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The Protagonist

‘Captain One Minute, Pirate the Next’

In 30 seconds

If you only had 30 seconds I'd tell you:

All innovation is powered by human emotion: anger, paranoia or ambition.



A great innovation process will never compensate for poor innovation people.



The profile of an ideal innovator is a 'Captain One Minute, Pirate the Next' – someone who respects their organisation but doesn't revere it.



They are unreasonably ambitious, relentlessly pushing the boundaries in a way that doesn't always make sense.



But they're not egomaniacs; they know when to shut up and listen.



They research as little as possible, and are confident enough in their own judgement to back themselves.



They are team workers, but more than that, they are collaborators.



They're socially skilled and able to guide others between an expansive world of ideas and a reductive world of decisions.



They're not necessarily creative, but they are good finishers.

Art has been the Chief Innovation Officer of a global bank for the past year. He oversees a pipeline of about 20 innovation initiatives around the world, each one managed by a team working within its own P&L. Increasingly, Art's efforts to navigate the company's internal processes and nudge these initiatives to launch are met with indifference and, in some cases, hostility. 'It's like I'm putting a baby in the boxing ring', Art says of the ideas it's his job to champion. 'These projects need more investment and protection.' Art has started to wonder how much his bank really wants to innovate and – in his darker moments – why he took the job in the first place.

Lillian is the Head of Marketing for one of a global pharmaceutical company's blockbuster brands. With only 8 years of patent-protected revenue under its belt, Lillian knows her focus should be on innovating new ways to extend the drug's reach. But she just can't seem to carve out the time. 'I feel crushed by the constant need to cover off the senior management', she says. 'Every day some junior staffer is asking me to prepare a one-page summary for someone important somewhere. What I need to be doing is getting out of this office and into the marketplace, where I can make a real difference.' Instead, she and her colleagues spend most of their time trapped in meetings or creating spreadsheets to justify the company's innovation investments.

John runs the Innovation Centre for a large multinational packaged goods company. He drives development across all regions of a group of brands, and oversees a large team of research scientists, packaging developers and marketers. Recently, following a particularly rocky

product launch, his company mandated an ‘innovation protocol’. Now each project must pass through a series of gates, with each gate culminating in an all-day review meeting – an event that demands weeks of paperwork and preparation. The top brass fly in for these meetings, which are scheduled up to a year in advance. John doesn’t mind thinking things through, but in his gut he knows innovation doesn’t work like this. ‘It’s as if the organisation has these great grinding wheels of decision-making that slowly turn’, he says. ‘I’m just a little wheel called innovation and I can’t seem to find a way to synchronise with the big wheel.’ To make matters worse, John’s people are starting to jump ship for smaller, less process-driven competitors.

Stories like these are not uncommon. Dig behind innovation and you’ll find people who are frustrated, restless and ambitious. It’s this human energy that drives innovation; people sparking off people. Rarely, if ever, does anyone claim that it was the process or the organisational structure that ‘won it’. The protagonists who pull and push new things through a big company need to have some special qualities to survive the kind of combat they’re about to face. They need an unreasonable dose of ambition. They need to be humble enough to know they don’t have all the answers and yet confident enough to back themselves. They need to be not just great team-workers but also collaborators – and they need to be able to make things happen.

So who is crazy enough to
want this job?

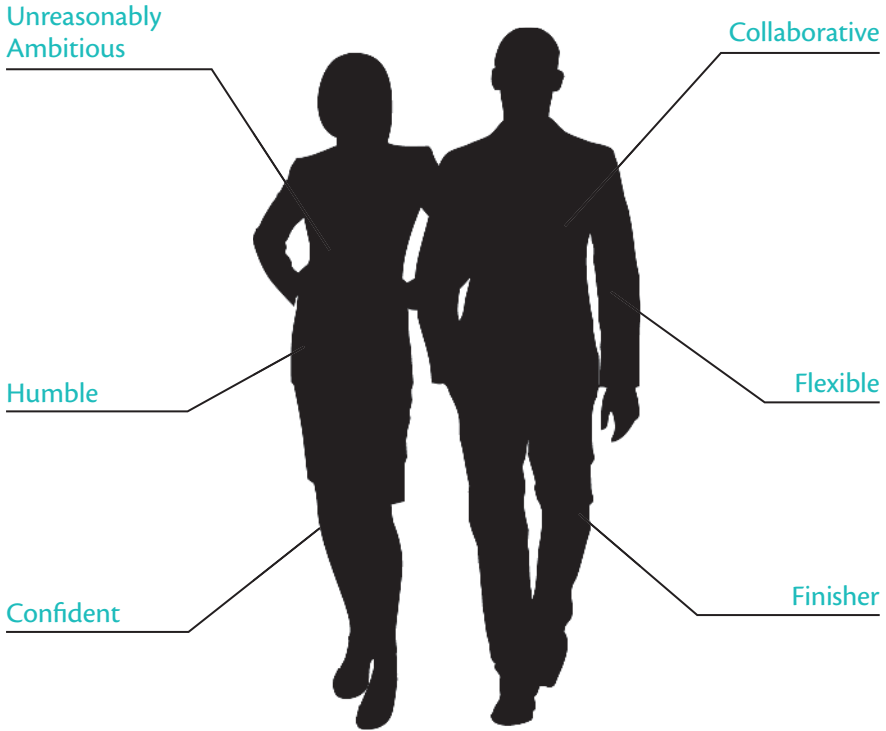
‘Captain One Minute, Pirate the Next’

Most successful big-company innovators I meet, whether Chief Innovation Officers, innovation team members or people without an innovation job title but who are tackling a big change project for the first time, have something in common: they respect the organisation they work for, but they don't revere it. As innovators, they want their businesses to do better, but at the same time they are dissatisfied with the status quo. There's a kind of 'love-hate' thing going on. But too much love and an innovator becomes an ineffective 'yes-man'. Too much hate and he or she ends up an ineffective loner.

It's a delicate balancing act. I describe someone who effectively manages it as a 'Captain One Minute, Pirate the Next'. One minute the innovation leader is the Captain, the passionate man-with-the-plan, standing tall on the bridge of the ship and inspiring us all to go 'this way'. But the next time you meet, the Captain has morphed into a Pirate. This time he or she is down in the boiler room, sleeves rolled up, shipmates gathered around, using all of his or her cunning to shortcut a process, to subvert the system. Now our protagonist is asking really challenging questions: 'What if we did it differently? What if we ripped up the way things are done around here? What if?'

So one minute an innovation leader is stubbornly sticking to the big picture; the next he or she is telling you not to sweat the small stuff. I think this intriguing mix of vision and cunning comes from the fact that successful innovators are fixated by outcomes. They are highly motivated to make change happen – so much so that they're often less bothered about how they get there.

These are the qualities of a ‘Captain One Minute, Pirate the Next’:



To be clear, I’ve never met anyone who scored high on all the traits of a ‘Captain One Minute, Pirate the Next’. The key is to recognise where you or your team are weak and either work at developing new skills or find people to compensate.

Unreasonably Ambitious: Always Pushing the Boundaries

Innovation starts with someone throwing a stone a long way. Innovators are good at this. They know that stretch goals – aiming beyond your own limits – create better performance. They know that their team, brand or organisation needs to work towards a picture of something that's truly exciting. If this picture doesn't exist then it's very hard to do anything other than incremental improvements – small twists and tweaks.

Innovation is literally thrilling. The ambition of an innovation leader and his or her team needs a degree of unreasonableness to it, a feeling of 'Wow, you've got to be kidding – how the hell are we going to do that?' Successful innovators in large companies aren't afraid to scare people shitless. When they find themselves surrounded by doubters, they develop a big fat grin – they know they're on the right track.

Axe, or Lynx depending on where in the world you live, is one of Unilever's leading brands and a good example of this approach. The Axe line-up of grooming products includes body sprays, deodorants, antiperspirants, shower gels, shampoos and styling products and claims to 'give guys confidence when it comes to getting the girl'.

In 2002, inspired by a scene from *The Matrix* in which the protagonist is offered the choice of a life-changing pill, newly appointed brand director at Unilever, Neil Munn, created the 'Republic of Axe'. This was a bold new brand culture within Unilever that had its own laddish identity. 'We needed walls', said Munn. 'Inside was our vibe, our beat.' Fuelled with the excitement of being a renegade

team, bent on helping young men get ahead in the mating game, Axe has enjoyed strong growth each year with wave after wave of award-winning advertising driving successful new products (such as Anti-Hangover shower gel that ‘gets the night out of your system’).

This innovation journey, of course, hasn’t been all plain sailing. In its wake are discarded and banned TV commercials. More than once Unilever has apologised online for going ‘too far’ with Axe, thus guaranteeing cult status amongst young men the world over. How did Unilever, a megasized company famous for sensible household brands such as Surf, Persil and Knorr, manage to spawn such a maverick tribe?

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*To be
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to leave*

Munn, who left the brand in 2006, says ‘I had to defend the brand, and my boss (the President of Unilever Deodorants category) had to give me air cover. Without this we wouldn’t have had the space and the confidence to flex our muscles and experiment – the brand is all about pushing it.’ Munn also

created an ambitious and powerful allegorical device that became iconic throughout the business: instead of just ‘joining the team’, new members had to agree to ‘take the red pill’. This is a commitment to rapid and audacious decision-making that is played out daily in the Axe Republic (i.e. brand offices throughout the world) where decisions aren’t supposed to be safe. In a characteristic move, Munn once presented his annual plan on video while having a massage; an unusual move, but entirely appropriate to the brand.

Finally, Munn admits to several moments where he thought he'd pushed the mothership too far but 'to be entrepreneurial in a large company you can't be afraid to leave', says Munn, 'the dynamic in megacorps isn't about fast decision-making, so our view was that we were going to just get on with things unless we were told to stop, which we never were'.

Large companies are like supertankers; they have a need to be predictable because their owners don't like surprises. They are very good at moving in one direction at a steady pace but often poor at turning quickly and exploring uncharted seas. The story of Axe is highly instructive. It tells us that innovation needs a rebellious band bent on doing things differently; think of it as an anticulture. As these rebel teams push hard and fast, whatever they propose will sound unreasonably ambitious.

The story of Axe/Lynx is also a reminder that it can be more powerful to express innovation goals in human terms rather than complex business terminology. Think of Steve Jobs telling his team they were going to 'put a dent in the universe'. Or one of my favourite examples, Victoria Beckham. When starting her career with the Spice Girls (as Posh Spice), she promised the world she was going to be 'as famous as Persil Automatic'. Persil, a global detergent megabrand, was a great benchmark. If she had chosen to be as famous as a well-known movie star her goal would have sounded arrogant. The choice of Persil Automatic is easy to understand, has a charm to it, is memorable and sounds authentic. Business leaders take note – lessons come from the most unlikely places.

The overall challenge is for an innovation leader to articulate his or her goals in a way that:

- ◆ Is expressed in everyday, blunt language
- ◆ Is measurable or 'benchmark-able'
- ◆ Appeals to basic human instincts: to win, to pulverise the enemy, to make the world a better place, to get outrageously rich.

So to lead innovation successfully, does the protagonist need to be a charismatic, larger-than-life character? My answer, of course, is 'No'. Many who have successfully innovated in large companies work hard to manage their network and allow others to take the plaudits. Innovation leaders can be behind-the-scenes people who think deeply about the next move.

Humble: Knowing When to Shut Up and Listen

Innovators need a healthy balance of confidence and self-doubt. They need big ambition but a small ego. There is nothing more dangerous than the know-it-all; the guy or girl who has all the answers.

So, innovators need to know when to shut up and start listening. They need to be opinionated enough to form a hypothesis but humble enough to know that their idea might not be the best, or that someone else will probably be able to make it better. Innovators are good at alternatives – they get used to putting aside the front-runner of an idea to search for another, and then another. This means they can't get too attached to ideas. They need to be constantly challenging themselves: *'What if there's a better way, let's keep going, just one more idea ...'*

We need good listeners who will consider alternative opinions. But we don't want 'flip-floppers' – people who just jump from the last opinion they heard to the next. This is a genuinely stressful issue for innovators; *'How long do I keep listening? When do I say "stop – that's enough opinion, I've made my mind up and we're going this way"?'* In my experience, people at work appreciate listening and action in equal measure. So don't be afraid to stop listening and start doing.

And it's not enough just to be a good listener; you need a reputation for it too. This is because innovators need to attract ideas from all over their organisation. The experience of kicking an idea around with the innovation team has to be positive. If the team has a poor reputation for listening, it will get little engagement or traction. So we need to apply the same sort of standards to the 'experience' of innovation dialogue as we do, say, to the customer experience of the products we sell. Just as a waiter in a restaurant 'gives good service', innovators have to 'give good listening'.

Much of our work at ?What If! involves working with clients who are fundamentally different to their consumers. Typical dynamics are middle-aged men innovating for younger female consumers, digitally savvy executives innovating for the technologically illiterate, or clever graduates innovating for hardworking retirees. In these cases it's critical to just shut up, look, listen and learn from your customers.

This is easier said than done. Accompanying a young single mum on a shopping expedition, one of our gallant 'gentleman' clients inadvertently revealed he'd held the woman's shopping bags on the bus ride home and discussed his recent skiing holiday. It seemed to us that he was nervous meeting this customer and compensated by talking too much. As a result he wasted his time. The temptation to be nice often overwhelms the need to shut up and just melt into the background.

Confident: Believing Enough to Back Yourself

Innovation is a combat sport. You need the hide of a rhinoceros to take the kind of battering you will surely face to get ideas across the line in most companies. This isn't a job for people easily crushed by the opinions of others.

Much of the innovation leader's job is to engage people at the top with ideas that don't yet have a robust financial story, or to engage with people who are cynical even about the need for innovation. Innovation can be as unnerving as it is exciting. This environment rules out rookies and favours those with battle-scars, who have confidence in their own judgement and who are not afraid to back themselves.

Confidence isn't the same as having a giant ego. Most giant egos meet a giant career crash at some stage. Confidence is a quiet thing born out of a belief that what you're doing is 'right'. What powers innovators is a belief that the world could be a better place, even in a small way, and that they have the means to make this happen.

Let's take a peek behind the scenes of a company that eschews conventional research and works hard to develop 'belief' in what they are doing.

ASOS is a £480m fast-growing online fashion retailer. If you don't know ASOS already, then go online now and check them out. Use your laptop but try shopping ASOS on your smartphone as so many customers do. Explore Marketplace, where independent boutiques can sell their latest lines; and Fashion Finder, where ASOS directs you to brands and products they don't sell but they think you'll like. So here's the hottest fashion business

– the second most visited fashion retail site globally – and they’re routing you elsewhere?

ASOS uploads about 1500 new items per week onto its site. Suppliers fight to get listed and the turnaround time to prepare, shoot and upload each item is a dizzying 8 minutes. The range is vast; the corridors at ASOS London HQ are swarming with the latest hot new items and models queuing in Make Up. ASOS reaches fashion conscious teens in 100+ countries – in 2011 ASOS became the biggest fashion site in Australia and New Zealand with no shops, no advertising and not even any people.

ASOS finds itself at the confluence of two megatrends: the rapid growth of teenage buying power in developing countries and the unstoppable march of the smartphone. The minute teenagers have to queue, get bored, can’t sleep, wait for a bus or even sit on the loo, then out comes the smartphone. And now there’s a shop in the palm of their hand with new lines everyday, and guess what, ASOS deliver for free anywhere in the world and if things don’t fit you can return them to ASOS at no charge.

Nick Robertson is the CEO at ASOS and it’s his creation. He doesn’t need external research to tell him what people want. He’s lucky to have most of his employees as typical customers and they’re free to tweet about the company. As Nick says ‘I read blogs, staff tweets, other tweets – all the insight is there, all the strategy we need.’

This confidence in getting it right for the customer is all pervasive: ‘We don’t have strategy here’, Robertson says. ‘We have a loose idea, it’s not set in stone. If you start with the customer and what they want then you can build the financials around that.’

Robertson adds that ‘It’s ironic; at ASOS the more we give (for free) the more we get back. Fashion Finder and Marketplace – easy decisions if you build from the heart. Other companies would have found this very hard, called it disruptive.’ Sincere belief in doing what’s right for the customer has enabled ASOS to innovate and turn retail conventions upside down. Robertson clearly sees ASOS more as a movement than a ‘retailer’: ‘ASOS is as much a retailer as it is a publisher as it is an enabler of fashion’.

Much of Robertson’s confidence comes from the fact that he trusts his gut. He’s had to make a lot of decisions without relying on market research. He’s fortunate in having so many customers as staff and that his business model enables him to remove slow moving lines more or less immediately. But the principle is universal: the more an innovator is able to make decisions based on his or her own judgement, the more instinctive he or she becomes. Some organisations just have too much money. They default to researching things that don’t need to be researched; instead they need someone to make a decision.



‘Believe in yourself. You spend your life talking to people and everyone has a different opinion. It’s quite easy to get distracted by that. You have to know where you are going. Look into the horizon and that is the destination. All the time you are going to have people telling you it’s wrong but sometimes trust yourself.’

Nick Robertson, from Jaffer and Bordell (2011)

Collaborative: Embracing Diverse and External Factors

There is a critical distinction to be made between teamwork and collaboration, but these words are often used interchangeably. Sure, innovation needs people to pull together as a team, but what it really needs is for people to be able to collaborate, often with contacts and organisations outside the company – maybe competitors, suppliers, maybe even people the company has never considered talking to.

Consider any team sport – winning is often down to teamwork. But to say that players ‘collaborate’ to win sounds odd. That’s because teamwork has boundaries (the duration of the game is fixed, the size of the pitch is fixed ...), it has rules, players have positions and what constitutes victory is normally pretty clear. But collaboration operates in a different environment where the boundaries and rules aren’t clear. In fact the rules unfold as the project progresses and collaborating parties don’t have a clear idea of what victory looks like – it’s something they feel their way towards.

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Too often teamwork looks like polite people making minimal progress, whereas collaboration is an altogether more robust concept that doesn’t tolerate mediocrity and drives step change.

Collaboration is an admission that you and your team haven’t got all the answers. True collaboration means that all parties open up a bit. There’s a tacit implication in attempting to collaborate; you’re saying ‘I can’t do

this alone. I don't have all the answers. Can we mix our thinking up and see what happens?' So allowing oneself to feel vulnerable is part and parcel of the collaborator's way.

So what does collaboration look like in practice? Firstly, collaborators really value diversity. They surround themselves with the kind of 'difference' that will enable serendipitous encounters. Innovators have a high tolerance for people from different cultures and skill sets. They generally have a wide circle of friends, acquaintances and interests. They're curious, occasionally eccentric people. Secondly, collaboration in practice has no boundaries. Innovators often face outwards, more so than anyone else in the organisation. They work hard to foster links outside their business and should be encouraged to do so. If they are in the office too much, they're not doing their job.



A good buddy of mine helped save a life recently, and if all goes well he'll save many more. Dave Green is President of Boston-based Harvard Bioscience. They're the guys who developed and manufactured the kit that helped create the world's first regenerated trachea implant in a 36 year old man suffering from 'inoperable' and terminal tracheal cancer (he'd been given two weeks to live). The surgery took place in June 2011 in Sweden. As we go to print, the patient is approaching his one year anniversary of the surgery.

The science in a nutshell is this: harvest stem cells from hip; create spongy plastic replica trachea; baste with cells for 2 days while they seed; grow and merge; remove cancerous trachea and replace with new. A few weeks later patient leaves hospital. A death sentence reversed. How mighty is the promise of innovation!



Dave tells his innovation story like this:

‘Back in 2004 I began to get interested in the power of stem cells. I read up about them and got myself rigged up to just about every scientific journal, conference and mailing list imaginable. I started chairing the Harvard Business School Healthcare Alumni Annual Conference, something that enabled me to talk about my interest, meet many experts in the field and learn about the business of medicine like FDA approvals and government reimbursement. I have no background in medicine, but eventually I figured our company could create the machinery to build highly

fibrous body parts like a trachea. I reached out to Professor Paolo Macchiarini, the surgeon pioneering in this field and suggested we could help. Shortly after his warm email reply I was on a plane to Italy. The next year is a blur of pulling together specialists from all over the world – the team literally included people from Italy, Spain, UK, Iran, Germany, Sweden, Iceland and the US. When we eventually did the first regenerated trachea transplant there were over 20 people in the operating theatre and many more outside. Each of them have played a critical role in the innovation, none of us could have done it alone’.

Note how many external points of reference Green refers to in his story: literature, the internet, a conference, the world-renowned surgeon and ultimately a small army of technicians during the operation itself. All the protagonists to the story were figuring out their role as they went along, none was sure of what they would get out of it or where the story would end up. Green got himself out of the office, camped out on the right person’s doorstep, jumped on a plane and did whatever it took to collaborate.

Flexible: Navigate Between Expansive and Reductive Thinking

There are two worlds an innovator needs to switch between. Let’s call one Planet Expand and the other Planet Reduce. During the innovation process we are orbiting one planet and then another. While we’re orbiting Planet Expand we’re seeking out stimulus, we’re looking for alternatives and we’re having ideas. We’ve deliberately dropped all constraints and are tossing ideas around. This can be a lot of fun but too long orbiting Planet Expand drives most people nuts.

At some stage we have to put the boosters on and escape the gravitational pull of Planet Expand and head off towards Planet Reduce, sometimes known as the 'Real World'. This is a different place altogether. Now we're using our experience to reduce the amount of choice we have generated.

Switching between these planets might happen several times during the course of a 5-minute conversation and potentially hundreds of times over the life of an innovation project. Below is a typical innovation project process:



This process looks pretty logical. But don't kid yourself. Innovation isn't a neat and tidy linear journey as diagrams like these can have you believe. You might find yourself joining halfway through the journey, your money runs out at unexpected junctures, the brief changes and the process is redrawn. These are the realities of an innovation process. And while this is going on you're constantly switching between Planet Expand and Planet Reduce. Managing the discipline of innovation process against this potentially chaotic backdrop needs people with highly developed interpersonal skills who can guide the conversations between these expansive and reductive states.

Signalling is a term we coined at ?What If! and it is a simple linguistic technique used to navigate the switch between these two worlds of innovation.

Once you are aware of the need to signal, it's easy to do and can have a dramatic effect on the outcome of an intimate conversation or group dialogue. Let's eavesdrop on an imaginary conversation between a store manager and his staff:

Signal (Manager): *'Let's forget all about how we work for a minute, what could we do to increase staff engagement?'*

Response (Staff): *'We could swap jobs within the store once a year, just for a day'*

Signal: *'That's interesting, what else could we do?'*

Response: *'We could swap jobs with the top brass!'*

Signal: *'OK, lets push that idea'*

Response: *'The top brass could do our jobs and we could mark them and give them feedback at the end of the day!'*

Signal: *'We need to close this down now, who has got a proposal about how we could test the idea fast?'*

Response: *'I think we can have one department do a job swap, if that works we'll do it across the store, then if that works we'll invite the top brass to join in.'*

Signalling alerts others as to how you want them to react. Notice how the signals in the dialogue above expanded, then contracted the conversation?

There is a critical moment in every creative conversation and it goes like this:

'I've got this thought, it's not formed, frankly it might sound a little weird but can you help me build it?'

This is a huge signal. It is saying PLEASE DON'T PISS ON THIS IDEA. Ignore this at your peril.

The other signal that really helps is to reassure that the expansion phase won't go on forever:

'Guys, let's kick this around together, I want us to get 20 different and radical ideas on the table, when we've done that we'll have a break and then come back and figure out the one or two we want to take forward.'

Think of signalling as the indicator lights on your car. They tell other cars of your intentions. Without them things can get messy. We've all experienced trying to 'close down' a debate while the lone genius drones on with their stream of creativity – very frustrating. Equally

annoying is Mr Worry who keeps asking for proof when the rest of the room is exploring a world of possibilities. Once you've been driving for a while, then signalling is automatic. It's the same in the creative process – soon you won't even realise you're doing it.

Finisher: A Relentless Drive to 'Get It Over the Line'

Any battle-hardened innovation veteran will tell you that 'having the idea was the easy bit, getting it to market nearly killed me'. Innovators need to be good finishers. They need to mentally lock on the endgame, get their heads down and charge.

The most frequent question I get asked about people in innovation roles in large companies is whether they need to be creative people. Creativity does have an important role to play in innovation. Making the connections that no one has seen lies at the heart of serendipity. But while creative people throw up a lot of options, they don't always close them down. A large organisation has a limited capacity to deal with options; too many initiatives and everything grinds to a halt.

So the answer is 'No', creativity isn't a prerequisite of an innovator as long as they realise the extent of their limitations. Someone who can get things done and can call on creative people to add flair – that's the ideal combination. The alternative, a creative starter who surrounds themselves with good finishers might work in a start-up organisation but becomes very frustrating in a large organisation as initiatives pile up.

Part of being a good finisher is being a good 'unblocker'. Innovators are the master plumbers of the business world. They understand the political realities of their organisation and they know who they need

in their pocket to make things move smoothly through the system. The best innovators I have worked with lament the amount of process they have to deal with. They are frustrated with the avalanche of ‘internal stuff’ that occupies much of their day. But they have developed coping mechanisms; they’re good at keeping everyone focused on the human side of innovation – the customer. A good innovator keeps us focused on what we’re trying to achieve. As a result, roadblocks disappear.

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The spectre of a stalled innovation process is depressingly common. Everyone in every business has at some point hit their head against the wall, whilst offering a silent prayer that the floor would open up and take them away to a more tranquil environment. This sense of frustration that things don’t move fast enough is disabling but it’s also inevitable, like acne is to a teenager.

The only way to cope is to take a deep breath, get over it and make an ‘unblocking plan’.

Sometimes we need a dramatic intervention to unblock the pipes. A client of ours, a large hospital, had got stuck whilst designing a new system for incoming patients. Some were walking wounded but most were returning for regular treatment. The hospital reception area was a mess, it was noisy and disorganised – a terrible first experience for any patient.

We’d been trying to crack the problem for months, but there were many stakeholders with conflicting views. The junior doctors wanted the consulting rooms to be used on a first come, first use basis. The senior

doctors wanted their own consulting rooms regardless of whether they were working or not. The receptionists wanted to recruit more help getting samples to the pathology lab on the sixth floor (the internal post took 24 hours) but the management wanted to reduce headcount.

We had reached an impasse but fortunately the hospital had a clever 'Master Plumber' on the team. The next meeting, which I think we'd all been dreading, turned out to be a great success. Our Master Plumber opened the meeting by introducing us to three patients. They stood in front of us and calmly told their story about just how bad the hospital experience had been, how it had affected their health and how their families had been affected as well.

This was a moving experience, and it was clear that cracking the problem was a lot more important than squabbling amongst ourselves. Soon a new mood of cooperation took hold. Within weeks we had hired a runner to speed the pathology reports, we started training receptionists as phlebotomists (so they could take blood when nursing staff were overloaded) and, whereas previously the senior doctors demanded their own consulting rooms, they now agreed to a flexible, shared arrangement.

Innovation is a very practical subject. There are flashes of creativity but mainly there are long dark nights hammering out just how something is going to work. This demands an endurance and an alignment around a single goal. A good finisher is good at spotting who they need onside and figuring ways to unblock the system. They're realists - rather than get bent out of shape over the inertia of the 'system', they get their heads down and charge. They're relentless in their pursuit of getting innovation 'over the line'.



‘Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too.’

W. H. Murray. *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* (1951)

**Let's Get
Practical**

So how much of a ‘Captain One Minute, Pirate the Next’ are you? Don’t even try to answer this question alone – get some help from people who know you well and aren’t afraid to tell you the truth. Below are several questions that are prompts for discussion. But don’t beat yourself up if the scores are low on some questions – few individuals have all these qualities.

- ◆ How have you articulated the ambition for your business (or team, division, department ...)? Be honest – does your heart beat faster when you explain the things in the world you’re going to put right? Are your hands itching to leave their pockets and punch the air? Many people give up too easily when answering this question: ‘How can my business possibly be exciting?’ You need to answer this question. Without a sense of audacity and passion innovation will never take off.
- ◆ Do you ‘give good listening’? Innovation needs people with humility and empathy. This comes from and is evidenced by your ability to listen. You may never have surveyed your colleagues on your reputation for this – many executives haven’t, but understanding your credibility as a ‘listener’ is critical.
- ◆ Do you ‘go with your gut’ or keep asking for more research before making a decision? To what extent do you ‘back yourself’?
- ◆ Are you more external or internal facing? Maybe think back to your last innovation project or engagement – how many people outside of your organisation did you seek inspiration from and collaborate with?
- ◆ Can you navigate between an expansive and reductive process? Do you know when to switch from creative to analytic mode, or vice versa?
- ◆ Finally, are you realistic about your ability to finish things off?

Note the question isn’t about your ability to finish things but your awareness of your ability. If you’re a poor finisher don’t lose heart – surround yourself with people who are good at it.

