Assessing Innovation in the Boardroom: Evidence for a dual-process model of creativity judgment within the context of innovation

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Abstract

Innovation is the last bastion of corporate competitive advantage. To have successful innovation requires a combination of people and their associated relationships. Innovation is much more than just a set of good ideas, but a methodology of execution that instantiates these 'good ideas' into tangible solutions. This qualitative study utilized an inductive, phenomenological approach to gather person and relationship data to superimpose against a framework that was an amalgamation of two different perspectives of the innovative process. The study sought a critical view of people, their personalities as well as their relationship. The sample for this study emanated from an exclusive set of senior executives that are charged with engaging with top companies for the sake of good customer relations. The data gathering method were responses to written questions and oral interviews and then the coding and analysis yielded generalized findings. Some suggest interventions and ideas for further research are also offered.

Keywords: innovation, persons, relationships, framework

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Christensen and Raynor (2003) suggest that in today's global market, the only way to achieve growth is through innovation. However, AG Lafley, former Chairman and CEO of Proctor and Gamble stated, "Until people are willing to buy your product, pay for it and then buy it again, there is no innovation (Lafley & Charan, 2008, p.21). In a parallel notion , Rogers (2003) states that it matters little whether an innovation idea is truly new or not, as long and the perceiver believes that the idea is new, then its considered an innovation. Kelley (2006) adds that effective innovation pairs great ideas with actions and caveats this position by stating that its people that execute on innovation and therefore should not be omitted from the equation. Having a systematic approach to innovation that considers human characteristics has greater probability of success as it adds to the meta-discussion of humans as the tools for innovation.

Herrmann (1996) submits that there are fours iterative steps towards innovation, analyzing the need for innovation or investigation, strategizing on innovation for the need or creativity, organizing the execution or evaluation and lastly, personalizing the solution or taking action. These steps imply a thought process that requires people to calibrate their inborn, human consideration through a set of learned cognitive skills. Though each of these steps are important in the overall approach to innovation, Gupta and Singhal (1993) suggest that creativity is the catalyst to innovation, so much so that they also suggest that companies reward their employee for creative risk taking in the name of innovation (p. 47-48). Nelson and Quick (2006) support this idea from the fact that creativity is often seen as an individual skill, however, creativity is a powerful component of the innovative process when an entire team is engaged. In this case, diversification is an amplifier for creativity as each of the members involved creates variance of thought, such that good ideas may emerge (Rogers, 2003). Both Granovetter (1973) and Stryker (1987) suggest that its through multiple interactions across many people that new meaning is born, and as such, innovations thrives and is sustainable. Therefore, its plausible to assume that innovation is more than just creative thinking, but a set of steps that rationalize the innovation into a solution for a need which requires action and discreet deliverables. Consequently, recognizing innovations in people and relationships is essential for the innovation process to flourish since its success is dependent on people and their relationship to each other.

This qualitative study attempts to utilize a framework to understand how people (evaluators) discern person behaviors and relationships through the observation of cues from potential innovators (evaluatees). From these results, proactive interventions are implied, to capture and predict successful innovative initiatives. This phenomenological study utilizes inductive reasoning from the interviews to abstract codes and these to explain successful and unsuccessful behavioral paradigms when assessing the potential for innovation success. Some generalized observations are also offered.

Literature Review

Creative Thinking in the Innovation Process

Robbins (2005) submits that the creative process requires three components, expertise, creativity-thinking skills and task motivation (p. 146). “Expertise is the foundation for all creative work (p. 146).” Creative-thinking entails that the thinker constructs a coherent plan, a test for reasonableness that can be pragmatically applied to various decisions (Andolina, 2001). Rogers suggests that to create an innovative environment, requires to challenge a paradoxical state. In essence, innovation requires a set of diversity in thinking; however, those that are diverse in thinking rarely have good communications, another ingredient for innovation. Teams that have good communications and interdependence of delivery (Stewart, Manz, & Sims, 1999), usually have little to no diversity of thinking hence the reason that they have relationships.

Kelley suggests that there are ten roles or faces' in the innovation process; anthropologist, experimenter, cross-pollinator, hurdler, collaborator, director, experience architect, set designer, caregiver and storyteller. Each of these has an implied role and set of duties to the innovation process. However, Kelly does distinguish these roles into three major *personas*, the learning personas, the organizing personas, and the building personas (pp. 8-11). This construct is congruent with Elsbach and Kramer (2003) framework for assessing people in the creative arenas as they look at people, from a creative behavioral perspective, and the associated relationship between people. This process of evaluation culminated is what is called a dual-process social judgment model (p. 283). This notion of a social judgment process is also inline with Rogers (2003) suggests that one of the four elements required for innovation to flourish is that of communicating through a social system. This social system is a set of interrelated units (of people) that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal. Note that the implied *force* to accomplish the aforementioned process is the same common definition of *leadership* submitted by Yukl (2010, p.4).

It is a reasonable view to suggest that Kelley's (2006) learning and building personas, as self-evident in the label, are akin to Elsbach and Kramer's person category while the organization persona (Kelley, 2006), as this role requires interaction with others, is similar to the relationships category found in Elsbach and Kramer's study. All of the people involved combine to form a social system to achieve innovation success (Rogers, 2003). From the point of view of person category (Elsbach & Kramer), Herrmann (1996) also adds that there are personality types that contribute to the innovation process. These personality types have individualized gifting such as the analyzer and the strategizer.

Robbins (2005) implies that task motivation is required to a high degree for it to be effective. According to Vroom, for task motivation to be high, that suggests that the expected reward for the effort expected is of perceived high value (Nelson & Quick, 2006), for this context, the innovation would be fruitful. Its expected that even during the creative process, those that create are seeking a tangible and measurable outcome. Though people possess skills that can contribute to a successful innovative process, they must be motivated to do so such for the process to reap the benefits of these skills.

Creative Relationships in the Innovation Process

With regards to the innovation process, Granovetter (1973) submits that weak ties, meaning relationships between people that are not based on deep emotional circumstances, are often found to be the most productive, since these ties are formed explicitly to exchange tangible information. Granovetter offers that strong ties may be detrimental to the information exchange process since the root of value to possess a strong tie is based on intimacy, hence participants feel compelled to share emotional and intimate information and not pragmatic content. This notion often feels counterintuitive since the stereotyped belief is, the deeper the relationship, the more value it provides the participant.

Brandes, Dharwadkar, and Wheatley (2004) perspective on social exchange is that this type of dyadic relationship is utilized to optimize the interchange of content communications, much like Granovetter (1973) aforementioned view. A positive consequence of this exchange is social capital as described by Seibert, Kraimer, and Liden (2001) as equity is created amongst the participants of this implied relationship which can be used to career or personal agenda advancement. This interaction also implies that there is a positive and fruitful reciprocity of information and an understood sense of enjoyment in participants in such a relationship (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). Without an affective motivation, these exchanges would not meet expectations and, therefore, eroding trust (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006) culminating in a lost relationship.

With regard to the innovation process, Hermann (1996) offers two personalities that are wholly dependent on relationships to be effective, the organizer, and the personalizer. The organizer relationship characteristics manifest themselves through a service or support perspective, as they are often the administrator and project managers. The personalizer, or action-oriented personality, acts as a liaison in the innovation process through coaching, counseling as well as teaching and training others. This is congruent with Kelley (2006) organizing personas such as the hurdler, one mitigates the obstacles that impede innovations; the collaboration, often brings eclectic groups together and actually leads from the middle of the pack; and lastly, the director, not only gathers the talent together, but sparks their creative skills (p. 10).

Qualitative Research Methodology

Creswell (2009) defines a ethnographical study as a qualitative strategy in which an intact cultural group is observed and interviewed over a long period of time. Qualitative studies capture social interaction as an ongoing process, examined and documented in detail (Stanford, Oates, & Flores, 1995). Patton (2002) suggests that there are three kinds of qualitative data, interviews, observations and documents, and in this case, all three were utilized. From a sampling perspective, Patton suggests that qualitative studies do not require the amount of responses as a quantitative study, but the sampling must adhere to the specific profile as stipulated by the study (p. 230).

The sample pool was an exclusive group of client executives (CE) that were hired into an organizations explicitly to provide high order services to ‘C’ level executives in major corporations. The hiring profile for these staff members were people that had over 25 years of business experience and a wealth of industry expertise, often serving as ‘C’ level executives themselves. Specifically, the total size of the group is 30 members, in which seven responded to this the study. Patton (2002) suggests that this sampling was a combination of random sampling, as everyone in the population had an equal opportunity to respond, purposeful sampling as the pool of client executives fit the prescribed profile for this study, and theory based sampling, since this study alludes to the characteristics associated to the program from which the respondents are housed. Since this group is spread throughout the U.S., six open-ended questions were emailed to all of the client executives (CE) and they were encouraged to either submit electronic responses or undergo a live, over the phone interview where the interviewer documented the responses electronically. This approach allowed the participants to submit their responses in their most comfortable mode of communication.

Method of the Content Analysis

All interviews were electronically recorded in text files. The advantage for electronic files was two fold, from an automation perspective, it was simple to generate word counts, and from a manual approach, printing text files for manual analysis. Though it is impossible to forecast what will be said and how the participants would react to the interviews, a set of parameters allowed the researcher to guide the questioning to optimize the time with the participants and establish focus on the research boundaries. Liberties were taken during the live interviews to probe specific aspects of the respondents questions to potentially ascertain new, uncovered themes (Creswell, 2009).

Definition and Categorization. Definitions and categorization of data based on Elsbach and Kramer's dual-process social judgment model, as well as the Kelley's roles in innovation, assisted in erecting boundaries for the conversions, which allowed for the content analysis to be consistent with the theoretical model proposed. Both theoretical models rely on behaviors as well as relationships, which allowed for the rationalization of content to merge. For example, person behaviors found in the Elsbach and Kramer's model that captures a type of prototypes were also compared to Kelley's innovative role. As many qualitative studies, the convergence of these models imply that potentially another model may emerge from these results.

Unit of Analysis. The unit for the content analysis consisted of words and themes that bled through when reading all of the transcripts. In this context, terms such as 'trusted role' versus 'vendor were viewed similarly to 'advisor' versus 'partner', however the theme for these sets of words was 'relationship type' (see Table 2). Similarly when asked about innovative qualities in the primary point of contact (PPC) that one would look for, words like critical-thinker and cautious emerged as words like 'smart' and 'defensive. These words were compiled and categorized, themes were derived from the dimensions coded and analyzed.

Quantitative Methods. After subjective themes and content were converted into objective and rationalized categories, the task of counting, ranking and rating allowed having better, objective understanding of the common issues faced by this group. For example, counting, in a cardinal way, how many times the person theme of 'cautious' was found in the transcript versus 'novice' drove the level of importance across all of the themes, implying a convergence to an ordinal depiction. In addition, themes were also associated with the person who said it and converted the person to their role in the organization they served.

Findings

It appears that the client executive (CE) assessed their ability to connect and be successful with their primary point of contact (PPC) in the two categories. The first was the connection to the PPC as a person (see Table 1) assessed by the behaviors and actions exhibited. It appears that PPC are willing to be engaged in an innovative initiative, however most are governed by their caution. Baldwin and Baldwin (1988) suggest that cautious behavior usually emerges from the fact that people have endured a bad experience in the past as it pertains to an upcoming experience in which they are about to engage. A novice PPC is inhibited by their lack of strategic prioritization. Kouzes and Posner (2007) as well as Bennis (2003) submit that those that have lack of foresight or strategic vision often are inhibited by not challenging the status quo. This lack of challenge may be induced by limiting organizational factors or personal agendas, for example a leader does not want to 'rock the boat' for fear of losing their job. This study, it appears that one PPC was deemed to be confident in this area. Confidence emerges as an affective emotion as is more aptly stated as self-confident or self-assured, signifying a personal stability and well-roundedness (Bass & Bass, 2008). Barrick and Mount (1991) have suggested that this type of stability is strongly correlated with conscientiousness and agreeableness and negatively correlated with neuroticism.

The second area was that of their relationship between the CE and PPC that was assessed by the CE via reciprocal behaviors from the PPC (see Table 2). The CEs unanimously assessed their success with the PPC by the reaction that they received when they introduced innovative ideas. Those relationships between the CE and PPC that were deemed collaboratively equal began with a perception of mutual respect. Each instance in this theme, the CE was characterized as possessing an equal position with the PPC. The lack of respect, in the workplace, is often viewed along with incivility which constitutes lack of politeness and civility (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2008). In the workplace, this is called organizational citizenship behavior, de facto behavior exhibited (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983). Conversely, respect is the manifestation of politeness and civility. Those relationships deemed being collaborative by the CE yet held a subservient position appear to stem from a transactional dyadic relationship. Burns (1978) suggests that these relationships are rooted in an exchange protocol, the CE provides a service to the PPC and the PPC provides organizational clout and capital to continue with the process. Most of the interactions found in the interview were based on a positive meritocracy between CE and PPC and not punitive. Lastly, some relationships labeled as guarded, growing from a position of distrust, specifically as there is a lack of clarity as to the value set that the CE is utilizing. The CE's agenda, either utilizing their relationship be a vendor or advisor, appears to be in question. Mistrust is often connected with missed expectations. These expectations are not necessarily wrong, unethical, or devious, however, they are often not equal. To rectify such discrepancies, expectations required realignment to achieve mutual trust.

Conclusion

Innovation is not only about creativity but is about execution. People are central to the innovative process. Innovation requires a diverse cast of characters to be effective. It's the diversity of people that sparks the innovative process. Unfortunately, often that same diversity squelches the potential for success. People that hold diverse views do not often communicate regularly with each other and, therefore, rarely build the respect in diversity required for successful complex innovations. It is reasonable to state that there are infinite combinations of people and relationship that change over time. Given this paradigm, it is astonishing that any innovation occurs at all.

This study has contributed to the literature in two ways. First, it rationalized the innovative process from multiple perspectives, which potentially instantiated a new framework as well as confirming the innovation process as one that is action-oriented. Secondly, it connected a social scientific, affective perspective of innovation to a pragmatic capitalistic view. This framework for predicting the likelihood for innovative success is portable, as it can be utilized in different environments.

This study observed a select group with an exclusive background and generalized themes within this context, however, given this exclusivity, it is not reasonable to assume that this generalization can be superimposed over the greater population, a limitation to this study. Secondly, there are many other factors known to this author that have an effect on these circumstances that were not addressed, factors that are most likely not present in other similar environments, which implies that this study is not comprehensive, another limitation. Therefore, other areas for research in deploying this same model for predicting innovative success in other, more generalizable conditions, as well as instantiate a quantitative approach to assess successful innovation potential.

Table 1
Person Categorization

Prototype[a]	Description and Cues[a]	Perceived Creative Potential[b]	Strength of Evidence[b]	Examples[(n)c]
Cautious (4)	Wants to reap the benefits of innovation, but is cautious to be sure the benefits are truly realized as they have a reputation to protect. Often are defensive when broached on innovative ideas *Cues*: Deliver (4), conservative culture (3), vendor (3), incremental step (2)	Low-Moderate	Strong	"He is being open and honest and his views, frustrations and there is a level of trust."[1] "Customer prefers to be a technology follower and not a leader. This is due to a strong culture of safety in the oil and gas industry."[2]
Novice (2)	Often caught in the day-to-day of operations that has no time to truly devote to creativity and innovation as it is a departure from daily corporate culture *Cues*: "Wants to be innovative" (2), Distracted (2), operational (2)	Moderate-High	Strong	"Wants to be innovative and often shows glimmers of innvaiton"[3] "… due to a culture of mediocre and a weak leadership team will have difficulty in doing so quickly"[6]
Confident (1)	Self-aware of innovative positions and skill which may not be to the degree required, but values innovations and will seek staff that can deliver. *Cues*: Appreciation for innovation, enable people to innovate, provides autonomy to smart people	High	Moderate	"He appreciates enthusiastically his company as an innovative company. That is the reason they are successful."[5] "He sees himself innovative as well as an enabler. Deliverer and operator of the services that delivers the innovation."[5]

[a] – Parenthesis depicts how many respondents fit this category
[b] – This level is a relative perspective formed from the qualitative analysis as inferred from the interviews
[c] – Comments may not be exact wording as notes were done in real time.
[(n)] – A arbitrary nominal label given to the respondent

Table 2
Relationship Categorization

Relationship between CE and PPC[a]	Description and Cues[a]	Perceived Creative Potential[b]	Strength of Evidence[b]	Examples[(n)c]
Collaboratively Equal (3)	PPC views CE as a peer and one that is there to solve the same problems, as they are attempting to solve. Displays courteous behaviors and plays the role of facilitator. *Cues*: advisor (3), counterpart (3), leadership (2), enabler (2)	High	Strong	"I am the only vendor who attends a monthly Senior Leadership Team meeting (SLT) lead by the CIO."[6] "I am considered his counterpart at Oracle although there are a series of executive sponsors who have come through"[7]
Collaboratively Subservient (2)	PPC views CE as a subordinate there to be directed to solve the their (PPC) problems. CE is to keep the PPC up to date with regular communications. *Cues*: timely reporting (2), expectations of delivery (2), shorten timelines (2)	Moderate-High	Strong	"Keep him up to date on what I'm doing who I'm speaking to, midst of a deal, regular check point"[1]
Guarded (2)	A vendor who is viewed as another channel to sell products and services pays the CE. Even though discussions of innovation are fruitful, the PPC is jaded by this compensatory relationship. *Cues*: need more trust (2), miscommunications (2), lack of personal equity (2),	Moderate	Moderate	"I don't have the same level of trust as the previous person"[3] "…it was successful in that the primary person that he said they did that, but was being defensive given their position"[4]

[a] – Parenthesis depicts how many respondents fit this category
[b] – This level is a relative perspective formed from the qualitative analysis as inferred from the interviews
[c] – Comments may not be exact wording as notes were done in real time.
[(n)] – A arbitrary nominal label given to the respondent

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