

# Innovation leadership: roles and key imperatives

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The single most important factor in determining the success of innovation initiatives is having a leader and a team with the ability and passion to turn ideas into business reality, however most companies pay too little attention to the development of innovation leaders or their teams. Rather than looking at leadership characteristics in isolation, this research helps executives understand the strategic and organisational context and therefore to determine the necessary leadership roles and imperatives. The research comprised a review of academic literature in the area of innovation, and a series of five in-depth interviews with senior executives responsible for generating growth through innovation and new venture creation in leading organisations. It thus addresses the behaviour of successful practitioners, identifying good practices in the leadership and management of innovation teams.

A number of roles necessary for successful innovation were identified. Different skills are required throughout the life cycle of an innovation project and it is necessary to have the right people with the right skills at the right time. The process begins with thinkers generating ideas and ends with operators managing business adoption and benefits realisation. Yet research has shown that it is the innovation leaders – those people who bridge the gap between thinkers and operators, turning ideas into reality, together with their innovation teams and sponsors – who are the most vital to innovation success.

The research identified three distinct innovation situations (the Innovation Engine, the Private Portfolio, and Corporate New Venturing), each having a different structure and strategy for innovation, and each requiring a different type of leader and an emphasis on different roles. An Innovation Engine is an organisation, such as 3M, with a climate that is widely supportive of innovation. A Private Portfolio is an organisation, such as easyGroup, that is privately funded by an individual. Corporate New Venturing exists where a company has a well-defined core business, but also actively engages in separate innovation initiatives. This is illustrated by British Airways Enterprises and cahoot.

The characteristics of these three types of innovation leader (the Intrapreneur, the Entrepreneur, and the Extrapreneur) are described. Although Private Portfolio companies are uncommon, differences between the Entrepreneur and Intrapreneur are highlighted, which illustrates why even seasoned entrepreneurs may not succeed in the corporate situation. For Corporate New Venturing, it is more difficult to succeed without the benefit of a widely supportive climate, so innovation leaders need to have extra skills. These innovation leaders need to have the characteristics of the Intrapreneur, plus an 'extra' set of skills and capabilities, and have been labelled 'Extrapreneurs' by Henley-Incubator.

All the organisations interviewed used cross-functional teams, and the characteristics required of innovation team members are presented. Effective innovation teams are composed of people with different expertise, team roles, personalities, experience, and thinking styles. The characteristics and imperatives for Sponsors are also described. Finally, the research revealed a number of implications for the management practice of innovation leaders: creating a climate for innovation, recruiting for innovation, team building, managing innovation teams, rewarding innovation, developing skills, and finding and working with supporters.