



The Characteristics of a Premium Innovation Leader

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Abstract

This paper discusses the characteristics of an individual who successfully leads an innovation (premium innovation leader) in an organization, as well as the key attributes that such an individual must consistently exhibit for employees, subcontractors, and customers to eagerly participate in the ideation and development of new products, services, or ideas. The author examines the various definitions of innovation, the question whether or not organizations must innovate, the centrality of a leader in the innovation process, as well as the characteristics of an individual (leader) who successfully leads innovation in an organization.

In this paper, the author discusses five essential characteristics namely: recognition of the divine nature of innovation, prioritization of innovation, courageous and risk-taking character in leadership, consistent and persuasive leadership communication, and cultivation of an innovative culture. Other characteristics addressed include dealing with innovative antibodies, development and mentoring of other leaders, and the use of rewards in the motivation and promotion of innovation. The author concludes by asserting that for organizations to succeed in innovating, premium leadership is a must have.

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From United Nations conferences to Fortune 500 companies' boardrooms, the conversation on how to go beyond the conformity crisis that threatens to make many organizations extinct continues to confound many. In his contribution to this thorny issue, global futurist, social scientist and a visionary business advisor James Canton described innovation as the perfect antidote and fundamental DNA for resolving the conformity crisis challenge. Innovation is "creating new opportunities for spreading ideas and business models, opening markets, fueling collaboration, enhancing global competition, and empowering individuals—not just businesses to achieve success" explains Canton. While annexing their thoughts to those of Canton, researchers and authors of *Making Innovations Work*, Tony Davila, Marc Epstein, and Robert Shelton opined that "innovation provides incremental improvements to existing products and services that help maintain market share and support margins." More importantly, innovation, at a radical scale, changes the rules of the game and produces the next new thing. It is this "new thing" that creates highly competitive and customer dynamics thus driving significant growth.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the characteristics of an individual who successfully leads innovation in an organization as well as the key attributes that such a leader must consistently exhibit for employees, subcontractors, and customers to eagerly participate in the ideation and development of new products, services, or ideas. The paper further examines how these premium innovation leaders demonstrate the characteristics necessary for all countries throughout history.

Innovation Defined

The definition of the term "innovation" varies with different authors and scholars. Innovation is derived from the Latin verb *innovare* or *novus*, explains Gary Oster, a Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Regent University and author of *The Light Prize*. In their article *Innovation*, Costello, the CEO of UpStream and Prohaska, the Vice President of Global Information Technology, defined innovation as "new" or doing something different. Scott Berkun, a renowned author of *Myths of Innovation*, defined innovation as making something new. Berkun went on to compare innovation with exploration since he argued that it was difficult to "find something new if you limit your travels to places others have already found." Berkun has therefore implored organizations and their teams to venture into the unknown to innovate.

Jon-Arild Johannessen, a Professor at the Norwegian School of Management, likened innovation to newness. In their contribution to this agenda, innovation authors Lam and Chin further defined innovation as the "ability to make positive changes in products, services, processes, and current methods." Malaya University dons, Siti Hajar Mohd Roffeei, Farrah Dina Yusop, and Yusniza Kamarulzaman described innovation as the "introduction of something new, or changes of doing or seeing things." According to the trio, this 'something new' could be ideas, behaviors, knowledge, skills, products, services, processes, methods of production or management systems. Authors Davila, Epstein and Shelton considered innovation not only crucial in providing an opportunity to grow and survive but essential in significantly influencing

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the direction of the industry since innovation can be supposed to be a capability fused to the core of the organization. A close analysis of these definitions points to one word, "new," which implies change. To innovate is to, therefore, bring about something new, which entails change.

Must Organizations Innovate?

The options are primarily two. Organizations should innovate, grow and thrive, or they can choose not to innovate, become irrelevant, outdated and eventually die. According to Davila, Epstein, and Shelton, innovation is not a 'nice to have' but a mandatory choice for survival. In his similar perspective to that of Davila, Epstein, and Shelton, the author of *Innovate or Evaporate* David Ward, Jr., said that "innovation has moved from being an option to think about doing, to a requirement and a need the organization must implement to stay in business." Organizations should therefore innovate. However, the journey of innovation should never be considered complete at the ideation phase. Instead, organizations need to go for the long haul to successfully execute the innovation idea since this is the crucial determinant factor between winners and losers, or survivors and perishers, explains Davila, Epstein, and Shelton. This notwithstanding, organization need to remain alert to Berkun warning that innovations do fail unless they reach the people they are intended to impact.

The Centrality of Leadership in an Innovation Process

Effective leadership is pivotal in realizing successful innovation. Research findings from 600 global business executives, managers, and professionals singled out leadership capabilities as the most critical determinant factor in achieving successful innovation, observed innovation advocates, Shahin and Bakhshi. It is leadership that charges in defining the innovation strategy, providing guidance on the style of change the organization should seek, and in encouraging a genuinely significant value creation, explains Davila, Epstein, and Shelton. Leadership is also vital in motivating other innovator followers. As innovation authors, Barsh, Capozzi, and Davidson noted in their article *Leadership and Innovation*, a strong leader who spends time managing and driving change, becomes that single most important factor in motivating behavior that promotes and sustains innovation in an organization.

Innovation *per se* is not enough. Successful innovation is the real deal since this is what differentiates the losers and winners. Achieving this success, however, requires excellent leadership. While sharing his perspective on the centrality of leadership in realizing successful innovations, Oster opined that "regardless of the size of a corporation, division, plant, or department, successful innovation is always guided by an inquisitive, knowledgeable, focused, visionary and energetic leader." In Oster's view, the greatest challenge of innovation in organizations is not lack of ideas. It is often the management of the innovation process in "such a way that the organization continually maximizes its return on people, money, facilities, and time." This approach to innovation management explains why the role of premium leadership is critical in the successful administration of an innovation process.

Characteristics of an Individual Who Successfully Leads Innovations

Innovating organizations must have a leader who possesses certain qualities. The reason is that innovation is both sophisticated and risky and hence the need for highly capable leaders. Below are some of the “must have” qualities for such leaders.

Recognition of the Divine Nature of Innovation

The tendency to focus on self and fail to recognize that the innovative human capabilities can be limited is a potential killer when it comes leading innovation. According to Oster, although every person is creative and innovative, the capacity to innovate was inbuilt in every human being by God, the Chief Innovator. Therefore, leaders must recognize that their ability to innovate has everything to do with their staying connected to God, the Great Innovator and that outside Him, man’s innovative power is limited. Any leader, therefore, who chooses to solely rely on their human knowledge, understanding, creativity and creative energy minimizes the opportunities to lead innovation successfully.

Paul's words in the Book of Ephesians reflect the divinely created nature of our innovation capability: “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...*” According to renown theologians and authors, Rydelnik and Vanlaningham, the word “*workmanship*” comes from the Greek word *poiema*, which means “something that is made” or created to do good works. Professor Oster agreed with this perspective when he asserted that “innovation is a biblical relationship allowing individuals a special mechanism for experiencing and communicating with God and to ultimately accomplish His earthly will for Mankind.” This recognition is essential in that it drives innovation leaders towards establishing and nurturing a relationship with God, the Great Innovator.

Prioritization of Innovation

Since innovation is a risky affair due to the unknown future, many leaders avoid to plan for and prioritize it in their management agenda. In such circumstances, leaders undertake innovation as a last-minute option to save a company from extinction. While countering this *laissez-faire* leadership style, authors Barsh, Capozzi, and Davidson in their article *Leadership and Innovation* argued that integrating innovation with the management and organization’s agenda is the number one quality of a leader who successfully leads new change. Effective innovation leadership is not accidental. According to Davila, Epstein, and Shelton, the art of prioritizing innovation demands that a premium innovation leader first employs a forward-looking perspective, which involves a thoughtful examination of business objectives and innovative strategy to ensure alignment. Second, Davila *et al.* opined that an innovation leader also employs a backward-looking perspective, which reviews recent innovation performances for learning purposes. By prioritizing innovations, the premium innovation leader communicates to

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the followers, customers, and partners that changes are essential to the organization's agenda and strategy.

Prioritization entails deliberate allocation of specific resources (time, human and financial) towards ideation, research, development, and execution of innovation. Since there is no silver bullet or formula or structure for innovative works for every organization, authors Davila, Epstein and Shelton are of the view that leadership should invest in research to identify those innovations with the highest likelihood of success and accord them the senior management attention. The trio, however, warns that any successful innovative change must embrace both research and development (R&D), and strategic (business model) since focusing on only one of the two will not produce successful and sustained innovation.

The development of human resource should receive utmost consideration when prioritizing innovations. "For an organization to effectively innovate into the future, its senior leaders must identify, train, nurture and mentor the leaders of tomorrow" asserts Oster. Capacity building of leaders is essential due to the limitation of critical human skills. According to Futurist Canton, the competition between organizations for the smartest, most talented and highly skilled individuals is the most significant threat facing the future of human resource. Leadership development must become an essential component when prioritizing innovation.

Courageous and Risk-taking Leadership

Innovating is a risky, costly, and time-consuming venture. A good example is the case of Apple and its daring and risk-taking leader, Steve Jobs. As Costello and Prohaska observed, Apple's investment in bringing the iPod to the market had the potential of diverting money from marketing or production to research and development. This potential diversion of funds, however, did not cow Steve Job from taking the challenge of innovation head-on. In his paper, *Corporate Courage*, innovation advocate Mel Perel noted that although most CEOs cite innovation as essential for their survival, in reality, they lack the courage to embrace change or take a long-term view of their businesses. In his Book *Exploring Christian Ethics*, Kyle Fedler, Assistant Professor of Religion at Ashland University described courage as what makes a leader stand up for his or her convictions in the face of ridicule or outright attack. In their Book *Virtues and Vices*, Kevin Timpe and Craig Boyd defined courage as the "characteristic which allows us to face up to our fears and overcome obstacles for the sake of some deeply-cherished value." Through courage, premium leaders stand up for their strong persuasions and challenge any form of conformity threatening the survival of their organizations.

Courageous leadership is essential in dealing with entropy. As Oster observed, entropy tends to occur in organizations that have grown large and where most employees have limited or no direct contact with customers. Oster has therefore warned organizational leaders that "ignoring the inevitability of entropy, the propensity of an organization to decline, degenerate, and drift leads to death." The need to address entropy is important since entropy does not vanish by being ignored. Instead, entropy tends to "calcify around products, procedures, and people that brought success in the past" explains Oster. In Oster's view, the antidote to this

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organizational ossification is active leadership which influences individuals towards change, promotes a specific agenda, marshals resources and employs them towards desirable change. Courageous leadership is equally important in the development of the innovative structure. According to Davila, Epstein, and Shelton, successful innovation takes place under an organizational structure that is intentionally systematic, orderly, and focused.

The other challenge that calls for courageous leadership is innovative antibodies. As Oster observed, it is the responsibility of an innovative leader to mitigate the effect of these devil's advocates who not only have the potential to wreak havoc on the organization's corporate future but are usually determined to slow or eliminate any innovation within the organization. Although "organizations sometimes aid and abet innovation antibodies by rewarding employees for their allegiance to the historical past of the company," asserts Oster, courageous and risk-taking leadership will ensure innovative antibodies do not derail an innovation.

Consistent and Persuasive Leadership Communication

A premium innovation leader is pretty aware that an "organizational innovation vision cannot be a one-time pronouncement or a fluffy management goal buried in the back pages of the annual corporate report," explains Oster. The frequency and amount of time allocated to the communication of any innovative idea speaks much about the value that leadership tags on an innovation. While emphasizing the importance of communication, leadership communication experts Michael Hackman and Craig Johnston described communication as complex since it involves more than one person, negotiations, and understanding of shared interpretations. As such, a premium leader needs to ensure that his or her message is well packaged and effectively delivered to the target audience for enhanced participation and support by innovation followers.

Leadership communication says much about the organizational culture. In his Book *Great Communication Secrets of Great Leaders*, John Baldoni, a Management Communications Consultant argued that effective leadership communication is vital in that it carries with it those messages from a leader that are rooted in the values and culture of an organization. Considering the benefits of leadership messages to stakeholders, such as employees, customers, strategic partners, shareholders, and the media, Baldoni advises leaders wishing to succeed in leading innovations to take leadership communication seriously since it is "designed to engage the listener, gain commitment, and ultimately create a bond of trust between leader and follower." Baldoni further explains that persuasive and consistent leadership communication drives results, enabling leader and follower to work together more efficiently since the two understand the issues and know what has to be done to accomplish the agreed-upon objectives. To adequately convey their message, leaders should employ various communication techniques such as email, staff meetings, conferences, newsletters or a combination of these methods.

Cultivation of a Great Innovative Culture

It is not enough to prioritize innovation. It is equally important to develop a unique innovation culture. In Perel's observation on organizational behavior and innovation, he noted that "organizations are by nature predisposed to reject the conditions of change, uncertainty and the risk that underpins breakthrough innovation." This attitude is typical of most CEOs and ends up killing innovations. However, a leader who successfully leads innovation change in an organization overcomes such attitude and behavior by cultivating an innovative culture that considers new ideas as precious corporate assets. Such a culture promotes the creative capabilities of mavericks and experimenters, explains Mel. In his Book, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, culture expert Edgar Schein opined that leaders are the primary developers and shapers of institutional culture. As a result, effective leaders should endorse a culture of innovation by prioritizing the innovation agenda in their communication, resource allocation, vision, and strategic priorities.

A significant innovation culture supports the creation of new ideas and their implementation. In their paper *Determinants of Innovation Culture Amongst Higher Education Students*, authors Roffeei, Yusop, and Kamarulzaman advanced that innovative culture verbally and non-verbally communicates organizational values and beliefs in a way that aligns individual and corporate behaviors towards promotion of innovations. Such a culture appreciates that innovation is a process that has "no overnight successes but just many short-term failures leading to longer-term successes," explains Oster. A culture that recognizes and embraces failure as part and parcel of an innovation process is foundational since innovation is primarily about venturing into the unknown, asserts Berkun. In Berkun's view, the ability to embrace failure is the kind of attitude which is consistent among all great innovator.

An innovative culture also nurtures the use of rewards to motivate diligent innovators. As Oster opined, employees respond positively to the creation of appropriate metrics and rewards for innovation. Rewards are a form of recognition and appreciation for work done well. By cultivating an innovative culture that aligns rewards with the right change, the leader ensures that innovators stay motivated and supportive of new and ongoing innovations, explains Davila, Epstein, and Shelton. Preference for rewards varies with generational types. In their Book *What Millennials Want from Work*, authors Jennifer Deal and Alec Levenson explained that millennium employees prefer an integrated incentive system that blends monetary and non-monetary rewards. Although these Generation Y employees are particularly interested in well-paying jobs, substantial financial benefits, praise, challenging responsibility and a flexible work environment, these high energetic innovators will trade a high paying job for freedom in managing their schedule, says Deal and Levenson. A healthy innovative culture takes into consideration such generational dynamics.

Conclusion

The conversation on how to confront the conformity crisis that threatens to make many organizations extinct continues to be a top agenda for every leader who cares about the survival of their organization. As Futurist Canton opined, innovation is the perfect antidote and fundamental DNA to resolving this conformity crisis. Definitions from various authors show that innovation is about creating or developing something new and therefore every organization needs to innovate to survive. Finances and technology are not enough to bring about innovation. Premium or effective leadership is the critical factor when it comes to leading a successful innovation in an organization.

What characteristics should such an individual possess to qualify as a successful innovation leader within an organization? Some of the essential qualities include recognition of the divine nature of innovation, prioritization of innovation, courageous and risk-taking leadership, consistent and persuasive leadership communication, cultivation of a great innovative culture, mitigation of innovative antibodies, and destruction of entropy in an organization. Innovation is not optional for any organization that wishes to survive and thrive in today's changing environment. However, for innovation to succeed, the organization needs a premium innovation leader.

About the Author

Annah Kyoya is a third-year student in Doctor of Strategic Leadership Program at Regent University. Before beginning her doctoral program, Annah facilitated humanitarian and development programs in 12 African countries with World Vision International and Build Africa, Kenya. Annah is the founder and CEO of Leadership Impressions Ltd., leadership, and development consulting firm. Please contact the author at Annakyo@mail.regent.edu.
