

This paper was presented at the annual conference of the American Creativity Association, spring 2005.

Becoming an innovation evangelist

The passion and challenges of “intrapreneurship”

Intrapreneur’s 10 commandments

1. Come to work each day prepared to be fired
2. Circumvent any orders aimed at stopping your dream
3. Do any job needed to make your project work, regardless of your job description
4. Find people to help you
5. Follow your intuition about the people you choose, and work only with the best
6. Work underground as long as you can – publicity triggers the corporate immune mechanism
7. Never bet on a race unless you are running in it
8. Remember it is easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission
9. Be true to your goals, but be realistic about the way you achieve them
10. Honor your sponsors!

- Gifford Pinchot & Ron Pellman in “Intrapreneuring in Action”

Gifford Pinchot is the originator of the concept “intrapreneur”¹, and ever since I was exposed to his “10 commandments”, I knew that in my heart I’m an intrapreneur. The 10 Commandments reveal a tension between management and intrapreneurs, which I shall address later. First, let’s clarify the meaning of the word ‘*intrapreneur*’:

- “*The **entrepreneur** always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity*” Peter F. Drucker in “Innovation and Entrepreneurship”, 1985
- “*An **intrapreneur** is a corporate entrepreneur; this allows entrepreneurship to occur in an existing organization*” Robert D. Hisrich in “Entrepreneurship/Intrapreneurship”, American Psychologist, Vol. 45, No. 2, February 1990.
- “*In-tra-pre-neur, n. A person in a large corporation empowered to create new products without being constrained by standard procedures*”. The American Heritage College Dictionary, 3rd edition.

¹ *Intrapreneuring: Why You Don't Have to Leave the Corporation to Become an Entrepreneur* (1985)

“Orbiting the giant hairball”

Of the most fascinating descriptions of intrapreneurship unfolds in Gordon McKenzie's book, *“Orbiting the giant hairball”*², in which he describes his career as creative employee and manager at Hallmark. His metaphor of the ‘giant hairball’ refers to the corporation as a huge, grey mass. Everything that comes by gets attracted and disappears into the fluffy anonymity. Using this metaphor, McKenzie suggests some rules:

- *“Benefit from the physical, intellectual and philosophical resources of the organization without becoming entombed in the bureaucracy of the organization”*
- *“Invest enough individuality to counteract the pull of Corporate Gravity, but not so much that you escape that pull all together. Just enough to stay out of the Hairball”.*

To elaborate: If you, as a creative individual, insist so much on your originality that you fly away from the community, you will no longer contribute to the value creation – you are flying around in the loneliness of empty space. If you, on the other hand, let yourself be sucked into the organization to such degree that you lose your originality, you add nothing new and different to the same community.

The core of this balancing act is *staying in orbit around the organization* – close enough to create value – but distant enough to save your originality as a creative person.

My way of staying in orbit

I started my career as a small-scale entrepreneur, building up my own little consultancy within design and marketing. My first step into intrapreneurship was by becoming a Business Developer at one of my clients, Ericsson Denmark. Having worked as an independent consultant for a dozen of years I didn't dare to take the full step – I guess I feared the ‘giant hairball’ – so we agreed that I could work on a part time basis, allowing me to have some time left time for my own business. However, as I got more and more engaged at Ericsson, my own company was suffering until almost nothing was left.

I don't regret this; it was 4 extremely exiting years. Our Business Development team invented a new business concept, which in 1999 led to a new joint venture between Ericsson and Electrolux. It was an optimistic period, and we did actually ‘rock the boat’ – until everything was closed down again as the IT bubble burst in 2001.

I then considered building up my own consultancy again. However, after having tried the sweet taste of working in a global network of professionals within a large corporation, I chose a new job at Novo Nordisk, which is one of the largest companies in Denmark. We are a healthcare company with a

² Gordon McKenzie: *“Orbiting the giant hairball – A corporate fool's guide to surviving with grace”* – quotes from p. 33

leading position globally within diabetes care. I officially serve as an Innovation Manager at a subdivision of R&D, but since I cannot be put into a small box, I work across the entire company, as an internal coach and promoter of innovation as a mindset – an ‘innovation evangelist’.

The tension between Intrapreneurship and Management

Gifford Pinchot in his book compared the mentality of traditional managers versus intrapreneurs. According to Pinchot, traditional managers are extrinsically motivated by promotion, rewards, status symbols and the like and they try to keep a distance, both personally and to upcoming risks.

Intrapreneurs, on their side, are motivated by the passion for what they are doing, and they are willing to risk almost everything, including their job, to achieve their dreams.

I would add some differences in the perception within the two tribes. If you have been in an industry for many years – which top managers often have – you know the market, you know the technologies, you know the competitors etc. The problem is that your understanding can become too perfect – you forget to stay open to other ways of looking at it.

Intrapreneurs are more like world explorers. They are ignited by blank areas on the map; they want to explore other ways of doing business. Such ideas, however, can be hard to sell to traditional managers, who prefer to play it safe and stick to what is proven. I remember once at Ericsson, as we presented our visionary concept at headquarters, one person rejected it with the exact words, “*I believe only in what has been sold*”. To put such remark to an intrapreneur, of course, is like a red rag to a bull.

Managing intrapreneurship

Based on my experiences, I here suggest how managers could utilize the tension towards intrapreneurs fruitfully:

- **Set up bold and broad goals, “if we could only...”**

Top managers can play an important role by articulating what some researchers call ‘the holy grails’ of the industry³, “*if we could only...*”. Kevlar® fibers were invented as a result of such goal setting from the top management of DuPont. Intrapreneurs like to have challenging, visionary – and important – goals to work for. But they don’t like the goals to be detailed, too concrete; they should be broad enough to allow exploration.

- **Allow independency, but help, support and challenge the team**

Even intrapreneurs are lovers of independency, they like some guiding support. Top managers can support the team by setting the direction of the project. I have experienced it to be a very effective method to visualize a road map for the project, right from the beginning.

³ Richard Leifer et al: Radical Innovation – How mature companies can outsmart upstarts – Harvard, 2000.

- **Invite people with alternative mindsets**

It is important for everybody, managers as employees, not to get stuck in proven ways of thinking. Therefore the granted assumptions within the company should constantly be contrasted by inviting in all kinds of experts from alien professions or industries, or even odd up-comers from the periphery of your own industry, having seemingly absurd business models.

Such guidelines could facilitate intrapreneurship to bloom and create new value in a corporate setting. Remember, to rephrase Drucker: *“The intrapreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity”*.

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