How Organisations Can Cultivate Innovation Catalysts

The most innovative leaders possess special skills that cannot be entirely taught. But they can be learnt.

Given the highly complex, uncertain and dynamic environments facing all firms nowadays, it is more important than ever to prepare your organisation to tackle any business challenge with an innovative mindset. That is the only way to transform existing and emerging threats into opportunities for future success. Accomplishing this requires a special type of leader – a type I call the innovation catalyst.

Years of research and various collaborations with some of the world’s most innovative companies have given me ample opportunity to study innovation catalysts at work. I’ve seen that what distinguishes them is a set of three fundamental capabilities:

- The ability to uncover user-centred insights and transform them into innovation opportunities
- The ability to transcend existing problem-solving approaches and ideate novel, creative solutions to business challenges
- An aptitude for enabling agile experimentation

To break it down further, innovation catalysts are characterised by their insightfulness, creative thinking and agility.

Every organisation needs innovation catalysts at all levels of management – the larger the organisation, the more of them it needs. As things stand, there are not enough of these precious individuals to go around. That is the bad news. The good news, however, is that the three key skills outlined above can certainly be learnt. Since 2017, I have helped business leaders learn them in my yearly Innovation by Design executive education programme. Yet these skills cannot be taught – at least, not entirely. If you’re puzzled or intrigued, keep on reading.

Innovation catalysts and design thinkers

In many respects, the unique skillset of innovation catalysts resembles design thinking, which has become a central concept of business learning. Like designers, innovation catalysts use unconventional cognitive strategies and disruptive creative approaches to untangle problems that are unsolvable by standard means.

However, there is more to becoming an innovation catalyst than reading books on design thinking or taking a typical course on the subject. This is true for two reasons. First, having a design skillset alone is not enough to innovate in business settings. As is well known, Steve Jobs did not design products himself; rather, he excelled at conjuring the best resources to create meaningful and transformational innovations. His ability to integrate the value of
design into Apple made him one of the greatest
innovation catalysts the world has ever seen.

Second, I have found in my research that a large
part of design talent is nuanced and subtle – the
outgrowth of instinct and intuition as much as learnt
 technique. While technique and process can be
conveyed in a standard academic format such as a
lecture or workshop, the unconscious knowledge of
professional designers does not translate well in
those contexts. Yet, such a design mindset can be
quite useful to solve business problems in
innovative ways.

Hence, innovation catalysts are those who
understand the value of design and integrate it well
in the organisation to solve business problems. They
also recognise that understanding the value of
design requires not only learning design techniques
but, most importantly, internalising the design
mindset.

Creative stars

If you want to learn a new language, most experts
agree that full immersion is a superior method.
Similarly, the best way to internalise the design
mindset is to work alongside designers to solve
concrete business problems.

My recently published research bears this out.
Studying U.S. design patents for the years
1975–2010, my co-authors and I found that
designers who collaborated with “stars” (i.e.
those with the most-cited patents) in the field were
more likely to become stars themselves. This
phenomenon had less to do with self-selection than
with the nature of the collaboration. We found that
stars possess special creative skills – such as the
ability to combine unlikely elements into novel
ideas which they refine into great innovations – that
rubbed off on those they worked with.

Just as collaborating with stars enables non-star
talents to evolve, design novices such as business
executives can absorb key innovation competencies
by working with gifted designers, both star and non-
star.

Management consultancies have caught on to this
notion as well. Witness the recent launch of the
McKinsey Design division, a product of the
consultancy’s prior acquisition of two design firms:
Lunar in 2015, and Veryday in 2016. As Benedict
Sheppard, a partner at McKinsey Design in London,
pot it: “If we can take the end pieces of strategy and
operations, and now bring the actual design
capabilities, then we can do something quite
extraordinary.” Rival professional service firms
Accenture and Boston Consulting Group have also
acquired design houses to enrich their advice with
the same unique innovation perspective.

Innovation by Design

INSEAD’s Innovation by Design (IBD) programme
was created with these trends very much in mind. A
three-and-a-half-day highly experiential learning
experience held in Singapore (at INSEAD’s
exclusively designed Creative Garage), it has
business practitioners team up with designers from
California’s renowned ArtCenter to solve realistic
innovation challenges.

The programme’s activities focus on developing the
three main attributes of innovation catalysts:
insightfulness, creativity and agility. Through
business cases, participants explore how innovation
catalysts act in various organisational settings,
including the public sector as well as firms such as
Apple and McKinsey. The programme includes time
for reflection so that participants can contemplate
how best to apply their new skills in their
organisational roles.

Obviously, innovation cannot be taught in a few
days – or months, for that matter. What organisations
can do, however, is create an experiential working
environment involving close collaboration with
designers. To ensure the organisation reaps the
benefit, managers should then be given free rein to
exercise their budding creative powers.

For more information on the Innovation by Design
programme, watch this video.

Manuel E. Sosa is an Associate Professor of
Technology and Operations Management and the
Director of the Heinrich and Esther Baumann-Steiner
Fund for Creativity and Business at INSEAD. He directs
the Innovation by Design and Design Thinking and
Creativity for Business programmes at INSEAD.

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