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Mastering the politics of innovation

By *Lameez Alexander*

There are two types of stories that explain the process of innovation. The first is the story of a team of underdogs who had an idea, fought people who said it couldn't be done, and triumphed in the end. The second kind tends to feature a lot of boxes, arrows and light bulbs.

When I started studying corporate innovation six years ago, I thought the first kind of story was more or less a fairy tale, or at the very least, very rare – applicable to Steve Jobs, maybe, but almost nobody else. What was left then were stories of the box-and-arrow variety, in which new ideas just seemed to roll off an assembly line as long as a certain set of critical factors and conditions were met.

However, after following three R&D teams on a daily basis for nearly a year, I learned that neither story sufficiently explained the innovation process. While underdogs were part of the story, they did not necessarily triumph in the end and nor did they always act in ways beneficial to the innovation process. The messy, painful processes I observed all seemed to owe more to Darwin than Drucker. Innovation turned out to be a very human, very political struggle that the technically focused scholars and consultants who studied the subject had never really described.

This was not the conclusion I expected to reach. The initial aim of my research had been to clarify some generally accepted models of innovation. The trouble was that the more I saw of corporate innovation, the more

I realised that the experiences of the teams I followed didn't actually fit the typical models.

In fact, the box-and-arrow models seemed to have surprisingly little application to their real life experience. Instead of being supported by the organisation, they spent a lot of their time fighting it. Instead of gaining more resources as they proved the worth of their idea, they had to spar for control. Innovation did not seem to be a structured, linear and relatively predictable system of activities. Instead, it seemed to be a dynamic, messy process vulnerable to external shocks.

I fought this insight for a while – it's a strange feeling to see something you weren't expecting to see, particularly if you've read a lot about a topic.

Looking back on it now, I think of one of my first research projects as an undergraduate at the University of Cape Town, which concerned cross-cultural racial interaction among students.

I had been excited at having the chance to meet people from different backgrounds and cultures, but when I arrived at school I found it didn't actually happen. Instead, students seemed to self-segregate by their background or culture. At that point, I had

to throw my theory out and accept the fact that my fellow students just did not behave rationally, and by extension, that human beings weren't very rational creatures.

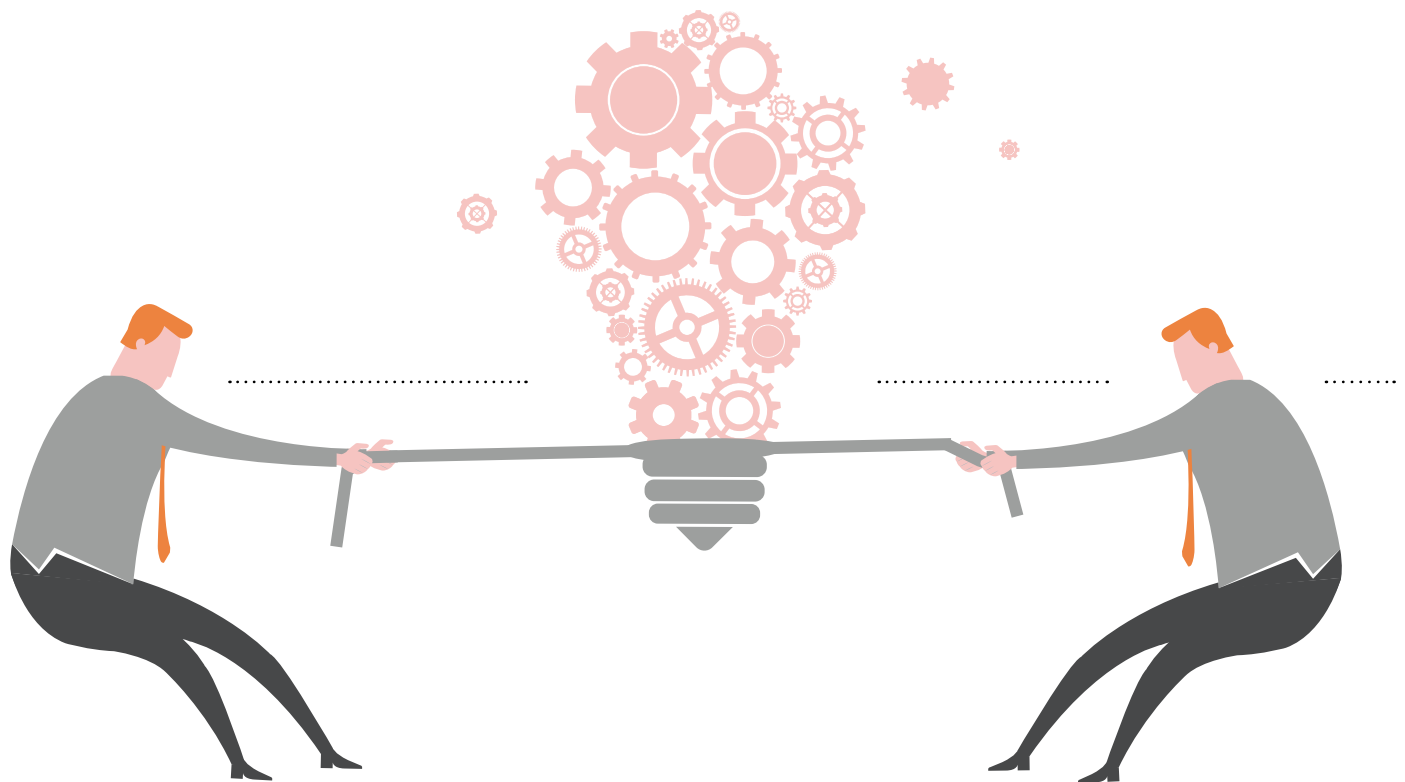
Similarly, the innovation process I saw now didn't make sense from an organisational perspective. This was not a smooth-running industrial process, but a struggle that was both technical and political.

The political aspect, in fact, which most theorists scarcely mention, actually seemed to me to be one of the most predictable elements of radical innovation. Somewhere along the way, a messy, painful struggle over ownership of the idea ensues, between the team that invented the new product and the managers who are in a position to get it adopted.

These two parties tend to have a hard time getting along, mostly because they usually have such different aims. The inventors are generally technically focused and eager to perfect their idea. The manager, meanwhile, tends to be more pragmatically focused on overcoming the political and commercial hurdles that could prevent the idea from being accepted in the marketplace.

What lessons should business leaders draw from my research? I think there are at least four useful ideas. The first three apply to innovation; the last, to almost anything:

Innovations depend on successful teamwork. A successful innovation requires the application of two very different skill sets: first, the technical acumen to build a device or system



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that actually works, and secondly, the political power and persuasive ability to sell that idea to the rest of the organisation. Few people have both skills, but to succeed, you need both.

Sooner or later, your teams won’t get along. Disputes between the inventors and managers over ownership of an idea is a natural part of the innovation process. Expect it, make time for it, and try to strike some sort of compromise. If either the managers or the inventors are winners, the odds are good your idea won’t be. Managers should make sure that the innovation team doesn’t feel entirely shunted aside. Frustrating their sense of ownership completely is an excellent way to prevent more good ideas.

Don’t trust the models. When it comes to innovation, models should be taken with several pinches of salt. Unless the innovation is very minor, it’s

likely to prove very resistant to the box-and-arrow treatment. Innovations are so often the result of various kinds of accidents – a misunderstood instruction, the wrong chemical mixed in the wrong formula at the wrong time, or an executive sponsor’s irresponsible obsession – that I’ve actually become sceptical of any theory about how they might arise.

Question your questions. Your own preconceptions limit what you can see, because it’s easy to ask questions that just confirm what your model says you should see. The main reason I was able to see innovation in this new way is that I came to this study by way of my earlier work in social psychology, which made it possible for me to see a political dynamic whereas the more technically focused scholars who preceded me saw only technical challenges. ■



This article draws its inspiration from Lameez Alexander’s PhD thesis, *People, Politics, and Innovation: A process perspective*. It can be downloaded at: <http://repub.eur.nl/pub/77209>

Lameez Alexander is a post-doctoral researcher at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. Her most recent research project focuses on entrepreneurship in developing countries such as South Africa and Kenya where she is currently doing fieldwork.

EMAIL lalexander@rsm.nl