

# The Role of Champion in Product Innovation

In observing that the primary reasons for lack of innovation in organizations are (1) inertia in putting forth the idea, (2) fear of criticism if the idea is offered, (3) feeling of futility about the likelihood that the idea will be well received or acted on, (4) lack of attention paid to the idea at early stages, Marvin Bower, Managing Director of McKinsey & Company advocated that successful innovation requires attention of the top management and a nurturing atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> From his experiences as the Chief Executive of Bell and Howell, Peter G. Peterson concluded that the following three conditions are necessary for successful innovations in an organization: (1) some amount of flexible structure is necessary for defining the problem and need of the organization; (2) a minimum number of people to prevent mangling the idea; and (3) a moderate amount of humility toward intellectual ability is needed to generate some willingness to experiment with the idea.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of both Bower's and Peterson's observations led to the point that new ideas—products or other innovations—require some kind of protective nurturing before they become viable. This concept was elaborated by James Quinn and James Mueller who noted:

A new product is like a baby. You can't just bring it into the world and expect it to grow up and be a success. It needs a mother (enthusiasm) to love and

keep it going when things are tough. It needs a pediatrician (expert information and technical skills) to solve the problems the mother can't cope with alone. And it needs a father (authority with resources) to feed it and house it. Without any of these the baby may still turn out all right, but its chances of survival are a lot lower.<sup>3</sup>

The importance of the role of the key individual or "product champion" lies in selling the idea to the management and getting the management sufficiently interested in the project. The term "product champion" was used by the Materials Advisory Board Study<sup>4</sup> on research-engineering interaction. A champion was defined as "an individual who is intensely interested and involved with the overall objectives and goals of the project and who plays a dominant role in many of the research-engineering interaction events through some of the stages, overcoming technical and organizational obstacles and pulling the effort through its final achievement by the sheer force of his will and energy." Donald Schon<sup>5</sup> argued that the presence of a product champion is very important in the success of product innovation in large corporate organizations. Systems and procedures developed in large companies are designed to maintain the status quo and avoid risks. The regular screening mechanisms require a hierarchy of management and chain of command. The champion goes

beyond his formal organizational role, over the hierarchical chain, to where positive decision-making is possible.

The role of "product champion" in the process of product innovation was investigated in a study of forty-five cases on product development based on NASA innovations. The degree of success of the adoption of an innovation was defined based on Everett Rogers<sup>6</sup> 1962 concept of the five sequential stages: awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption of the idea. Illustrative cases were divided into two categories, (a) less successful and (b) more successful. In the less successful cases, the NASA information was known, but very little had been done (or was intended to be done in the near future) to develop the product. The more successful cases were those where the products were actually made and marketed (in some cases, test marketed).

In each of the forty-five cases, persons involved in the product development project were interviewed about the history of the project in terms of the decisions, events and outcomes, and people involved with the project. Information obtained through interviews with involved individuals and other sources such as letters, sales brochures, and company memoranda were analyzed to ascertain whether or not a single individual could be identified as product champion. Table I illustrates that the presence of a product champion was, indeed, an important factor for success of product development.

To understand the dynamics of the process by which a champion influences the product development, one has to recognize that the decision to adopt an idea (in this study, these ideas were generated at NASA projects) is a collective one. Members of various functional groups like production, marketing, finance, and research and development are involved in the process. According to Rogers and F. Shoemaker,<sup>7</sup> a collective decision process consists of five sequen-

**Table I.—Identification of Product Champion in Forty-five Cases**

	No. of Relatively Successful Cases	No. of Less Successful Cases	Total
No. of cases where the presence of product champions was identified	16	1	17
No. of cases where product champions could not be identified	1	27	28

tial stages: stimulation, initiation, legitimation, decision, and execution. Figure 1 describes these five stages as well as the characteristics of individuals who play key roles in each stage.

From an analysis of these different stages it becomes obvious that a champion acts in multiple roles, and acts as a link between the different phases. The decision-making stage often involves the top management. The forty-five cases studied were divided into four categories according to the degree of success of adoption of the innovation. In Table II, it may be observed that higher management is more involved in the successful cases than in the less successful ones. This was also reflected by the high correlation between top management support and the degree of success of adoption.<sup>8</sup> The following two cases have been presented to illustrate how the presence or absence of a champion affects the product development. (Exact identities of the persons and the organizations participating have been withheld.)

**Table II.—Decision-making in Forty-five Product Development Cases**

Level at which decision was made	No. of cases by the degree of success of the project as evidenced by:			
	commercial marketing	test marketing	technical feasibility testing	no action beyond awareness of the idea
President of the Company	6	7	7	-
Division Head	4	-	1	5
First line Supervisor	-	-	1	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>19</b>

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**Figure 1.—Collective Decision Process\***

Name of the Stage	Description of the Stage	Characteristics of Key Person
Stimulation	<i>It is the process by which someone becomes aware that a need exists for a certain innovation within the organization.</i>	Stimulator may be an outsider or an insider oriented externally through his formal or informal relationships with members or other people. Stimulators are cosmopolite people who should understand both the environment and the general problems of the organization.
Initiation	<i>It is the process by which the new idea receives increased attention by members of the organization.</i>	Initiator translates the idea into a plan of action which is appropriate for the organization. Initiator is an insider who knows the organization well enough to package the idea in a form acceptable to other organizational members.
Legitimation	<i>It is the process by which the idea is sanctioned by members who represent the norms and values of the organization.</i>	Legitimizer is inside person who has the social power of sanctioning an idea. An individual will act as legitimizer for different ideas depending upon (a) his breadth of experience, personality, interests; (b) the size and structure of the organization; and (c) the nature of the innovations.
Decision-making	<i>It is the actual process of decision-making for commitment of organizational resources for adopting the idea.</i>	Decision-maker is the person who has the formal authority to commit organizational resources.
Execution	<i>It is the actual process of implementing the decision.</i>	Executor is the person who implants the adoption decision. Execution of a product development decision generally involves different functional groups.

\*Everett M. Rogers and F. Floyd Shoemaker, *Communication of Innovations: . . .* (The Free Press, 1971).

**The Cases**

**CASE 1.**—Benjamin Smith, the NASA innovator of two instruments, was known well to both Charles Nelson, Director of Instrument Group, and Joe Peters, Sales Manager of Instrument Group (Peters reported to Nelson), of a large multidivisional company. Nelson and Peters evaluated the instruments' technical and market potential for their company. Both Nelson and Peters were convinced that it would be worthwhile to develop the products in their organization. Nelson said:

The first problem was how to put the proposal to the management. The expected market for these two instruments was in the order of a hundred thousand dollars which is chicken-feed compared to our total annual sales. So I put the proposal for development of the devices as a piggy-back on a larger project. The second problem was the blood letting among the various groups in our company about who should be in charge of the project. The engineering department wanted to be the boss, the marketing department wanted to be the boss

and so on. But I said that if I would have to be part of it, I must have the project. Fortunately, I knew the counsel to the Board. He recommended to the management that I should be the head of the project. Ultimately, I got the project. I quietly let the larger parts of the project slip and concentrated on the two instrument devices. Pretty soon the products were successful, we sold a few thousand pieces and got about fifty thousand dollars worth of business. At this point, I left the company and somebody took over. Nobody kills the healthy baby.

(Nelson's story was confirmed by his successor as well as by Joe Peters).

**CASE 2.**—George Fowler, the marketing representative of a large company, knew the NASA scientist who developed a very expensive analytical instrument. Fowler submitted this information to his boss, William Rockwell, as well as to the executive committee. The committee decided on the development of the product. But the president of the company did not sign the project proposal for a year and Fowler could not

reach the president. After a year or so, the decision to undertake the project was made and Fowler was assigned to supervise it. But after a short time he left the company for a better job. Bob Jones took over Fowler's job and got the responsibility of developing the instrument. The NASA innovator was also a personal friend of Jones. A prototype model was developed and sold to a medical college in the West at a price of \$50,000. A second instrument was developed for the R & D laboratory of the company itself. Jones left the company before the second instrument was built. Rockwell was not happy with the instrument and no further action was taken on the instrument. (The author spoke with Rockwell, Jones, Fowler, and the product engineer in the R & D laboratory.)

*Evaluation.*—Interesting points of difference between these two cases are:

(a) In Case 1, there was a product champion in Charles Nelson who went beyond his formal organizational role in promoting the idea. He also provided a continuity of effort in the development of the product. He coordinated the activities of engineering, production, and marketing departments. In Case 2, there was no person who felt committed to the product, and the turnover of personnel failed to provide the continuity of effort.

(b) In Case 1, a realistic appraisal of the technology was made by Nelson on the basis of his own market investigation and technical knowledge. But in Case 2, the people involved in the project were rather confused about the product. William Rockwell thought that the project was a disaster because the market potential was very limited. On the other hand the project engineer thought that the project was a success. When he was asked about Rockwell's feeling, he commented that one must recognize the complexity of the technology and realize that it is useful only in very limited cases. Jones and Fowler expressed the opinion that Rockwell did not really understand the technology and was not familiar with the development of the field of technology. Nobody developed a realistic expectation about the market and the scope of the technology.

In his recent article, John Bujake, Jr.<sup>9</sup> discussed

ten myths about new product development. His analysis quite candidly pointed out that a coordinated effort is needed in the success of product development.

### Who Will It Be?

What are the qualities of a product champion? An analysis of the earlier studies and our data indicate that a successful product champion should have the following qualities:

- *Technical competence.*—The champion should have a sound technical understanding of the product to be able to realistically assess its technical limitations and advantages. Technical competence will be necessary to translate the idea into a plan of action and to influence other technical people in the organization.
- *Knowledge about the company.*—As it has been discussed earlier, a champion acts in the multiple roles of stimulator, initiator, and legitimator. In order to do this, the champion should have a clear understanding of the company's needs so that he can identify relevant ideas. Technical and marketing needs, organizational resources, and constraints will determine what are the relevant ideas.
- *Knowledge of the market.*—The ultimate success of any product is determined in the market. The champion must have a realistic idea about the product's marketing potential. Because new markets are often the targets for new products, a prudent champion must be able to define the characteristics of the market for the product and develop a suitable marketing strategy. This may facilitate implementation of the product development decision.
- *Drive and aggressiveness.*—The product champion must have some amount of drive and aggressiveness to push the idea and get work done and decisions made. He may often have to confront adversaries.
- *Political astuteness.*—The art of product championship lies in political astuteness. The champion will have to get along with different types of people, communicate with them, and get work done without serious antagonism being created. Also, he has to know the proper power centers to get his actions legitimized.

Other questions may be raised here: How can one train an individual to be a product champion? How can one identify a potential product champion? The answers to these questions are not clear-cut. It definitely requires an above-average understanding of the problems of new product development. I have not answered these questions here; however, this study looked into the problems a champion often faces. Nelson very eloquently summarized the problems which he faced as a champion:

To be a product champion, one has to be a very aggressive and competent person. He must not only understand the technology, but also its uses. The job of the champion is that of an odd ball. Everybody looks at you with suspicion. The first problem you would face is that of isolation and communication. You would soon find that you cannot communicate with people around you. The reasons are threefold:

(a) If it is a large project, they may not like it and would be suspicious of the results. Secondly, they may not be able to appreciate your activities.

(b) If it is a small project, it will be *peanuts* to them. In most cases, the new technology-based projects are *peanuts* to the people in large companies. Who would waste time on *peanuts*?

(c) You soon find that you have become an *egomaniac*, always educating and criticizing people around you, because your role as the champion is to explain and expand on the problems. The people who can really appreciate your problems and with whom you can meaningfully talk, are not the people in your own organization, but your counterparts in your competitor's organization.

Many of the problems mentioned above can be remedied in an organic environment conducive to innovative activities. Information about the internal environment of the organization was obtained through a questionnaire measure of organizational climate.<sup>10</sup> Our data indicated that the top management support for the product innovations as indicated in the questionnaire was high in organizations where:

(a) the members were allowed and encouraged to thrash around ideas and discuss them (Kendall tau between top management support and degree of confrontation in joint decision-making = '42, significant at '001 level);

(b) the members are encouraged to take moderate risks (tau between top management support and organizational risk taking = '19, significant at '03 level); and

(c) the members expressed a sense of belonging to the organization (tau between top management support and organizational identification = '27, significant at '005).

The data also indicated that there was significant negative relationship between top management support and amount of force used in joint decision-making (Kendall tau = '18, significant at '03).

Thus far we have described the role of product champion as an unsystematic and non-routine one which primarily depends upon the individual's choice and initiative. The pragmatic reader may ask how one can systematize the champion's role in the product development process through a new product group. However, the effectiveness of the new product group will depend much upon the initiative and ability of the members in coordinating and promoting the new product ideas in various functional departments and the management hierarchies. This in turn will depend upon the organizational environment created and nurtured by the management philosophy and practices.

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