INNOVATION LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

How Leaders Turn Ideas into Value in a Changing World

Edited by

KARINA R. JENSEN
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Innovation Leadership in Practice

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2024

Editorial Matter and Selection © 2024 Karina R. Jensen, Stephanie Kaudela-Baum and Rob Sheffield.
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83753-397-8 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83753-396-1 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83753-398-5 (Epub)

INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

From Karina:
To all of the innovation leaders who inspire and co-create new opportunities and positive impact around the world.

From Stephanie:
For my family, Stefan, Benedikt and Ruth, who give me the freedom to do what I love.

From Rob:
To my children, Ella and Cormac, thanks for being with me while giving me the space for work like this. I'm hugely proud of you both.

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Foreword

– Dr John Bessant

There's almost certainly a list somewhere on the internet of the world's most overworked words. And it's a fair bet that two which feature high up that list will be 'leadership' and 'innovation'. You can't escape them – the calls for strategic leadership in times of crisis, the urgent need for innovation to help cope with a VUCA – volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous – world. Of course, these things matter but there's a real risk that we fall into the Humpty Dumpty trap; following the character in 'Alice in Wonderland' who famously claimed to 'use words to mean whatever I want them to mean' we risk having multiple definitions attached to the words. Put them together – 'innovation leadership' – and we've got a real problem.

What's missing is an understanding of what 'innovation leadership' actually involves. How does it play out in practice, is there a standard model or does it vary with different situations – and, most important, what are the core characteristics of a good innovation leader and how might we develop those skills? And that's where this book is welcome, a timely breath of wind to clear away the fog and give us some clear insights grounded in practice.

It helps, not least by clearing up some common misconceptions about innovation leadership. It's not about being a superstar, someone with great ideas who has put them into practice and built a successful organisation on the back of that. This can help – but whilst we have Thomas Edison or Steve Jobs to explore as role models, closer analysis reveals that they may not always have been the most supportive, patient or understanding of bosses. Inventive brilliance may be an asset but it's not what's needed at the heart of innovation leadership.

Nor is the kind of leader who sense the challenges in the future and sends his or her people forward with instructions to scale the heights, cross the ocean or otherwise fulfil the mission set for them. Again, we have role models for visionary leaders – but too often such people lack a detailed understanding of what goes on in the innovation process. Point and click isn't going to cut it, even if the pointer is stretching towards the edges of the screen. We need leaders who understand the delicate process of growing and nurturing ideas to the point where they create value.

And we also don't need the laissez-faire approach in which an innovation leader sees themselves as providing a comfortable world which allows permanent playtime, ideally taking place in an environment with minimal boundaries of time and space. Innovation is a discipline and being able to repeat the trick even more so.

It's about walking a tightrope between creativity and control, about managing projects against constraints of time and resources and, at the limit, being able to stop innovation as well as get it started, if the project is getting lost and out of control.

What we need is a complex mix of skills linked to creating the context, making it possible for individuals to contribute and share their creativity, knowledge and energy to bring ideas to life. And to do so towards a shared goal.

Several years ago, I had the privilege of working with a large German company over an extended period of time and I used the opportunity to write an innovation history of the firm. They're not a lucky newcomer; they've put in the hard yards since their foundation back in 1899 and they've continued to grow despite the huge challenges which the 20th and now the 21st century has thrown at them. Innovation is at the heart of what they do and has helped them grow to a multi-billon euro size and employ tens of thousands of people around the world. This isn't luck – they have a commitment to innovation as a core value. For me, this was exemplified in the (then) owner and chairman who set out his concept of innovation leadership simply and elegantly. He called it 'entrepreneurial responsibility' and by this, he meant a mutual obligation. On the part of all employees to deliver their creativity, knowledge and energy to help with the innovation mission. And on the part of his team of senior managers – the 'innovation leaders' – to create the context in which those employees could deliver on their innovation role.

That's a message I see reinforced and elaborated in this excellent book; from many complementary perspectives, it sets out practical guidelines through which innovation leadership can be enabled in organisations of all shapes and sizes. Far from being an empty label, we need innovation leadership more than ever in our challenging world; this book helps put that in place.

John Bessant,
Emeritus Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship,
University of Exeter, UK

Foreword

– Dr Bettina von Stamm

Innovation Philosopher, World Citizen and Founder of the Innovation Leadership Forum.

I am honoured and delighted to have been asked to write a foreword for this important book. Even more so as a dear and long time friend and colleague, John Bessant, will do the same. This fact demonstrates that the authors are readily embracing an emerging and fast growing understanding of leadership in the 21st century: that it is shared. Goodbye to the controlling, all-knowing, all powerful hero leader, and welcome to the humble, cooperative and empowering servant leader.

The concept of shared, collaborative leadership is also one that seems to be running through many of the chapters, be the focus on self leadership, leadership at the team, organisational or ecosystem level. That is hugely encouraging as such a shift is made necessary by the highly complex context in which we all operate. A context where change is being introduced at an ever faster rate and where everything and everyone are connected. A world where communication is instantaneous and, once out in the digital world, almost impossible to retract. A world in which customary boundaries blur and the concept of 'one right way' has all but disappeared. And a world, where the challenges to our beautiful planet start to look rather daunting and insurmountable. In such a context, it is impossible for any one person – or organisation or country – to have the answers to our challenges; but collectively we might. If each and everyone of us offers our hands, minds and hearts, contributing what makes us unique, we may yet have a chance to shape a world in which humans and nature live in harmony. That's why self-leadership and truly appreciating diversity are essential. We need to know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, and we need to be kind to ourselves – which is a far cry from being selfish or self-centered. And rather than being frightened or annoyed by those who are different, we need to turn that fear and annoyance into curiosity, appreciation and delight. Only by bringing everyone together, pooling our resources, insights and experiences, will we be able to come up with the radically new approaches and offerings that are so urgently needed.

Whom we have customary thought of as leader will be replaced by those who are orchestrators, encouragers, enablers, providers of the most appropriate context and upholders of the vision. While such a shift in understanding and execution of leadership is urgent and necessary, it is also a rather tricky one: it requires

leaders to put their (often rather big) egos to one side and put themselves into the service of a greater good. No doubt, that greater good must be innovating towards a sustainable world.

So it will come as no surprise that I consider 'Leadership' and 'Innovation' – individually or combined – to be key for shaping our future. Innovation is absolutely critical as humanity has forged paths that are utterly unsustainable, as should be absolutely clear to everyone by now. Only through innovating can we shape new ones. Leaders and leadership play a critical role, as it requires vision, and a great deal of courage and determination to leave the accustomed path. The importance of leaders and leadership in the context of innovation was one of the first realisations I had in the over 30 years that I have been working, researching, writing in the field of innovation. It has taken me a little longer though to understand and appreciate the difference between 'leading of' and 'leading for innovation'.

I introduced this distinction about a decade ago when I realised that many of those in a leading position, in the sense that they are asked to make decisions about innovation, are not comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty and risk taking, and are hence uncomfortable with sanctioning highly innovative projects (the often uttered observation that middle management is the key blocker to innovation with a capital 'I'). Their forté is the management of costs and efficiencies – which is of course also a hugely important skill and mindset in organisational contexts. We cannot – and should not – make everyone an innovation enthusiast. But rather than allowing a context where decisions on path-altering innovations are influenced by individuals' own preferences, or worse, fears, such decisions should be made by a triumvirate (a set of three): the person passionate about the idea, a person reserved and critical about change (and hence innovation) and one who thrives and invites change. That way it can become possible to make decisions that are in the best interest of the greater good, or, at least, in the best interest of the organisation.

While not all of us need to become leaders of innovation – leading and driving highly innovative projects forward, I certainly believe that many more of us need to become leaders for innovation: understanding ourselves and our attitude towards innovation and being truly appreciative of diversity. *Innovation Leadership in Practice* makes a great contribution to what this might look and feel like, at all different levels: individual, team, organisation and ecosystem.

Preface

If you want a place to serve as inspiration, it's hard to beat Florence in Italy. After all, in Renaissance times the '… Italian city-state produced an explosion of great art and brilliant ideas, the likes of which the world has not seen before or since' (Weiner, 2016).

And, at the June 2019 International Society for Professional Innovation Management (ISPIM) conference, around 700 people gathered in Florence to share their insights on innovation. Attending sessions and workshops, gathering in small and large groups, informally over coffee and pastries, and without any planning in the best tradition of random conversations.

And that's where the idea for an Innovation Leadership Special Interest Group began to be discussed. The book editors, Karina, Stephanie and Rob, along with what would become other members of the leadership group, Russell Ward, Alex Booth and John Metselaar, all met, talked and started to plan. And the seed of something exciting was planted.

In the coming months, Joerg Reckhenrich joined the leadership group, bringing a perspective from the arts, and Ajit Paul joined from Bangalore, with his digital expertise while expanding the geographic reach of the group. In September 2019, we held our first informal meeting, exploring the potential for a community to be built around this topic. We recognised that there was around 100 years of research on both innovation and leadership, but much less that looked at their confluence. We noted the sustained contributions to practice and research from Bettina Von Stamm (2017); Shalley and Gilson's (2004) article in a 2004 special issue from *The Leadership Quarterly*; Rickards and Moger's (2006) article summarising a decade's understanding of leadership as contributing to creativity and innovation; and the more practice-oriented insights from *McKinsey* (Barsh, Capozzi, & Davidson, 2008).

We also recognised that this field has very different disciplinary approaches and that the results of the research work from these disciplines are still rather loosely linked. Psychological, sociological, communication science, economic, design-oriented and art approaches to the topic of innovation leadership have all come together and explored similar problems. But making the respective results accessible to a broader professional community requires 'translation work'. The interest in innovation leadership was certainly growing – from different perspectives, from academia and from leadership practice.

There was a growing recognition of the importance of enacting leadership within wider, particular system contexts. From the leadership field, we were alert

to changing conceptions of leadership itself, as notions of relational, shared, collective and distributed leadership challenged more traditional, 'lone-hero' versions. And, through our collective gathering of weak and stronger signals, we sensed a growing demand for a greater understanding of leadership approaches that enabled and inspired others to turn ideas into value.

It seemed a good bet to us, as we shared our perspectives from leadership research, leadership development practice, broader consulting and our own experience of leading teams. The group was formalised as a Special interest Group within the ISPIM network in Spring 2020, just as the world was going into COVID-19 lockdown. We kept the momentum, running online monthly meetings and growing the wider community – now more than 240 members at the time of writing.

We invited consultants, leadership practitioners and researchers to share their insights and experiences at these monthly meetings. We started to build some foundational ideas about the purpose and aims for the group. How might we learn about effective innovation leadership practice, and spread this? How might we attract excellent researchers to advance the work? All while growing the international community, serving practicing leaders, consultants and researchers? As we continued our journey, our monthly meetings attracted innovation leaders and speakers with open sessions for knowledge-sharing, ideation and networking. They inspired working groups in developing an innovation leadership framework, research projects and a video series featuring innovation leaders.

Conferences helped to focus our attention and share our work. There were the ISPIM global virtual and Berlin online conferences in 2020 and 2021. The in-person ISPIM 2022 conference in Copenhagen allowed us to connect with our community and celebrate innovation leadership through social gatherings and work sessions where we continued to build the meaning of leading innovation in changing contexts. This led to a dedicated two-day workshop in Reims where champagne and innovation leadership sparked contributions to the framework and chapter proposals for this book. Through all these events, we shared our emerging thoughts about the goals and projects of the group, and received feedback from interested others, all of which enriched further conversations and expanded group membership. People joined us from all over Europe, Turkey, Australia, the USA, Canada, India, Nigeria and elsewhere.

Getting people's time and attention is no small matter in the distractable digital age. Momentum grew steadily, as did the pressure to make all this increasingly relevant to the different stakeholders and their interests in our group. When the thought arose for this book, it seemed a natural evolution of our previous conversations. Something that would gather a wide range of contributions from different author perspectives, types of organisations, sectors and geographies. And that would signpost the way to further valuable work. We hope it does that and look forward to what comes next.

Dr Karina R. Jensen
Dr Stephanie Kaudela-Baum
Dr Rob Sheffield
April 15th 2023

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the many people who helped with the thinking, motivation, development and production of this book. We are especially grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with the 38 authors who have contributed to this book. Thank you to our many work colleagues whose ideas and professionalism helped inform our ongoing work.

Many thanks to the ISPIM (International Society for Professional Innovation Management) directors, Steffen Conn and Iain Bitran, for supporting our enthusiasm for innovation leadership research and practice through the creation of an Innovation Leadership Special Interest Group. We are especially appreciative of their support for the paper development workshops at ISPIM Copenhagen conference and the SIG workshop in Reims through continued encouragement and engagement of the global ISPIM community. We also extend our thanks and appreciation to respected ISPIM leaders John and Anna Bessant of the Teaching & Coaching SIG, Joanne Hyland and Magnus Karlsson of the Body of Knowledge SIG who encouraged us to further develop the framework dedicated to future skills and competencies in innovation leadership.

Stephanie would like to thank the innovation research community at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts. In particular, the colleagues from the Competence Centre Business Development, Leadership and HR, in which both research and consulting projects as well as further education programmes on the topic of innovation leadership have been realised in interdisciplinary teams for over 15 years.

Karina would like to thank colleagues at NEOMA Business School for their support in hosting the dedicated research and writing workshop on the Future of Innovation Leadership that inspired some of the chapters featured in this book. Special thanks to NEOMA professors Olli-Pekka Kauppila, Gaël Bonnin, Edgar Bellow and Sharam Alijani for their participation and support.

Rob would like to thank the leadership academics from the University of West of England, UK, for years of support in teaching and research. In particular, thanks to Professors Carol Jarvis and Richard Bolden, and Associate Professors, Peter Simpson and Selen Kars Unluoglu – for being a pleasure to work alongside, and for keeping the work fresh and relevant.

We would like to extend our appreciation to our valued colleagues of the Innovation Leadership SIG team for their engagement in research and development initiatives that led to this book project: Russell Ward, Joerg Reckhenrich, Alex Booth, Ajit Paul and John Metselaar. A special thanks to our dedicated

SIG members who have contributed their enthusiasm and support since the start and throughout this wonderful journey: Bryan Cassady, Mikael Johnsson, Tove Brink, Maria Vittoria Colucci, Letizia Migliola, Krista Keränen, Vilho Jonsson, Christophe Deutsch, Jelto von Schuckmann and Ole Tangsgaard.

And a big thanks to the members of the international Innovation Leadership community. You are why the group exists: to bring learning that aids innovation leadership practice and improves solutions for people and the planet.

Finally, we would like to recognise the team at Emerald for your support through the whole process. A heartfelt thank you to Nick Wallwork, our editor, for your interest and support in making this book a reality. An extended thank you to Thomas Creighton for his editorial and design skills and Kousalya Thangarusu for her expert guidance in the production process of transforming the manuscript into a final book.