



INNOVATION success is often attributed to individuals with outstanding attributes. Examples of such so-called innovation champions include Rudolf Wanzl Senior who started the corporate success story of the world leader in shopping carts and airport baggage carts (Wanzl) as a locksmith in Giebau (Sudetenland) in 1918; Nespresso's former CEO Jean-Paul Gailard who turned (n)espresso into a very profitable luxury brand; and the "Father of the Digital Revolution", Steve Jobs.

The champion concept can be traced back to MIT professor Donald A Schoen who observed in a 1963 study on radical military-related innovations that they were often driven by extraordinarily engaged persons who played a key role throughout the entire process from ideation to implementation: "The champion must be a man willing to put himself on the line for an idea of doubtful success."

Champions are the individuals who emerge to take creative ideas (which they may or may not have generated) and bring them alive. Their role is critical as innovation implies change (innovations can range from small incremental improvements, such as Nabisco's extension of the Oreo product line, to radical breakthroughs, such as Toyota's battery-fuelled Prius), insecurity, resistance and risks.

Strong self-belief

A famous risk-taking innovator is German physician Werner Theodor Otto Forssmann (1904-1979) who received the 1956 Nobel Prize in medicine (together with A Courmand and D Richards) for performing the first human cardiac catheterisation in 1929. The story goes that he ignored his department head when he passed the catheter into his heart via a vein of his arm, a risky self-attempt which could have cost him his life.

A similar narrative surrounds the development of the laser printer by Xerox researcher Gary Starkweather who faced enormous headwinds from colleagues and his own manager who regarded this new laser technology as impractical and too expensive.

Research has shown that innovation champions have unique personality traits,

To innovate, hire the 'wrong' people

Business leaders must use diagnostic frameworks to examine the extent to which entrepreneurialism, creativity and continuous learning is promoted within their organisation. **By Thomas Menkhoff**

such as high self-esteem in combination with extraversion and an unwillingness to adjust their behaviour in line with social norms.

While these so-called low self-monitors with their somewhat uncompromising traits can drive their bosses and colleagues crazy, they add very significant value to a firm's creativity and innovation performance, for example in terms of new product development.

The problem is that they are not seldom regarded as difficult employees, as outlined by Stanford Professor Robert I Sutton in a 2001 *Harvard Business Review* article entitled "The Weird Rules of Creativity".

Such perceptions are in stark contrast with their actual behaviour as they seek to foster cross-functional communication and collaboration within the organisation (stimulating discussions and decisions about innovation projects) or ensure that scarce resources are distributed correctly in support of strategic development and commercialisation objectives.

Organisational research has shown that innovation champions display very effective (transformational) leadership behaviour such as knocking down barriers to the innovation, getting problems into the hands of those who can solve them or not giving up when others say that it cannot be done.

This often requires a combination of pursuing both autonomous (pursuing new ideas independently) and horizontal (gathering support by colleagues) strategies rather than vertical (authorisation through superiors) approaches.

Real champions

Depending on the culture of an organisation, bosses who are being consulted by their employees with regard to new ideas (aimed at authorising them) may consider such employees as uncreative and unimaginative. "Real" champions take charge and challenge complacency.

If they are in senior management positions, they provide a compelling innovation vision, including the necessary re-

sources to get things done. They "walk the innovation strategy talk" with a clear sense of purpose, command and conviction.

They are enthusiastic and confident about the success of the innovation, persist under adversity (eg in cases where they decide to disobey their "ignorant" superiors) and get the right people involved in the organisation.

Unfortunately, corporate reality often differs from such a scenario. Often, insufficient attention is given to the people-oriented determinants of innovative culture, ie values, behaviours and organisational climate.

Business leaders who wish to check the innovative health of their own corporate culture are well-advised to utilise diagnostic frameworks to examine the extent to which entrepreneurialism, creativity and continuous learning is promoted within the organisational culture or to shed light on the ability to effectively ideate, seeing the gaps, prototyping, going to market and making deals.

Champions such as Steve Jobs are the individuals who emerge to take creative ideas (which they may or may not have generated) and bring them alive. Their role is critical as innovation implies change, insecurity, resistance and risks.

The success (or failure) of any innovation initiative, whether accidental or intentional, is contingent upon the respective organisational (business) model. Organisational culture, communications, power distribution, human resource engagement, etc, has an impact upon what works and what doesn't.

Focus and diversity

In their book *Making Innovation Work*, Tony Davila et al listed nine levers of culture that affect innovation. One of these levers is what the authors call "focus and diversity". Innovative organisations must master these conflicting goals of focus and diversity if they want to create and extract sustainable value from innovations.

While being focused adds value in a stable business environment, extreme focus can lead to inflexibility and slow responsiveness in times of rapid change as illustrated by the corporate decline of German camera maker Rollei.

Embracing diversity in talent, ideas, and methods can ensure that the organisation excels in periods of change as evidenced by the success of Google. Attracting and retaining the "wrong" (diverse) people such as enthusiastic and "bull-headed" innovation champs can be a wise approach to combat group think in favour of greater innovativeness – provided trust, collaboration and cultural diversity are managed optimally.

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