

The Art of Innovation

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Dr. Pierre De Muelenaere, Founder, Past-President & CEO, IRIS Group ©2018, All Right Reserved

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A few months ago, I made a nice deal with one of my friends. I traded my own book *"The IRIS Book, a 33 years story on Entrepreneurship from Belgium and what you can learn from it"* against one of his preferred book *"Collective Genius, the art and practice of leading innovation"*.

He told me *"Leading Innovation, I suppose it means something to you and it was important for IRIS? Tell me what you think about it! I believe you will like it"*

Of course, he was right, I devoured it and I was even more interested because concrete case studies are presented from a dozen of companies such as Pixar, HCL, Volkswagen, Pentagram, eBay, Google, Pfizer, etc. The 4 authors have joined forces and consolidated about 10 years of their studies in the field.

In a first step, the book challenges the myth of the innovator that should be a lonesome genius, suddenly hit by a great idea. Quite in agreement with the authors! I like to stress the importance of teamwork. I prefer the Japanese collective spirit to the American individualism. Very few projects are built by one person alone.

Then, being a good leader, is not only presenting a vision for the company. It is also necessary to understand the innovation process and how the company should be organized to become an *"Innovation Machine"*. Perfectly aligned with this! For instance, some leaders can be good managers, but they do not live the business truly from the inside. They don't understand well enough the DNA of the company to boost its innovation potential.

At IRIS, in a technological field (Artificial Intelligence and Digital Transformation) with intense competition (there were way too many companies for the number of seats available), the continued innovation was essential to finally emerge as

one of the survivors. The ability to have teams completely immersed in the project and able to work long term was a great asset.

What is the limit of that book? I believe that it is quite obvious. The kind of companies studied by the authors are flying a bit high compared to the level of the classical industries and companies in Belgium. In their list, no companies are comparable to Realco, Jema, Trasis or Amoobi and even less to spin-offs such as Tessares, Telemis or Blue Foot Membranes. And yet, for all these companies, the innovation is at the heart of their success or their survival.

Volkswagen and HCL can inspire directly the teams of Proximus, Canon or GSK who probably already apply some of the best practices presented. But the economic fabric of Belgium is composed of much smaller companies which often present a significant potential of innovation. The responsibility to innovate does not belong only on the big ones!

Martin De Prycker, who was formerly CTO of Alcatel at world-wide level and the CEO of Barco told me one day that the big companies are often *"the graveyard of innovation, with plenty of excellent ideas lost"*. I agree with him! The big organizations have many skilled and brilliant people able to generate many innovative ideas. Some of these could easily justify the creation of a new start-up. But many of these ideas will be lost in space. Only those which are more "mainstream" and offer a better visibility on the potential revenues and expenses will be finally selected.

The Start-up or the small entreprize have fewer ideas and often less good. But they will fight longer and sometimes *"when you have faith, you move mountains!"*



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