

Systematic imagination: what organizations can learn from fiction writing about innovation

Linn Marie Kolbe
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Innovation is “the effort to create purposeful, focused change in an enterprise’s economic or social potential”¹. In order to successfully innovate, Drucker advocates practicing innovation as a systematic activity rather than relying on inspiration and good luck. As can be seen by the growing volume of scientific and practical literature regarding innovation processes and practices, the field of management is actively seeking for more effective methods to improve innovative capacity. Analytical tools, such as better methods to screen the environment for new ideas, help organizations to create better routines and structures for innovation. By means of analysis, firms also try to gain better insight into the product development process and new market opportunities. Yet, according to Drucker, “innovation is both, conceptual and perceptual”². In this essay, I depart from the assumption that, while firms possess the rational tools to tackle innovation processes related to the analytical side of innovation (i.e. managing knowledge), the perceptual side of innovation remains largely unexplored. Perception, imagination and empathy, however, represent an important source of information to feed the innovative process. In order to help firms to formulate a systematic innovation strategy regarding the perceptual side of innovation, this essay explores some lessons that can be learned from fiction writers.

Fiction writing is concerned with creating prose, based on imagery events and people (characters). Good fiction writing triggers intense emotions; it makes the reader cry, laugh or shiver with fear. When reading a good novel, we accompany its characters; we breathe, suffer or cheer along with them, identify with them or even deeply dislike them. Fiction writing, therefore, very purposefully and in a focused manner creates a change in the reader. This change may not necessarily have economic potential but it has emotional and social potential.

Since perception, imagination and empathy are qualities that can promote the innovative capacity of the firm and since firms have not yet found a systematic process to take advantage of these features, this essay strives to answer the question: What can organizations learn from fiction writing in order to improve their innovation strategy? In order to answer this question, I draw upon some of the principles that fiction writers employ when creating fiction and elaborate on how they might be useful to improve the understanding of innovation in firms and other institutions. The main conclusion is that in order to ensure innovation that is not only based on analytics and rationality, but also on perception and imagination, managers in firms need to 1) be committed to innovation, by investing a huge amount of hours into it and 2) remain open to failure and even suffering. Both conclusions are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Commit to innovation: practice, practice, practice

Just as Drucker warns innovators in firms about merely relying on inspiration and good luck, it is the habit of writing itself that will be most fruitful to the writing career, as opposed to sudden inspiration. In his book “on writing”, bestselling author Stephen King

¹ Drucker, P.F. (1998), *The discipline of innovation*, Harvard business review, p.3

² Drucker, P.F. (2007), *Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Elsevier, p. 123

recommends (aspiring) writers to “read a lot and write a lot”³. In this section, I first discuss three purposes of practice in fiction writing, namely developing ideas, testing ideas and practicing ones craft. Then I go into how this relates to a corporate environment.

Develop ideas. A quote by Pablo Picasso (admittedly famous for his painting and not writing) says: “Inspiration exists, but it has to find you working”⁴. The best writing ideas come while writing⁵. Stephen King describes the muse as a grunting guy that lives in the writer’s basement and has a bag of magic (the inspiration). This muse “sits and smokes cigars and admires his bowling trophies and pretends to ignore you”⁶. The writer’s job is to get down there with the muse to make sure she or he can be found at his desk whenever the muse decides to spill some of his inspirational dust. Along the same line, novelist Robert Olen Butler states, “Art does not come from ideas, art does not come from the mind. Art comes from the place where you dream. Art comes from your unconscious.”⁷ Therefore, writing helps to access our unconscious and to turn off our analytical mind and thereby dig for the hidden treasures.

Test ideas. Ideas have to be concrete to work on paper. Abstract concepts do not work in writing. For example, a reader cannot necessarily empathize with the hatred of a character towards his father, even though the author works “and he thought of his terrible childhood” into the text. Instead, the reader needs to see the character as a young child cowering underneath the sink in the kitchen cabinet and embracing his baby sister, while the mother’s screams and the father’s angry groans sound from the doorway. Amongst writers this phenomenon is often referred to as “show don’t tell”. As soon as we grab our pen or open a new document on our computer, the supposedly best ideas can magically disappear. Therefore, engaging in the writing process will help to distinguish the good ideas from the bad ideas.

Practice the craft. Another purpose of deliberately practicing writing is rather obvious: to practice the craft. Stephen King distinguishes four types of writers: bad writers, competent writers, good writers and really good writers. While, according to King, a good writer can never be a really good writer (such as Shakespeare), a bad writer can never be a competent writer. However, a competent writer can become a good writer through practice. Of course, it may be hard to evaluate one’s own ability to write and frankly it is even unnecessary to do so as long as a person feels the necessity and urgency to write. In most cases, others will do the judgment soon enough. So practice and dedication to writing comes first. If there is no urge to write, there is a high likelihood that other activities will be given preference above writing anyway. Writing a lot helps writers to become better at it.

Three main suggestions can be derived from the above for the business world. Firstly, regarding the development of new ideas, managers should focus on finding the right routines that work for their employees to dedicate themselves to innovation. This does not merely mean to focus on the sourcing and screening of innovative ideas, for example by setting up idea

³ King, S. (2000), *On Writing. A Memoir of the Craft*. Scribner: New York, p. 145

⁴ Pablo Picasso (n.d.) *Goodreads*, retrieved on 27. 06. 2013 from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/30296-inspiration-exists-but-it-has-to-find-you-working>

⁵ See also the TED talk from bestselling author Elizabeth Gilbert („Eat, Pray, Love“): *Your elusive creative genius* on http://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius.html

⁶ King, S. (2000), *On Writing. A Memoir of the Craft*. Scribner: New York, p. 144

⁷ Butler, R.O. (2005). *From where you dream*. Grove Press: New York (Kindle Edition)

boxes throughout the firm. It rather means to allow people to sit at their desks or in their labs and make them concretize their innovative ideas. The best ideas will emerge during the process. Often, coming up with new ideas does not necessarily represent the biggest challenge in firms. Rather it requires the ability to distinguish between good and bad ideas, and ability that can be developed through practice and experience.

Therefore, secondly, employees should be encouraged to put their ideas on paper in order to test them. A couple of weeks ago, I have witnessed a talk at the R&D Management conference in Manchester⁸, that argued that writing reports is one of the most important abilities of people working in R&D and constitutes the main output of R&D. In my experience, especially the technical staff can be reluctant to writing reports, since their main interest is to solve technical problems and deal with technological challenges. If a firm wishes to invest in successful innovation, however, training as many individuals as possible to express their ideas and plans in textual, oral or/and figurative manner (e.g. reports, prototypes, pitches) may represent an important step to a) distinguish the good ideas from the bad ones b) develop and come up with new, better ideas c) communicate ideas and d) think through the whole process of the innovation.

Thirdly, practicing innovation usually implies that firms invest considerable resources (time and money) into the process although the success of innovation is often hard or impossible to predict. Also, innovation requires people to work in a highly uncertain environment with high failure rates. This can be very uncomfortable and stressful for a lot of people. Therefore, the first question that managers should answer to test whether they are willing to invest in their ability to innovate is: Do I have the urge to innovate? The second is: Does my firm have the urge to innovate? If the answer is no both questions, why even bother (or why read this essay)? Rather focus on the short-term outcomes and hope for the best. If the answer is yes to the first one and no to the second one and there is no urge and recognition to the necessity to innovate within the firm, managers can try to work around resistance as described further down below. However, innovation will only lead to fruitful results if there is an absolute necessity and drive within the firm (either caused intrinsically or extrinsically) to innovate. If a firm is not truly committed or willing to commit to the innovative process, there will be no innovation.

As discussed above, doing “it” (writing or innovating) a lot is key to success. In the next section, I discuss the necessity to remain open towards failure and suffering in writing and innovation.

Openness to failure and suffering

Drucker listed failures as one of the important sources for innovation. However “most businesses dismiss them, disregard them, and even resent them”⁹, which of course makes them more valuable, thinking in terms of competitive advantage. Fiction writers are especially experienced in transforming failure and suffering into literature. As the main character of Isabel Allende’s recent novel puts it: “In writing happiness is useless – without suffering there is no story”¹⁰. Who wants to read a story about a pretty girl who meets a pretty boy, with whom she raises two pretty children and they live happily ever after? Instead, readers appreciate characters that are human, and therefore: flawed. Characters, who are struggling with the obstacles in life will draw the reader’s attention. In order to be able to successfully transmit these feelings in writing and hereby connecting to the reader, the author himself/

⁸ Macey, B. (2013, June), *Practical Magic – Managing R&D Teams*, Plenary Session at the R&D Management Conference in Manchester, Great Britain

⁹ Drucker, P.F. (1998), *The discipline of innovation*, Harvard business review, p.5

¹⁰ Allende, I. (2013), *Maya’s Notebook*, Forth Estate: London, p. 34

herself has to truthfully feel what he/she is writing about. As journalist and author Gene Fowler puts it, "Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood from on your forehead".¹¹ Most people's natural tendency is not to bleed or suffer. For example, quite understandably, they rather distract themselves from the bad quarterly figures with a cold beer than feeling the anxiety and difficulty of this financial challenge. However, inspiration and innovative solutions may be drawn from failure, if failure is truly acknowledged. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the barriers that prevent us from facing failure and to work around these boundaries.

Be aware of barriers. The human psyche has set up powerful defense mechanisms to protect us from suffering and help us stay "sane" and function effectively in our day-to-day lives. Picture these barriers as a couple of 90-kilos weighting bouncers in bulletproof vests. Their job is to prevent intruders from descending into the darkness of our adventurous psyche, our unconscious. Sometimes these bouncers punch you in the face and your mind goes blank (repression, or what may be called writers block) and sometimes they throw fouled eggs at you, yelling "You suck!" or "Booooring". They manipulate you in all kinds of ways to prevent you from entering the cave with the magic.

Work around barriers by remaining open. According to the novelist Anne Lamott¹², it is essential as a writer to be reverent and encounter one's environment with awe, presence and openness. This implies postponing one's judgment and instead encountering the world with the curiosity of a child. This curiosity (it may also be referred to as compassionate detachment) helps the writer to remain open to wherever the story may lead to. As poet Robert Frost says, "no surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader".¹³

Work around barriers with charm and humor. The advantage of fiction is that it is fiction. This means that writers can use colorful language, fun characters and lots of humor to disguise the sadness and the darkness of their writing.

There are several powerful reasons for why organizations and people in organization can take advantage from learning to better deal with failure and suffering. Probably the most powerful is that between 40%-90% innovations fail.¹⁴ Failure, therefore, is just part of the process and professionals can learn from fiction writers to accept this reality. In firms, the resistance may come from the resistance within the firm (from the same department or from other departments), as well as from the outside. Failures may trigger feelings of shame, anger and sadness and may be rationalized or at times even covered up (the bouncers!). Firms should be aware that resistance is part of the process and be okay with that. If people stop to have good ideas or become demotivated it can be helpful to be aware of the darker forces at play that may prevent us from doing our best work. Instead of abandoning innovation, firms should stick with it, especially when it seems hardest. The tool of the writer is language, but firms have technologies or interesting services and design that may motivate practitioners and clients to embrace a little bit of suffering. Of course, humor can be applied just as well in the business world and can take the steam out of difficult situations.

¹¹ O'Toole, G. (14. 09. 2011), Writing Is Easy; You Just Open a Vein and Bleed, Quote Investigator, retrieved on 27. 06. 2013 from <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2011/09/14/writing-bleed/>

¹² Lamott, A. (1994), Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life, Anchor Books: New York (Kindle Edition)

¹³ Robert Frost (n.d.) Goodreads, retrieved on 27. 06. 2013 from <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/writing>

¹⁴ Gourville, G.T. (June, 2006), Eager Sellers and Stony Buyers: Understanding the Psychology of New-Product Adoption, Harvard Business Review, retrieved on 27. 06. 2013 from <http://hbr.org/2006/06/eager-sellers-and-stony-buyers-understanding-the-psychology-of-new-product-adoption/ar/1>

Therefore, the ability to remain open and surprise the surrounding implies some degree of vulnerability. Being aware of barriers that may cause firms and employees to shut down - and finding the necessary “seductive” tools to keep people at it - is essential. In today’s world there is a necessity to collaborate with external partners throughout the innovation process and integrate knowledge from outside into the firm, as well as sharing firm knowledge with external innovation partners. Firms increasingly engage in networks and therefore act in an increasingly uncertain environment. Taking advantage of perceptual thinking is essential in this context. It is only by deliberate practice and a reverent and respectfully curious attitude that firms can learn to manage these relationships and remain innovative.