

Outlining what it takes to foster innovation can be quite elusive. Two keen innovation researchers share what they have learned through their persistent, action-oriented research.

# Leading the Innovation Revolution: Will the Real Spartacus Stand Up?

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In the 1960 Academy Award-winning movie “Spartacus” the Roman commander, Crassus, attempts to identify Spartacus, a former slave and gladiator, who became the legendary leader of a genuine social revolution. The prisoners, even at the risk of their own deaths by crucifixion, would not reveal the identity of their revolutionary leader. Instead many cried out, “I am Spartacus!” to protect their hero at any cost.

While Hollywood took significant liberties with the story of Spartacus, his courage, tenacity, and ability to hold Roman forces at bay for two years by building a handful of followers into a formidable army and revolutionary force can only inspire admiration.

Do you think many business or government leaders today could inspire such a commitment from

their followers—both internal and external stakeholders? If innovation is the new price of admission to market leadership as quality was in the 1980s and 1990s, how can we ensure that leadership is effectively focused on advancing an innovation agenda for organizational health and success? Here we lay out a framework for building innovation leadership capacity and highlight some examples of leading the innovation revolution in action. Let’s first look briefly at some trends that are influencing the challenge of leading innovation.

## **The innovation mantra**

The world has always needed innovation. From the invention of the wheel to the personal computer, to the Internet that truly makes this a global village, we have always been surrounded by day-to-day

evidence of the innovative spirit. So why is the need for innovation different today?

Three key factors: technology; global marketplace, and personal power. *Technology* is moving faster than at any time in the last 100 years and forcing business and government into uncharted territory faster than ever. We both applaud and fear the effects of changing technology. The harsh reality is that machines can and do replace people. Technology also paved the way for the *global marketplace*, where organizations no longer need to rely on local sources of supply. As geographic boundaries come down, the level of competition goes up.

The final, and possibly the most significant factor affecting life in today's organizations is the rising expectation of *personal power*. We are seeing less and less respect for formal authority and a rapid rise in expectations of personal rights. Formality and protocol are fast being replaced by a more outspoken, aggressive, and impatient style. People have naturally come to expect to voice their opinions, be heard, be treated well, and have the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their work and workplace.

Effective innovation leaders understand these factors and help others see the broader picture, so that they too can distinguish these important influences and anticipate how their work may evolve in the near future.

As many leaders recognize the need to strengthen their competitive and collaborative abilities, they turn to innovation as a new corporate mantra. Unfortunately, many fail to follow with the appropriate support systems and culture change that might ensure innovation does, indeed, become a rallying cry throughout the organization.

The most common approaches

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to “innovation” include:

- 1) *Cost cutting programs in search of greater efficiency.* These programs focus employees' efforts on getting better at what they already do. The assumption is the environment is relatively stable and any efficiencies identified will still be relevant. Unfortunately, many of these programs simply lead to downsizing. And, all too often, project lists and processes are not adjusted to reflect the new, leaner organization, leading to increased frustration and, paradoxically, more inefficiencies.
- 2) *Innovation is assigned to a special team or department.* Unfortunately, this approach often narrows the view of innovation to only new products or technological breakthroughs and misses other innovations that might be as or more effective.
- 3) *An organization-wide approach to innovation.* If innovation is truly to become the corporate objective, it should be embraced at all levels, departments, and functions. But how do we move beyond simply stating innovation is the corporate mantra to making it central to all organizational activities?

### **The building blocks of leading innovation**

We've developed an empirically-based model called Innovation Systems Architecture, (ISA) to

outfit any organizational entity—from teams to entire organizations—with a systematic way to create and sustain an organization-wide environment for innovation. The word architecture is especially important since the model is based on the building blocks needed for a strong organizational innovation foundation.

The model is based on extensive field research and practice. It identifies eight dimensions or pillars that support an architecture for sustained innovation. The eight pillars are:

1. Shared innovation vision and strategy.
2. Innovation environment supports.
3. Innovation resource allocation.
4. Innovation process networks.
5. Innovation programs.
6. Innovation skills development.
7. Innovation rewards and recognition.
8. External stakeholder innovation.

### **Unearthing the pillars of innovation**

To see how the infrastructure for organizational innovation is related to innovation leadership, let's take a look at three of these pillars in an applied context.

#### **Innovation Vision and Strategy**

Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop, identified a strong innovation vision for her organiza-

tion based on a set of core principles: fair trade, environmental awareness, animal protection, respect for human rights, and social campaigning, including support for local economies where the company's product ingredients were sourced. She then developed a strategy to integrate this vision into all business operations and products. Not only did The Body Shop leapfrog the competition in being people and Earth friendly, it also became well known for these guiding principles.

The Body Shop is a strong example of an organization whose leader clearly communicated that innovation was, indeed, a corporate goal, developed an innovation vision, and then focused the company's energies on becoming an innovation-centric organization. The evidence from the last 25 years certainly suggests The Body Shop team united behind Roddick's innovation vision and strategy, especially before the company went public. Employees want to work for organizations that have a strong vision and the passion to achieve that vision.

In "Business as Unusual" Roddick underscores her revolutionary perspective on business. Looking back over the years since the company's founding, Roddick asked herself, "Should I be a renegade, anarchic, loose cannon to stir them up? Or am I simply getting in the way?" She concluded that her role in the future should be that of agitator, "...an irritant, a gadfly, infusing creativity and creating an edge to everything The Body Shop does." Again, by relying on the core principles and values upon which her company was conceived, she is now seeking to transform her own

leadership role, in effect, by looking back to the future.

Above all, Roddick believes her legacy in the world of business is meant to be revolutionary, for she wants to nurture a revolution in

Kelleher has always treated every employee as an important contributor to the airline's success. Since he became chairman and CEO, he has made a sincere commitment to know Southwest employees in a

**"By looking for ways to cooperate with our competitors, we have found opportunities that we might otherwise have missed...."**

kindness. In many ways Anita Roddick authentically embodies the spirit of Spartacus. Like a gladiator and revolutionary leader in ancient Rome, she entered the arena of organizational innovation with vision, courage, and conviction, seeking to create entirely new ways of doing business and therefore willing to openly engage in face-to-face combat with those who would oppose her.

### **Innovation Environment Supports**

Today, as we have read, organizations not only have to compete for customers and financial resources, they have to compete for staff. Organizations that treat their employees with respect and provide a culture of support for personal and collaborative innovation will win in the coming years.

Innovation leaders need to create a secure environment in which employees can take harbor and relax long enough to contribute their best ideas for strengthening the organization. Herb Kelleher, co-founder of Southwest Airlines, is a good example of an innovation leader who created such a climate.

personal way. Eventually, this commitment became part of the company's philosophy whereby the employee is positioned as the number one priority. This philosophy is grounded in the belief that if the employee is inspired, inspiration will rub off on the customer who, in turn, will generate profits for the company and shareholders. Other organizations seem to put shareholders first, customers second, and employees third.

Kelleher knows employees want to be treated as important members of the team. At Southwest Airlines, listening authentically to employees is a core value and a critical environmental support for continuous innovation. Kelleher says, "...if somebody has an idea, you read it quickly and you respond instantaneously. You may say no, but you give a lot of reasons why you're saying no, or you may say we're going to experiment with it in the field, see if it works. But I think showing respect for people's ideas is very, very important because as soon as you stop doing that, you stop getting ideas. We tell people that if you need a suggestion box, then you're not doing what you should be

doing. You shouldn't have to interpose the box between you and the people with the ideas. You ought to be talking to them on a regular basis. You ought to be with your people enough that they are comfortable to just pop on in and give you their ideas."

Kelleher is certainly unique in many respects and his perspective on the employee worth ethic can even be termed revolutionary. A strong innovation leader will encourage everyone to challenge the status quo, challenge each other's thoughts, and experiment with alternative approaches. Moreover, this type of leader will strive to ensure the environment supports such attitudes and behaviors.

It is important to note, however, that an innovation leader does not have to build consensus. Experience shows that collaborative innovation, where ideas are developed based on collective experiences and the shared knowledge base of all stakeholders, allows leaders to retain responsibility for making the final decisions and moving the innovation process forward quickly. Collaborative innovation means that everyone participates to provide insights for the collective good. Because it is not limited to a single function, department, or organizational entity, collaborative innovation also requires greater attention to the complex mix of environment supports that are necessary for authentic stakeholder participation to take place.

### **External Stakeholder Innovation**

All too often organizations rely primarily on ideas generated from within, instead of capitalizing on ideas from inside and outside the

organization. Strengthening connections with external stakeholders (i.e., customers, partners, suppliers, regulatory agencies, and even competitors) can provide new sources of innovation to leverage for the firm's competitive advantage.

Engaging external stakeholders to advance an organization's innovation agenda does not have to be as charismatic or flamboyant as the Virgin Group's Richard Branson to be effective. Some of the best examples of leading external stakeholder innovation come from individuals who are much more subtle in their approach. Ryuzaburo Kaku, the honorary chairman of the board of Canon in Tokyo, Japan, is an excellent example of a more quiet innovation leader and a revolutionary. He served as president of Canon from 1977 to 1989 and was largely responsible for transforming it from a competent, but little-known, manufacturer of cameras into one of the world's leading technology companies.

Kaku was instrumental in putting "kyosei" at the heart of the company's business credo, which ultimately became its most cherished principle. Kyosei can best be defined as a spirit of cooperation in which individuals and organizations live and work together for the common good. According to Kaku, a company that is practicing kyosei establishes harmonious relations with its customers, suppliers, competitors, the governments with which it deals, and the natural environment. Kyosei, in this context, can become a powerful force for social, political, and economic transformation, and a source of continuous innovation for all individuals and entities that work together.

Among other things, kyosei helped Canon break through an important management taboo: working with competitors. Kaku says, "By looking for ways to cooperate with our competitors, we have found opportunities that we might otherwise have missed....When we first tried to form a partnership with Hewlett-Packard, the company gave us a cold shoulder. But when we presented our patents and demonstrated our technological abilities, Hewlett-Packard saw the advantages in buying laser-printer engines from us. As a result, Canon developed a long-standing and very profitable relationship with Hewlett-Packard even though the two companies remain fierce competitors."

Another example of this pillar of Innovation Systems Architecture is Aliant, a major telecommunications company in Atlantic Canada. Aliant's excellence in innovation has come largely from novel ways of interacting with customers and partners. Gerry Pond, an Aliant senior executive and recognized innovation champion, established a LivingLAB™ innovations environment, which has enabled the company to move ideas from concept to market quickly while providing continuous learning, opportunity, and innovation. This concept generates live market learning in new services and products by drawing customers, employees, and partners into a holistic "incubator" environment focused on what the company calls "electronic services integration."

In addition to being named 1997 Information Innovator of the Year, Pond maintains his commitment to tapping into broad-based sources of innovation by leveraging the knowledge, skills, and ideas of

external stakeholders for the company's—and broader community's—benefit. Within his organization, region, and industry, Pond has established himself not only as a leader of innovation, but also as a revolutionary who, like Spartacus, is not afraid to break ranks from the status quo and unleash his creative spirit.

### Long live the innovation revolution!

Peter Drucker said, “Innovation will be the core competency of the next (21st) century.” Companies that want to be 21st century leaders need organizational structures and processes that will evolve to accommodate this shift to innovation at the core of a company. To meet the employees’ desire for participation and involvement in decision making, companies must have more flexible operating structures. Open and adaptive systems are needed to allow ideas and work to flow quickly and seamlessly through the organization and into the marketplace. A strong innovation leader needs to:

1. Share the innovation vision and strategy with all stakeholders.
2. Create an innovation climate that welcomes and supports new ideas and encourages participation from all employees.
3. Expand and open organizational boundaries so that ideas can flow in from external sources.

In this article, we shared some examples of how innovation leaders, especially those who seem to operate at the fringe of their enterprise, industry, or sector, can and have put into practice these particular attributes and concepts. Obviously, there are more illustrations that could be presented. We will

leave the task of determining who else could or should be included to the readers with the hope that the message that we have tried to convey is clear.

Before closing, let's return to our role model, Spartacus. In real life and in the movie, Spartacus exemplified the leadership traits of an authentic revolutionary in body, mind, and spirit. He persevered through times of conflict and hardship, sometimes employing very radical techniques to express and achieve his objectives. You might now ask—does one have to be a Spartacus to lead the innovation revolution? Our answer? It depends. The more radical the idea or objective you are seeking, the more Spartacus-like you will have to be in order to achieve or realize it.

It is important to recognize that revolutions, by definition, do not flow in the same direction or with the same force as the mainstream and therefore are inclined to become the arenas wherein only trained gladiators are ready and willing to enter. From a leadership perspective, the innovation revolution should be approached with the same kind of holistic and systematic knowledge, skills, and attitudes that well served Spartacus and his gladiator comrades when they confronted the Roman Empire. Not only were they required to be strategic when plotting their next campaign move, they needed to be highly creative and courageous in their actions against a much more powerful foe. In our view, Anita Roddick, Herb Kelleher, Ryuzaburo Kaku, and Gerry Pond each demonstrate such leadership competencies and have earned the right to call out, “I am Spartacus!” It is our hope that all those who aspire to be the

Spartacus of innovation within their organization, industry, or sector, as well as those with less radical aims, will find our model of Innovation Systems Architecture, with its pillars of opportunity, to be a useful map in the quest to advance their own innovation agenda.



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