

Managers as Innovation Champions in Modern Organizations

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Abstract

People are the most important organizational assets and Managers remain at the forefront of leading or influencing the people towards achieving the organizational goals. Managers are so important to business success to the extent that organizations might not succeed without a competent manager. Modern organizations that wish to succeed must constantly practice innovation which a manager must champion, emphasizing knowledge management. This is necessary in Nigeria, a developing country struggling to meet up with the demand of globalization and advancement in information technology. This paper describes the role of Managers in Organizations: it compares the characteristics of the past managers with the present/future-oriented 21st Century managers of modern organizations. Existing literature was reviewed in the area under examination. The paper revealed that the attributes noted for innovation champions are just perfectly adequate for all managers of modern organizations. Thus, managers need to update their knowledge in this regard, strive to increase their capabilities and skills to align with this evolving professional trend and to meet up with new demands of globalization, information technology and knowledge management. The paper emphasizes the importance of Managers championing innovation management for competitive advantage and organizational success. It concluded by highlighting the basic skills needed by managers of modern organizations to champion innovation successfully. This will therefore drive optimal level of success in the organizations and society at large.

Keywords: Innovation, innovation champions, knowledge management, managers and modern organization

Introduction

Every business organization, schools, hospitals and government agencies require systematic management. Thus, whether we like it or not, managers touch lives in many ways. In today's world, managers are contending with changing roles, changing workplaces, changing technology, ethical issues, global economic uncertainties, political instability and security threats. All these, creates a mandate for a new kind of manager in the 21st century who is ready and willing to champion innovation i.e. leading implementation of new ideas in their various organizations.

Innovation is the key to continually achieve success to secure the future (Robbins & Coutler 2013). Innovation is a process of implementing new ideas introduced by creative persons to achieve a new or better products and services. Managing innovations in an organization requires the identification of employees that have the tendency to engage in creative and innovative behavior. It further involves understanding of how the organizational context influences their behavior while contributing to the hassle-free adoption and implementation of innovation (Jain, 2016). Hence, the importance of knowledge management as a concept of organizational knowledge, aimed at effective application of knowledge to make quality decisions which will eventually nurture innovation in the organization (Jelenic, 2011). Effective knowledge management is required to be able to identify those employees who are creative and innovative to be able to manage their innovation successfully. Managers have important roles to play in stimulating and nurturing innovation in business organizations. They are to act as innovation champions in the business organizations.

Innovation champions identify, recognize, and encourage people to come forward with their novel ideas, make sure that idea generators receive timely recognition and support. Thus, managers need to act as innovation champions, improve their skills and capabilities to effectively and efficiently manage all the resources that are available in the modern organizations towards achieving the set goals. Management is a universal concept and process but managers are faced with different working environment influenced by political, economic, social and technological factors. Employees in the work place are also from different tribal or

ethnic background and possess attitudes; traits, perceptions and thinking depending on the country where the work place exist. (Osunde, Ashima, Anup, Shankar 2015).

In a developing nation like Nigeria, managers of modern organizations tend to have more responsibilities in an unbalanced societal environment. It is perceived that employees of modern organizations in Nigeria may still be struggling to move from Douglas McGregor Theory X point of view; a negative and pessimistic view of employees' motivation and behavior that they dislike work, they are not ambitious, they are self-centered, they avoid responsibility and dislike change. Thus, managers of organizations in Nigeria are confronted with lots of challenges from the societal environment, economic, socio-cultural, political, legal and technological which directly affects their strategies and decision-making. To appropriately discuss the focus of the study, the paper is divided into six segments. The first segment is the introduction. The second segment concisely describes managers and the competencies required of them in organizations. The third segment discusses the evolving roles of Manager: comparing the characteristics of the past managers with the future-oriented 21st Century managers of modern organizations. The fourth segment talks about successful innovation management; emphasizing effective knowledge management, innovation processes cum innovation drivers. The fifth look critically into the specific focus of the paper – managers as innovation champions. The 21st century skills needed for managers to succeed in championing innovation in the workplace was detailed in the conclusion and last segment of the paper.

Managers and their Competencies

Management is the process of working with and through others to achieve organizational objectives in an efficient and ethical manner (Kreitner, Kinicki, & Buelens 2002). Management is also defined as a way of achieving goals that add the most value (Magretta, 2003). A manager is someone who coordinates and oversees the work of other people so that organizational goals can be accomplished. A manager's job is not about personal achievement; it's about helping others do their work. The dominant view in management theory and society in general is that managers are directly responsible for an organizations success or

failure. Managers need to creatively and actively sell bold new directions in an ethical and sensitive manner. Effective managers are team players, empowered by willing and active support of others who are driven by conflicting self-interests (Robbins & Coutler 2013). Good managers anticipate change, exploit opportunities, correct poor performance and lead their organizations (Kreitner, Kinicki, & Buelens 2002). A manager must be able to take charge of a business and overcome any obstacle in seeing that the organization achieves its goals. To be able to achieve this huge stake, a manager needs to possess the following personal key traits as highlighted by Robbins, Bergman and Stagg (2014):

- 1) Drive: Managers have a relatively high desire for achievement, they are ambitious, they have lot of energy, they are tirelessly persistent in their activities, and they show initiative
- 2) Desire to lead: Managers demonstrate the willingness to take responsibility.
- 3) Honesty and integrity: Building trusting relationships with workers by being truthful or non-deceitful and by showing high consistency between word and deed.
- 4) Self-confidence: Managers need to show self-confidence in order to convince workers of their rightness of their goals and decisions.
- 5) Intelligence: Managers need to be intelligent enough to gather, synthesize and interpret large amounts of information and they need to be able to create visions, solve problems and make correct decisions.
- 6) Job-relevant knowledge: Effective managers must have a high degree of knowledge about the company, industry and technical matters. In-depth knowledge allows leaders make well-informed decisions and to understand the implications of those decisions.
- 7) Extraversion: Managers are energetic and lively people.

Stream of research over the past 20years, by Clark Wilson and others cited in Kreitner, Kinicki, and Buelens (2002), has given us a practical and statistically validated profile of managerial skills that are very much in tune with today's emphasis on managerial competency. They are stated as follows:

1. Clarifies goals and objectives for everyone involved.
2. Encourages participation, upward communication and suggestions.

3. Plans and organizes for an orderly work flow.
4. Has technical and administrative expertise to answer organization-related questions.
5. Facilitates work through team building, training, coaching and support.
6. Provides feedback honestly and constructively.
7. Keep things moving by relying on schedules, deadlines and helpful reminders.
8. Controls details without being overbearing.
9. Applies reasonable pressure of goal accomplishment.
10. Empowers and delegates key duties to others while maintaining goal clarity and commitment.
11. Recognizes good performance with rewards and positive reinforcement.

Evolving Roles of Managers

The managerial shift of past managers to future managers is a necessity in the modern organization. Managers are recognizing that delivering consistent high-quality customer service is essential for survival and success in today's competitive environment and that employees are an important part of that equation (Dougherty & Murthy 2009). The implication is clear – managers must create a customer-responsive organization where employees are friendly and courteous, accessible, knowledgeable, prompt in responding to customer needs, and willing to do what's necessary to please the customer (Mayer, Ehrhart, Schneider 2009). Evolution of the 21st Century managers has made it possible for researchers to compare the characteristics of the past managers with the future managers. The table below is adapted from Kreitner, Kinicki, and Buelens (2002) in their *World of Organizational behaviour*.

	<i>Past Managers</i>	<i>Present Managers (futuristic)</i>
Primary role	Order giver, privileged elite, manipulator, controller	Facilitator, team member, teacher, advocate, sponsor, coach
Learning and knowledge	Periodic learning narrow specialist	Continuous life-long learning, generalist with multiple specialties
Compensation criteria	Time, effort, rank	Skills, results
Cultural orientation	Monocultural, monolingual	Multicultural, multilingual
Primary source of influence	Formal authority	Knowledge (Technical and interpersonal)
View of People	Potential Problem	Primary resource
Primary communication pattern	Vertical	Multidirectional
Decision-making style	Limited input for individual decisions	Broad-based input for joint decisions
Ethical considerations	Afterthought	Forethought
Nature of interpersonal relationships	Competitive (win-lose)	Co-operative (win-win)
Handling of power and key information	Hoard and restrict access	Share and broaden access
Approach to change	Resist	Facilitate

In view of the above and the content analysis of the literature, the characteristics of 21st century managers have been highlighted as follows:

- Team players relying on joint-decision making than formal authority.
- Engage in life-long learning
- Facilitate rather than resist change
- Share rather than hoard power and key information
- Multidirectional communicators

- Ethics will be a forethought rather than afterthought
- Generalists with multiple specialties

And the evolving role of managers as follows:

- **Strategist:** Strategist helps to define the company's goals and objectives by identifying opportunities.
- **Change Agent:** Change agent introduces new tools and techniques and organizational designs that will help achieve stated goals and objectives.
- **Staff Professional:** Staff professional is one who oversees the management of special projects and develops one time solutions that help pull the firm through a changing stretch.
- **Politician:** A politician is someone who is sensitive to the corporate culture and knows how to get the job done by working with the system.
- **Integrator:** Integrator is someone who melds existing application systems and technologies into solid platforms from which to run the business.

Innovation Management

Robbins and Coutler (2013) define creativity as the ability to combine ideas in a unique way or to make unusual associations between ideas while innovation is taking creative ideas and turning them into useful products or work methods. Creativity is concerned with the production of new ideas while innovation is concerned with the process that transforms those forward-looking new ideas into real world (commercial) products, services, or processes of enhanced value. Innovation would relate to human ability to intentionally change to meet new opportunities. Thus, innovation describes an intended change including having a common direction or vision, recognizing and deciding opportunities related to the vision, intentionally and effectively moving in a direction to achieve the objective (Akinboye, 2016). Innovation is important because it is a necessity to survive in a global competitive environment. Organizations must constantly innovate to be in front of and respond to market opportunities, competitive threats and changes in the business environment (Robbins & Coutler, 2013).

In order to win over their competitors, organizations require increasing innovation management competence at the level of entire organization and the employees across the cadres (Jain, 2016). An existence of all the innovation capabilities in an organization enhances effective innovative performance (Lawson & Samson, 2001). Innovativeness is an attribute that organizations must demonstrate over time. Globalization of world's economies and the resultant competition in markets requires managements of various organizations to set their contextual environment to motivate employees' innovation (Jain, 2016).

“Innovation should be embedded as a part of organizational culture and organizational people should be encouraged to contribute to generate novel ideas directly or indirectly as well as to involve in the process of adoption/implementation of such pool of novel ideas (innovation) to some or greater extent. While facing the challenge of implementation of innovation, organizations are dependent on the tacit and explicit knowledge, creative abilities, and engagement of the employees in such a process”. (Jain, 2016: 210)

Thus, implementation of innovation requires effective knowledge management. The organizations are forced to innovate and develop new techniques for improving the quality and functionality of products, reduce costs and, of course, the answer to the increasingly sophisticated customers' demands in order to survive in the market (Jelenic, 2011). Knowledge Management as defined by Holsapple and Joshi (2004) is an entity's systematic and deliberate efforts to expand, cultivate, and apply available knowledge in ways that add value to the entity in the sense of positive results in accomplishing its objectives. The entity's scope may be individual, organizational, trans-organizational, national, and so forth. Alavi and Leidner (2001) concluded that KM involves distinct but interdependent processes of knowledge creation, knowledge storage and retrieval, knowledge transfer, and knowledge application. The ultimate result of well-created process of knowledge management is that every employee in the company fulfill its mission, which reaches the corporate objectives and strategies, and identifies the most valuable knowledge from the “sea of information”. It is not an easy task because it involves the management structure at the highest levels of management

(Jelenic, 2011). They are responsible for the processes of finding, selecting, organizing and presentation of information in a manner that promotes understanding of employees in a particular area of interests. Managers need to have a greater sense of invisible and intangible assets of people, featured in the minds and experiences of employees. Without these assets, organizations are unequipped with vision and ability to predict the future. The using of knowledge management process increases the effectiveness of decision-making processes, as well as the level of operational efficiency, flexibility, commitment and involvement of employees (Jelenic, 2011). The knowledge management process aims to support innovation and encourage the free flow of ideas through the company.

Jain (2016) has identified five sets of process/capabilities to influence adoption and implementation of innovation in organizations. They are employees' creativity & innovative behavior, innovation championing, organization's absorptive capacity, organization's capability for team working and Human Resources Management practices. In the context of this paper, emphasis will be on innovation championing which the researcher infers to be a compulsory attribute for managers of modern organization.

Innovation Drivers

Innovation drivers are those elements that make innovation work in organizations. Dooley and O'Sullivan (2000) differentiated between tangible and intangible elements that influence, direct, facilitate or hinder innovation. According to the authors, intangible elements like culture, personal schemas, resistance to change, politics, and fears, are normally underestimated in innovation management systems in comparison to more tangible elements such as the resource infrastructure and the information systems that support the innovation process itself.

The most common innovation driver in the literature reviewed is Innovation Strategy. Strategy includes the company's medium to long term vision regarding innovation, including the foresight about market and technological developments and an action plan to develop innovative capabilities to explore opportunities and defend against threats. An innovation oriented strategy is essential to the establishment of long

term directions for the innovative efforts (Kramer, Person, Wolpert, Craumer, Peebles, Drucker, Brown, & Levitt, 2003). At the same time, it tries to guarantee top management commitment to a path that can be perilous, dangerous, and risky, while setting adequate reward mechanisms that favour non conformity to current business practices. This driver also includes directives for resource management mechanisms that recognize the specificities of innovation projects (Damanpour, 1991; Wan, Chin & Lee, 2003).

Another very common innovation driver identified is the organizational culture. To Kocher, Kaudela Baum, and Wolf (2011), the organizational culture represents a guideline that orients stakeholders' expectations. Cormican and O'Sullivan (2004) describe organizational culture to be an orientation towards knowledge sharing. However, the authors mention that the organizational culture is not always an innovation driver per se, as it can also be a barrier to effective knowledge sharing and interpersonal information flows, with obvious negative consequences on innovation performance.

The third most commonly mentioned innovation driver was the organizational structure. Organizational structure is an all encompassing driver that includes mechanisms of structural complexity, decision making, formalization and distribution of power and assignment of roles to all involved. Similarly, this driver includes organizational procedures to regulate conflict resolution inherent to the innovative activity. Organizational structure must be flexible to encourage innovation champions and idea generators to relate with top management who are capable of implementing creative ideas.

Another key driver for innovation is management leadership. The leader influences, directly or indirectly, the individual behavior and commitment of all involved with innovation efforts. Effective innovation leaders combine personality traits, abilities, and attitudes that allow him or her to be recognized as visionary, sensitive to even the slightest change in the business environment, and inspiring (Kramer et al., 2003; Mumford & Licuanan, 2004; Sun, Wong, Zhao, & Yam, 2012). Engaged and committed leaders are also essential in setting and maintaining innovation oriented organizational culture, structure, and strategy. This also buttresses

the researcher's view of a manager, as all top-level managers are leaders in their various organizations.

Knowledge Management can also be highlighted as a key innovation driver. Successful innovation requires a blend of market, consumer, and technical knowledge. The knowledge management function is responsible for fostering idea generation and the transformation of these ideas in a visible, positive result for the company. Effective knowledge management practices include knowledge development and acquisition, which allows internal knowledge development and external knowledge acquisition, as well as knowledge dissemination and accumulation, which leads to organizational learning, improved communication, and the creation and exploitation of intellectual capital (Wong and Chin, 2007). Indeed, an innovation driver identified in the literature reviewed that is closely related to knowledge management is Communication.

To Cormican and O'Sullivan (2004), innovation could be described as a process of information transformation and application in the right context, as appropriate information is reunited, processed, and transferred all over the company in support of idea generation, evaluation, and transformation into innovation projects. Effective communication management is essential to innovation.

Human Resources were also widely recognized as a key innovation driver. Successful management of innovation requires the management of people. Thus, the assembly and development of work teams that take into account the individuals' personalities, inclinations, attitudes and competences is critical to the innovative company. In particular, capabilities related to problem solving, communication, creativity, conflict resolution, experimentation and collaborative work are essential individual abilities in the context of innovation (Alpan, Bulut, Gunday, Ulusoy & Kilic, 2010). Complementary to the human resources, Physical Resources were also mentioned in the literature reviewed. Combined with human resources, resources such as equipment and machinery allow to aggregate physicality to the ideas and concepts generated in the first stages of the innovation process. Moreover, technology can be interpreted as the embodiment of innovation, thus being essential to the latter phases of the innovation process. Dervitsiotis (2010) define physical resources for innovation as all the available resources that complete the organizational

knowledge and competences that drive the innovation process. In some innovation management system proposals, the interaction with regional and national innovation systems is considered a key driver (Galanakis, 2006; Llamas Sanchez, Munoz Fernandez & Maraver Tarifa, 2011; Ichimura, Ishii, Tuominen, & Piipo, 2003).

To Galanakis (2006), the national innovation system is composed by elements like the regulatory system, the national economic system, basic infrastructure (transport, energy, communications, etc.), demand conditions, and physical and human resources available. To interact with the national innovation system is a pre requisite for effective innovation in a changing context like Nigeria, where open innovation practices become more and more critical. Meanwhile, the innovation drivers permeate the whole innovation process in its various stages. The specific relationship between the drivers and the process stages will vary depending on the particularities of the company and the business sector it operates on. This is an important aspect that has to be investigated and customized wherever the system is actually implemented.

Managers as Innovation Champions

Business organizations today are in dire need for managers who not only can achieve efficient productivity, but also who possess technical, human and conceptual skills that make them sensitive toward not only market needs for goods and services, but also speedily respond to other environmental factors that are continuously changing (Moghrabi, Sharabati & Khader 2014).

Champions of innovation are individuals who take a lead in bringing forth and implementing creative ideas of themselves or others. They show conscientiousness and enthusiasms while pursuing new product ideas, evolving the ideas into innovations and eventually bringing them to market (Mansfeld, Holzle, & Gemunden, 2010).

Innovation champions also serve as role models to the organizational people to provide inspiration, support their ideas, and the facilitation required to excel. Champions of innovation question the status quo, voice contrary views, and push enterprise leaders to think and do things differently (Howell, 2005). Team work is also very important in influencing overall ability of the organization to innovate (Muthusamy,

Wheeler & Simmon, 2005). People that work within teams seldom function better than those working by themselves (Whetten & Cameron, 2011).

Mansfeld, Hozle and Gemunden (2010) found that innovation champions are characterized by a need for autonomy and an intrinsic form of motivation and they show significantly higher level of altruism than others. Innovation champions are willing to take risks and confront the organization's resistance and political pressures to realize their objectives. Idea champion, sponsor or mentor, orchestrator or facilitator, and rule breaker.

Innovation champions pro-actively manage and maintain a free flow of information exchange among team members and the stakeholders. They actively attempt to influence the attitude of senior and top executives toward the initiation and implementation of innovation in an effective manner. They develop a coalition of all concerned in order to ensure effective implementation of innovation. They inspire the internal public by sharing their vision regarding the potential for innovation. The findings of the study of Howell & Shea, (2001) suggest that in scanning the environment for new ideas, the most effective source of information is the champion's personal network of people inside and outside the organization.

In a nutshell, innovation champions, who have intrinsic motivation, considerable degree of autonomy, tendency of taking personal initiative, focus on exploratory learning, positive attitude of empowering organizational people, high level of altruism, supportive relationship with organizational people, social network and coalition of supporters, and also ability to promote sharing creative ideas among team members, are in better position to promote innovation in organization. Empowering others (e.g., idea champions) by the innovation champions enhances creativity, initiative, and resourcefulness of the organizational people and increases their motivation and commitment to innovation endeavors.

Critically looking at all the salient points made on innovation championing, the attributes of innovation champions and their contributions to implementing innovation in modern organizations which eventually predicts the success, profitability and competitive advantage of the organization, it is obvious that all 21st century managers should be

innovation champions. Damanpour and Schneider (2006) found that managers' attitude toward innovations, competition and entrepreneurship positively affect all phases of innovation adoption. However, managers need to motivate their subordinates to be innovative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, innovation has been found to be directly related to the competencies of managers. It is the responsibility of a manager to set the context, guide the process, clearly communicate reasons, shield creative teams, appreciate distinctiveness in people and their thinking, and welcome change. The managers are encouraged to strive to continually manage the knowledge of employees, provide a work environment of openness built on trust where every member of the team at all levels feels free to express their views/opinions without fear of ridicule or reprisal.

Way Forward

In view of the above, it is pertinent to give specific clues on how managers can become a better professional in the 21st century as highlighted in Adenekan, Chilaka, Fadeyi, George & Ige (2018) which are:

1. Sharpen your communication skills - Multidirectional communicators
2. Work on your people management skills - Team players relying on joint-decision making than formal authority
3. Be an innovative thinker - Generalists with multiple specialties
4. Develop your business acumen.
5. Continue your education and professional development - Engage in life-long learning
6. Facilitate rather than resist change
7. Ethics should be a forethought rather than afterthought
8. Improve on your digital literacy skills – information literacy, ICT literacy and media literacy.

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