

20. Knowledge, Skills and Talent

Once upon a time, certain Miss Frog was living in Swamp City. But, unlike others of the kind, she was determined to escape the fate of spending entire life crawling in the mud. So, one day she approached wise Mrs. Owl and asked her for advice: "What should I do to make my dream come true". And her dream, of course, was to fly. "It is quite simple", answered Mrs. Owl, "Spread your wings and then you can wave us goodbye from the sky!". "But how could I do it, I have no wings?", Miss Frog's voice couldn't hide the disappointment. "I am providing you with the principle", Mrs. Owl was furious, "and you bother me with details. Instead of nagging, why don't you start doing something for yourself!".

What is the message of this story? Well, the truly innovative people are born with wings. But, even though creativity, like flying, could hardly be mastered by wingless creatures, there are numerous methods and techniques that stimulate or support innovative thinking. In this chapter, we are going to discuss some of them. They will teach us if not how to fly, then how to jump higher, build a balloon or buy the airplane ticket.

Do you agree that creativity and innovation cannot really be taught? They can only be learned. Or, they can be taught, but they cannot be learned easily. Many people believe that, if adequately trained, anyone can become creative. Others see innovators as humans made of special material, shaped through genetics and environment. As a proof, they offer a list of uneducated geniuses with brilliant careers, none of them having a school diploma. Moreover, the most successful among them have been college dropouts, from the IT industry prophets like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Michael Dell and Larry Ellison, to the influential and popular Ted Turner, David Murdoch, Oprah Winfrey, Roman Abramovich, John Lennon, and Lady Gaga. Most of these people probably think that, even though education may not be completely redundant, if you are not born creative, no program in the world would help you become an innovator.

If they are right, we don't need books on innovation management like the one you're reading. Luckily, there are many who believe that innovators also emerge through training and self-development. Hence, we can all benefit from continuous learning, innovation management seminars, and workshops. It means that we put faith in trained innovators and the fact that, in the end, knowledge always pays off.

Is there a correlation between knowledge and innovation? Do the experts in a given field make the best creators? Are innovators born or made? I guess the best answer is: Yes! People without a genuine creative personality, be it inherited through genetics or built by a supportive environment, are never going to become great innovators. But the other side of the coin is equally important. A path to bad creativity is paved with lack of motivation to study and self-develop, with a disinterest in theories, and inability to learn from mistakes.

In a book with a very telling title [*First Break All the Rules*](#), the Gallup Organization researchers Buckingham and Coffman indicate that the individual success depends on a proper balance between person's knowledge, skills, and talents.

Knowledge deals with what it is about. It is acquired by studying, reading, attending seminars or searching the Internet. Creativity-related knowledge is found in books, articles, websites and libraries; it is based on facts and can be obtained from expert lectures or from consultants.

Knowledge is easily transferable. Faster or slower, sooner or later, anyone is able to learn anything from others. Throughout our lives, we are trained by teachers, parents, co-workers, mentors, bosses, tutors, professors, and consultants. Theoretically, all individuals can master all knowledge on creativity and innovation, subject to time, intellectual ability and motivation constraints. It is rightly assumed that some people know more than others, but it is also true that knowledge (or "creativity theory") is only one small ingredient of successful innovation.

Skills have to do with how things are done; they are practical abilities, responsible for better or worse work performance. There are specific skills like dancing, skiing, driving a car, riding a bicycle, maneuvering a boat, using computers, mastering foreign languages, bookkeeping or solving mathematical problems. Also, there are mental

abilities to analyze balance sheets, to quickly get the overall picture, to listen carefully, to resolve conflicts, to convince, to sell or to come up with original ideas.

Skills are acquired and developed through practice; in a way, they reflect accumulated experience. People with a lot of practice may be less knowledgeable, but more skillful. Years of experience and a growing number of ballgames makes us all experts. Skills, like knowledge, can be transferred from one person to another. That's what all the trainers, teachers, mentors, bosses and coaches are for. Even though mastering a skill seems to be more complicated than acquiring knowledge, most people are capable of doing it right.

Talents are personal traits or characteristics by which we differ one from another. There are traits common to all people (a need to be loved, a need for physical safety). Some people are similar to certain groups of people (ambitious individuals, risk takers or perfectionists tend to look and behave alike). However, some of our traits could be quite unique. Here, the term "talent" does not mean a special gift (i.e., talent for music). Rather, it describes a trait that "differentiates"; to be a risk taker, and to be a person who plays it safe, are two opposing talents. Unlike knowledge and skills, a talent cannot be acquired from others, nor can it be transferred from one person to another (except by genetics). We are either born with a talent or we discover it while being brought up, or we don't have it. Before the time of mass education, creativity programs and innovation management workshops, all successful innovators were "natural born."

There are many anecdotes about talents and personality. Here is one: *The great maestro Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart attended a concert by a twelve-year-old child prodigy. At the end, Mozart was sure to praise the kid and his superb performance. The proud child responded: I want to become a composer like you. When should I start? Mozart told him to be patient; it would take years of study, a lot of work and many more concerts. Not pleased with the answer, the boy said: But you were already composing at the age of six. Yes, answered Mozart, but I never had to ask anybody when to start.*

Although all categorizations are somewhat arbitrary, we can talk about three types of talents; the first has to do with motivation (why we work), the second explains the behavior (how we do things) and the third describes our relationships (how we relate to people).

What are the **motivational talents**? They describe our attitude related to what makes us act and move. For example, we are competitive or not. We are altruists or egoists. Some things work for us while others don't. Motivational talents explain what we are prepared to fight for, how much we depend on the love and support from others, do we need to be publicly recognized or not, do we enjoy serving others or we are more self-centered, do we aim high or let things "flow," not caring what happens to us.

The second group is called the **thinking talents**. We differ in terms of the choices we make and the speed and ease with which we make decisions. We may be dedicated to single or multiple goals. We may be superficial or perfectionists. We may be self-disciplined or disobedient. We may prefer predictability or surprise. We do, or don't, think strategically. We seek risk or avoid it. We analyze options before making a decision (asking ourselves, what if), or we just impulsively go with the flow.

Third, there are the **relationship talents**. We build interpersonal relations by deciding who should be trusted, and who shouldn't, whom we ignore, whom we respect. We may be in conflict with most people or avoid all conflicts. We may see others as competitors or as collaborators. We may like, or despise, foreigners. We may be cosmopolitans or nationalists. We may believe in the goodness of all people or be skeptical and cynical about human nature.

Obviously, everyone can master creativity-related knowledge and skills if he is ready to try hard enough. However, innovation-related talents cannot be acquired in any school. In case you have inherited them, people will probably call you a born innovator.

Here is a short story about one such individual. *The origins of the [Nestlé Company](#) go all the way back to 1867 when Henri Nestlé created a nutritious product for infants that could be used by mothers who were unable to breast-feed. Henri Nestlé picked the "Nest", a graphic translation of his name (little nest), to personify the business. Evocative of security, maternity and affection, nature and nourishment, family and tradition, this symbol*

remains the central element in the Nestlé corporate identity. Merchant, chemist, and inventor Henri Nestlé, made a breakthrough when his new formula saved the life of a premature infant, he called it Farine Lactée Nestlé. In the years since Nestlé developed his infant formula, the history of the Nestlé Company has been marked by many firsts: the first commercially sold infant formula; the first condensed milk produced in Europe; the first milk chocolate; the first soluble coffee; the first freeze-dried coffee; the first granulated instant coffee. No wonder Nestlé is considered the most innovative company in the industry.

Fortunately or unfortunately, there is no ideal combination of knowledge, skills, and talent that would guarantee a person to become creative and innovative. The world's best creators are very different; each of them is characterized by a unique combination of knowledge, skill and talents. [Buffon](#) is well known for saying: "His style is the man himself." Personality is the content and the form, the inside and the outside, the inherited and the acquired. These are inseparable. Each person must adopt a style and develop an approach that suits his personality. You cannot fake it; you must be it. That's why the perfect innovator is best described as a perfect combination of imperfect traits that fit together perfectly well.