

The Maverick Way: Lateral Thinkers Looking For Innovations

by Jana Wolf Sussman

Editors Note: This article is the English translation of Sussman's original article, which was published in the German newspaper, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (Frankfurt, Germany) on January 7, 2002.

They call themselves “mavericks” after the unbranded cattle of the Wild West. For four years they have been meeting for the “Mavericks Roundtable” in herds of 25 to 35, this time at a resort in the Arizona desert. The participants come from all backgrounds and positions: from large corporations like Eastman Kodak and Hewlett-Packard to venture capitalists and start-ups; from CEOs to researchers. Unusual management and innovation methods connect them, and their identification with the “Maverick Way.”

“For the first time, I feel understood amongst peers,” says Dick Sperry, inventor of the InstaPak, a multibillion dollar product of the packaging industry. As the name “maverick” suggests, mavericks prefer to cross borders unbranded and therefore unrecognized, to discover uncharted territories without unwanted interference.

Lanny Vincent, innovation management consultant and initiator of the roundtables, defines “The Maverick Way” as follows: “The Maverick Way is a combination of factors that increase corporate chances of success. One key factor is the perception of internal and external changes that lead to a need for innovation. Another key factor is the maverick’s ability to cross the borders between the inside and the outside of a corporation. The maverick takes on the role of a catalyst and is in need of a mentor, called MOM (mentor of maverick). It’s the MOM who clears the maverick’s path within the company.”

The father of the Maverick Way is Bill Wilson, 79, who looks back at a 24-year career at Kimberly-Clark, manufacturer of brands like Kleenex, Kotex and Huggies. He is proud of his turbulent career that he ended

in 1988, holding the position of Vice President for Innovation Management. In the late 1950s, Wilson’s team developed the first paper diapers for a focus group, against corporate instructions and using funds intended for other purposes. K-C’s corporate leadership only found out when the mothers in the focus group were striving to sue the company for more diapers.

Unfortunately one of the focus group participants was married to a Procter & Gamble employee. Pleased with the test diapers, she excitedly handed them on to her husband. P&G’s Pampers became a market sensation before K-C got their first diaper to market. Wilson was not disappointed at all: “I felt good,” he remembers. “After five years, our idea finally made it to the stores, and P&G

develop an innovative idea into a stock-exchange success without scaring away its founders and creative heads? In open, critical discussions the mavericks sought and encouraged unusual ways to potential solutions.

Mavericks are looking for mutual support, as their unorthodox ways often are rejected in their respective work environments. “Nonetheless, companies profit from using the creative potential of their employees and going through internal renewal processes without outside help,” says Vincent, explaining the value of the maverick. “Mavericks realize their full potential with the help of a mentor. It is the mentor who enables the maverick’s unhindered journey into the Free Range. Later, the MOM helps to com-

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showed us how we have to market them.” During the 1980s, Wilson hired a theology graduate and young pastor, Lanny Vincent, and became his “MOM.” Capturing Vincent’s experiences in Wilson’s environment at K-C, “*The Maverick Way, Profiteering from the Power of the Corporate Misfit*” was published in 2000.

While the first Mavericks Roundtables focused on the definition of the maverick and the Maverick Way, this year’s Roundtable explored the “Free Range,” the area outside of paradigms and limitations. For two days the group worked on case studies of companies that were confronted with great changes: What does a manufacturer of conventional film and camera equipment do in the age of digitalization? How do you de-

communicate and implement the maverick’s discoveries, as many companies are unwilling to accept uncomfortable truths and to enter new paths.”

Every enterprise needs mavericks and their MOMs to survive in today’s environment. The participants of the Mavericks Roundtable are convinced of this. As Wilson says, “It’s not status and money that attract us to a job, but the freedom and the thrill of an innovative roller coaster ride.”

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Jana Wolf Sussman is a commercial strategist for Genentech’s Decision Support and Commercial Innovation Department in South San Francisco, California. She can be reached at jana_sussman@yahoo.com.

Darwinian Innovation

by Lanny Vincent

Most of us attribute the concept of “survival of the fittest” to Charles Darwin. Yet, according to the recent book *Driven*, Darwin actually never used the phrase. Rather, Darwin’s ideas on evolution had more to do with survival of the most adaptable and less to do with survival of the strongest. Survival goes to the species that can generate variations, select the best one and retain it for future generations. Isn’t this what corporations are attempting to do when they seek to innovate?

Unlike the entrepreneur, the established corporation has to deal not only with this sometimes tumultuous evolutionary process in the market, but also it has to deal with variations, selection and retention internally as well.

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The Maverick as a Chameleon

by John Raley

Discontinuous innovation is defined as new innovations that are tangentially related to a company’s current business, which offer substantial opportunity for company growth and renewal. An essential player in the arena of discontinuous innovation is the maverick.

The maverick finds discontinuous innovations by exploring outside the company’s “comfort zone” of products and technologies. When the maverick finds a potential connection between something new and the company’s core competencies, the maverick is now faced with the challenge of how to bring the innovation back into the company. And the challenge is a significant one.

By the very fact of the innovation being discontinuous and outside the company’s normal sphere of operations, the maverick cannot assume that others will see the same

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Mavericks Without Borders

by Jana Wolf Sussman

Intrigued by Lanny Vincent’s mention of “The Maverick Way” during an innovation workshop last summer, I read the book and decided to attend the Mavericks Roundtable in November. My plan was to write an article for the German business audience about mavericks.

Assisting Lanny with his workshop, I got a sense of what “The Maverick Way” really meant for some people, from struggles with their company to new found freedom in this group. From what I saw, the workshop had the liberating effect on both “corporate misfits” and well-adjusted managers who could finally speak freely about their ideas and feelings.

In December, I submitted my article on “The Maverick Way” to Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), a leading German newspaper. The article was printed on top of the “Management Overview” section on Monday, January 7, 2002. (An English translation of Jana’s article is attached.) Trying to do the Mavericks justice in a little over 800 (long, German) words, the article describes

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Corporate Immunity

Editor’s Note: This “parable” was by submitted by Curt Schauer as a light-hearted look at how a social immune response might develop.

Experiment: Start with a cage containing five monkeys. Inside the cage, hang a banana on a string and place a set of stairs under it. Before long, a monkey will go to the stairs and start to climb towards the banana. As soon as he touches the stairs, spray all of the other monkeys with cold water.

After a while, another monkey makes an attempt with the same result: all the other monkeys are sprayed with cold water. Pretty soon, when another monkey tries to climb the stairs, the other monkeys will try to prevent it.

Now, put away the cold water. Remove one monkey from the cage and replace it with a new one. The new monkey sees the banana and wants to climb the stairs. To his surprise and horror, all of the other monkeys attack him. After another attempt and attack, he knows that if he tries to climb the stairs, he will be assaulted.

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Darwinian Innovation

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ing Company, 1997) calls the corporate immune system a chronic management challenge for established companies seeking innovation. Corporations, just like the human body, can and will produce antibodies that respond to innovation efforts as threats to corporate health. Some corporations anticipate this immune response and turn to mavericks, their mentors and their methods for a way out.

The accompanying articles lend some insight and perspective on the corporate immune response system and the growing interest in mavericks, their mentors and their methods as a practical management framework for these challenges.

In addition, Vincent & Associates is planning a pilot study with younger and more mature companies to map out how they are dealing with their organizations' immune response systems. If you have interest, please call Lanny Vincent for a prospectus of the study. □

The Maverick as a Chameleon

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connections and value to company growth.

So how does a successful maverick bring a new, discontinuous innovation back home? The secret is that a successful maverick must be a chameleon, one who is able to change how they relate to individuals depending on the functional orientation of the individual. And the maverick must do so in a believable and credible manner.

When talking with technical people, the maverick must be able to effectively discuss the technical aspects of the new innovation and how it is tangentially related to the existing competencies of the technical organization. When talking with marketing and business people, the maverick must be able to describe how the new innovation is compatible with the overall vision of the company. When talking with financial people, the maverick must be able to conceptually discuss the dollars and cents of what it would take to implement the innovation and the

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Vincent & Associates

lanny@innovationsthatwork.com

Mavericks Without Borders

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the Roundtable itself, giving some background on its history and development. Working right off Lanny's latest ideas and conceptions, it also defined the Maverick Way, giving the example of Kimberly-Clark's diaper (pp.106-118 "The Maverick Way"), and described the meaning and power of the Mentor of Mavericks/Maverick construct.

It wasn't until I received an email from an ex-colleague in Germany on January 8th that I found out the article was published. This was especially exciting to me, as the FAZ newspaper was "required reading" during my time in business school. So today's students are required to read my article!

Over the next couple of weeks, both Lanny and I received various emails from people wanting to know more about the mavericks. Not surprisingly to me, this concept had struck a major chord with people overseas. Later that month Lanny told me that they sold the German translation rights for "The

financial benefits to the company.

Not only does the successful maverick have to be somewhat fluent in discussing different aspects of the innovation, but also the maverick must be able to do so convincingly. This requires credibility throughout the company that can only be obtained over time via ongoing interaction with the different functional areas. The credibility that is developed not only aids the maverick in bringing new innovations back home, but it also aids the maverick in discovering innovations by viewing possibilities from a variety of points of view.

If you are looking for a successful maverick in your organization, look for someone with a broad range of interests and who networks well with many different functional areas. This is the person who is most likely to be able to see new, discontinuous innovations for your company and also efficiently and meaningfully explain the discovery to others. □

John Raley is a business leader with state-of-the-art experience in global intellectual asset management. He is based in Fremont, Wisconsin. John can be reached at john_raley@pitnet.net.

Maverick Way."

It will be exciting to see where the mavericks' movement is going: whether it turns into an institution, whether it is taking off into new, unexpected directions, both philosophically and geographically.

I am happy to help getting the ball rolling in Germany, excited to have met and talked to the mavericks that attended the Mavericks Roundtable. It has been an invaluable experience for me, and even now I find myself talking to friends and colleagues about maverick approaches to problems. I am currently considering writing my doctorate thesis in the area of innovation management, and hope to draw from experiences and input of the mavericks. □

Jana Wolf Sussman works as a commercial strategist for Genentech's Decision Support and Commercial Innovation Department in South San Francisco, CA. Jana can be contacted at jana_sussman@yahoo.com.

Corporate Immunity

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Next, remove another of the original five monkeys and replace it with a new one. The newcomer goes to the stairs and is attacked. The previous newcomer takes part in the punishment with enthusiasm! Likewise, replace a third original monkey with a new one, then a fourth, then the fifth.

Every time the newest monkey takes to the stairs, he is attacked. Most of the monkeys that are beating him have no idea why they were not permitted to climb the stairs or why they are participating in the beating of the newest monkey.

After replacing all the original monkeys, none of the remaining monkeys have ever been sprayed with cold water. Nevertheless, no monkey ever again approaches the stairs to try for the banana. Why not? Because as far as they know that's the way it's always been done around here. □

Curt Schauer works for Brocade Communications Systems in San Jose, California. He can be contacted at csschi@yahoo.com.