

# Innovation roles for managers

Almost every organisation – charity, public body or private corporation – sees innovation as a key competency for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Philip Kotler, marketing guru says, “the *only* sustainable competitive advantages are creativity and innovation.” His argument goes that since it’s almost impossible to develop a service or product that will not be copied, the only way to stay ahead – or even perhaps to survive – is to keep reinventing the way you work.

Bill Gates the influential founder of Microsoft summarises the same idea in a very practical but challenging way: “In three years every product we make will be obsolete. The only question is whether we’ll make them obsolete or if someone else will.”  
(*Business @The Speed of Thought*: Warner Business Books, May 15, 2000.)

In the commercial field, after a massive rethink of the business it was in, IBM has moved from almost 90 years as a manufacturer of computers to being essentially a management consultancy in a decade. And in the charity world organisations like LEPRO – originally set up almost 80 years ago to tackle leprosy – have now moved on to deal with other illnesses such as HIV and Tuberculosis.

## A typology of roles

So what can we learn from these organisations? How do organisations sustain this innovation impulse? Part of the answer lies in the roles that managers play in stimulating innovation. The process of innovation and creativity is complex and involves many factors. But =mc’s experience suggests that for an organisation to succeed managers have to successfully encourage others to innovate. And they can do this by playing one of several roles.

We can divide these roles up into a simple typology. This download explores the different roles and the functions they can play.

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### ***Mentor***

The mentor is a key role in many organisations. As the name suggests they adopt individuals or even ideas, ensuring they achieve their full potential through careful nurturing throughout their life cycle. They have the power to agree specific support for individuals or ideas. They help organise connections with key decision makers if necessary. The mentor helps cut aside layers of bureaucracy to ensure appropriate innovation wins through and is recognised at the top. Does your organisation need you to be mentor? Who should you mentor?

### ***Gardener***

The gardener adopts a different approach. Essentially they see themselves as responsible for making sure that the organisational culture (which can be thought of as a garden) is capable of sustaining ideas (plants). So the emphasis is on creating a general culture where innovative ideas can flourish. Such a culture is probably supportive and allows experiment and risk. The gardener can of course look after or nurture ideas in their early stages. But there comes a time when ideas have to grow by themselves! And the strongest will succeed and blossom. Is your organisation capable of being an 'innovation' garden? What would you have to change to make it so?

### ***Talent scout***

The talent scout is, if you like, the complement to the mentor and gardener. Like the mentor she or he is focused on individual people. But their unique contribution is on seeking talent from 'outside.' They focus on identifying and hiring the best people and ensuring they come on board. These individuals can be new employees, secondees or even consultants. However, they are talent and are part of a process of re-inventing organisational energy through an influx of fresh blood. So does your organisation need talent? And if so what kind of talent?

### ***Catalyst***

A catalyst in science is something that produces a radical change in a normally stable substance. In the context of innovation, a catalyst is someone who stimulates people who work in an organisation with a constant supply of ideas and information. These

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stimuli can be trends or challenges that the organisation needs to respond to, or techniques being adopted and used elsewhere that the organisation should try and adopt. The catalyst role involves helping the existing structure to change by bringing together diverse elements – teams or individuals to create reaction. One point to note is that once you create the reaction you can't control it. Who could you bring together in your organisation to create a dramatic reaction or to work on an outstanding problem in a radical new way?

### ***Mash-up artist***

A mash-up artist is a phrase taken from music in which an artist combines elements from different songs – and even other media – to create something new. An innovation mash up artist is a manager who combines and controls in an organisational sense. They work hard to tear down silos, to mix up teams, to link unlikely ideas, and to bring in outsiders with the specific aim of challenging current thinking. The key difference with the Catalyst is that this time the artist is *directing* the process. Are you a mash-up artist capable of choosing different elements and ideas and combining them in unusual ways.

### ***Ethnographer***

An ethnographer is someone who studies and learns from human behaviours across cultures and generations. In an innovation sense they search for needs and interests that are not yet met or even fully expressed by the organisation's customers or users. So for example, they might identify that users of a service are increasingly concerned about access to a service at night and therefore would change patterns of staff hours or offer online support to meet this need. Which group of customers or users might you study to gain some insights into how to change your work? What insights might that offer you?

### ***Venture intellectual capitalist***

This role acts as a fund-holder who can invest in and support ideas and new offerings. They generate and sustain a portfolio of new offerings with fast return and high RoI x 2. (Return on *Investment* and Return on *Innovation*.) They tend to be a budget holder with a relatively free rein and a good mind for spotting long shot-ideas with a chance to succeed. It's important to allow the venture *intellectual* capitalist to be judged across a whole portfolio rather than on a case-by-case basis. Could you get your hands on a

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budget? And if you could, what would you support with it? Would you use prizes or awards? What are your criteria for choosing new ideas?

## When to use the roles

You probably don't need all of these roles in your organisation but you certainly need some. And their appropriateness can vary depending on the culture of your organisation.

Ethnographers research culture a great deal and look for ways that customers are using certain products and services and then work to adapt them. A similar approach is suitable for an organisation like Greenpeace, who global campaigns on an issue but needs to adapt them to different cultures. Greenpeace's recent *Defending the Whales* campaign existed in a number of different forms.

Oxfam, on the other hand, adopts a more gardening approach with the role of innovation firmly located in learning and development. The task there is to create an organisational framework in which others can succeed and innovate. This is similar to the 3M company who famously reinvented themselves after failing to spot the potential of the post it. (For more on this see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-it\\_note](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-it_note)).

## Need more help?

If you would like to learn more then join us for =mc's ***Breakthrough Creativity & Innovation***. In this challenging and demanding 1-day programme you will explore systematic approaches on how to generate, improve and implement new ideas.

## Breakthrough Creativity & Innovation

For further information and to book your place, please visit

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