an average interest in thinking, creating, innovating, or solving problems.

They have some **MARKED CHARACTERISTICS IN COMMON** with their teams of innovators.

- They are indifferent to authority
- They have a very low interest in consensus

Serial Innovators owe their success firstly to their own characteristics and preferences and secondly to those of their managers. The way these two groups interact and collaborate is key to success through innovation.

Management Dimensions has developed an in-depth understanding of these success factors and how they apply in different business contexts.