

# **Innovation Leadership - Leadership for Innovation**

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## **Innovation - a requirement**

Innovation. The critical ingredient to survival and success today, be it at the organisational or country level - or even the individual level! We hear about it all the time but often we see puzzled faces when we ask, what does that actually mean? What does innovation mean? Is it about technology? Is it about R&D (research & development)? Is it about patents? The answer of course is yes - AND! Over the past 20 odd years the meaning of innovation has expanded; it has expanded beyond 'product' and 'technology' to include 'process-focused innovation', 'service innovation', 'business model innovation' and most recently also 'social innovation'. The expansion in *what* innovation means and *where* it happens has come with an expansion in *who* is involved in innovation. Gone are the days where innovation is the domain of the dedicated privileged few, of the experts, of the geniuses. With the new landscape of innovation it has become everyone's responsibility - and everyone's opportunity!

## **Why all that talk about innovation, now?**

Is innovation a driver or a consequence? Is technology the driver of innovation or a consequence? Well, I actually think this is a bit of a 'chicken or egg' situation but perhaps it can be described as follows: from the beginning of time we humans have been experimenting, inventing, innovating to improve our social and economic conditions. Because humanity was spread so thinly originally, innovations spread rather slowly. Today innovations spread like wildfire - it took the radio 38 years to be adopted by 50 million people, it was only 4 years for the internet; even with the population growth between the invention of the radio and the invention of the internet, that's quite impressive.

At the bottom of this is that innovation happens when connecting different bodies of knowledge. The easier knowledge can be accessed, the more people have access to that knowledge, and the more knowledge there is, the greater the potential to innovate will be. As Thomas Friedman, author of 'The World is Flat', said, "It has become possible for more people to collaborate and compete in real time, with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet, on a more equal footing than any previous time in the history of the world." As the ambition of collaboration and innovation is (or should be) to improve existing

conditions, everyone aims to be part of the innovation race in order not to be left behind. (By the way, my definition of innovation is 'to embrace the path of change to create value'.)

Today's reality, so aptly described by Thomas Friedman, has far reaching implications for most things, - including leadership. Yet while we see changes in many places, there seems to be little change in how we think about, and educate for, leadership.

### **Innovating Leadership?**

Does it matter that there has been little fundamental change and development in the understanding of leadership?? I would argue, yes, very much so. Access to knowledge has made people better informed; as a consequence they have become more critical and are less inclined to follow without questioning. As everyone has access to the same knowledge, knowledge is no longer the domain of a few experts and hence the deference to the experts (and the willingness to follow them) is no longer the same. Being able to find people with shared interest, and have the tools to collaborate within easy reach, means more people follow their passion, feeling less bound to stay in roles and tasks they do not agree with. If you think the above is not relevant for the bulk of the workforce today, wait another 10-20 years and this will definitely hold true.

No one can convince me that traditional 'command and control' management and hierarchy-based leadership will continue to work with such a workforce. Just telling people what to do won't work any longer. These informed and independent people need to be persuaded, convinced, engaged. Succeeding at this is much more difficult; it requires different skill and tool sets, and it requires different relationships between leaders and led to what is common today. Therefore I believe very much that we need innovation in the field of leadership. By the way, we also need a new kind of leadership for innovation but that is perhaps an argument for another time. We need to ensure that leadership understanding and leadership education are keeping pace with the changes that are going on everywhere else. And that, as I would argue that such skills and tools are not part of mainstream management education, is why I believe that we need more MBIs (Master of Business Innovation), rather than more MBAs (Master of Business Administration).

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