



INNOVATION ISN'T MAGIC, YOU CAN DO IT TOO

PEOPLE LIKE ELON MUSK AND STEVE JOBS ARE SEEN AS SUPERHUMAN.
BUT REAL LEADERS CAN INNOVATE TOO. HERE'S WHERE TO START.

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In a recent article, I told you about Elon Musk, who has launched several successful businesses including PayPal, one of the first secure online payment systems; SpaceX a private space company which is trying to beat NASA to Mars; SolarCity a solar panel producer which hopes to fight climate change, and Tesla, a high end electric auto company working on making its cars driverless.

We usually associate such technological and commercial advances with the extraordinary talents of industry captains: superhuman beings, visionaries with unique entrepreneurial capacities who live in the future and who have ground-breaking ideas before everyone else. Elon Musk – like Henry Ford, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, or Steve Jobs before him – is seen almost as a hero who creates progress while others are busy keeping up with day to day tasks. But, this is a romantic way to look at it.

The reality I teach at IMD is different. Of course some people innovate while others prefer the status quo. After all not everybody is meant to change the world. But if we look at Elon Musk's career in further detail without just accepting the myths that surround it, there is nothing magic about what he has done.

Here are 3 real world tips to become an innovator:

1] New business opportunities don't invent themselves, they are created

People say that Elon Musk is trying to make the impossible possible. But, he is also constantly taking steps to make his projects concrete and less improbable. Before building a huge electric battery factory in Nevada, he organized an open and transparent bidding process between potential host states for the site and its 6500 jobs. This was a great way to test his idea, and at the same time to mobilize the resources and funds needed to make it happen. We definitely need to think big to innovate, but we have to move forward step by step. Rome wasn't built in a day. Entrepreneurs have to work tightly with the market in order to implement their ideas.

2] You can't start a revolution while you're asleep

Elon Musk is a demanding boss who works nearly 100 hours per week and is never satisfied. His performance criteria are so high that he looks for "special forces" type elite personnel, almost like in the military, to make up his teams. Dolly Singh, former head of talent acquisition for SpaceX, described it like this: "Diamonds are created under pressure, and Elon Musk is a master diamond maker".

This is a great example of the "virtuoso teams" theory. The idea is that by bringing together the most skilled talent in a super team, you will have constant clashes of big egos, but also amazing results. (My colleague and friend Bill Fischer wrote an [excellent book](#) on the subject.) These types of teams can work wonders – but for a limited time. Being part of a crack commando gets boring once the mission is accomplished.

3] To innovate you have to think differently – but how?

Elon Musk studied physics at the University of Pennsylvania. This wouldn't seem to make him qualified to revolutionize electronic payments, electric vehicles or conquer space. But maybe it is this lack of specific expertise of certain industries that has allowed him to have a fresh look at the fields he sought to reinvent.

A car "expert" might have built a more traditional type of car which would have been less likely to spark new concepts in the automotive sector. It is very difficult for someone who has become an "expert" in a certain field to question beliefs that are held to be absolute truths. Like John Maynard Keynes said: "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping the old ones". Accepted wisdom influences our perception of today's world and how we envision the future.

So, should we forget what we know during the innovation process? Definitely not! But it is absolutely necessary to have varied points of view – innovative teams are pluridisciplinary – and provide structure to discussions in order to avoid endless debates.

We also have to flip the “déjà vu” syndrome to “vujà-dé”. When we experience “vujà-dé”, rather than feeling like we have done something that we haven't before, we look at a familiar experience in a completely new way. Questioning existing knowledge is the starting point for innovation. Like Marcel Proust said: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”.

This is the subject of a book I am writing called “Think like an ALIEN”. The vujà-dé mindset requires real free thinking and a non-conformist attitude to help you escape what's bogging you down so you can start to innovate. As Einstein once said: “If at first an idea does not sound absurd, then there is no hope for it”.

Cyril Bouquet is Professor of Strategy at IMD. His major interest is the interface between organizational psychology, strategy and leadership.

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