

The Champion of Innovation

by Robert Porter Lynch

Before one can aspire to be a Architect of Innovation, one must first have the passion embraced in a Champion of Innovation, because innovation is a discipline of both head and heart.

One cannot create without an intense desire spawned in the heart.

Brainpower alone is insufficient to drive the innovative spirit. The ancient Greeks, guided by the wisdom of Socrates, knew that any quest for truth began with the humble admission of personal ignorance. One's ego had to confess to its impoverished nature – knowledge was an insufficient midwife to birth the discovery of Truth or Beauty.

The heroic journey of innovation starts with passionate but humble origins. This requires three difficult steps in one's life:

First, a boldly honest personal assessment of one's own inadequacies and limits, then

Second, the consequent acknowledgement that the roots of innovation come not from the mind alone, and not from the soul alone, but from the interactive frictional challenges of thoughts and beliefs of others, then

Third, the power of enabling the heroic journey into the realm of co-creative innovation to be embraced both individually and collectively.

These are not easy tasks, balancing one's individualism with the collective consciousness to individually and jointly penetrate the depths of discovery.

The eminent historian, Arthur Schlesinger laid out the case eloquently for the individual hero nearly 50 years ago:

Our national aspiration has become peace of mind, peace of soul. The symptomatic drug of our age is the tranquilizer. "Togetherness" is a banner under which we march into the brave new world.

We Americans should start worrying as our so-called individualistic society develops a cult of the group. We instinctively suppose that the tough questions will be solved by an interfaith conference or an

interdisciplinary research team or and interdepartmental committee or an assembly of wise men..... But are not these group tactics essentially means by which individuals hedge their bets and distribute their responsibilities? And do they not nearly always result in the dilution of insight and the triumph of mish-mash? If we are to survive, we must have ideas, vision, courage. These things are rarely produced by committees.

A bland society will never be creative. “The amount of eccentricity in a society,” said John Stuart Mill, “has generally been proportional to the amount of creative genius, mental vigor, and moral courage it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.” If this condition frightened Mill in Victorian England, it should frighten us much more.

For our national apotheosis of the group means that we systematically lop off the eccentrics, the originals, the proud, the imaginative, lonely people from whom new ideas come. What began as a recoil from hero worship ends as a *conspiracy against creativity*. If worship of great men brings us to perdition by one path, flight from great men brings us there just as surely as by another. When we do not admire great men, then *our instinct for admiration is likely to end by settling on ourselves*. The one thing worse from democracy than hero worship is self-worship.

A free society cannot get along without heroes, because they are the most vivid means of exhibiting the power of free men. The hero exposes to all mankind unsuspected possibilities of conception, unimagined resources of strength. “The appearance of a great man,” wrote Emerson, “draws a new circle outside of our largest orbit and surprises and commands us.” Carlyle likened ordinary, lethargic times, with their unbelief and perplexity, to dry, dead fuel, waiting for the lightning out of heaven to kindle it. “The great man, with his free force direct out of God’s own hand, is the lightning the rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame.”

Great men enable us to rise to our own highest potentialities. They nerve lesser men to disregard the world and trust to their own deepest instinct. “In picking out from history our heroes,” said William James, “each one of us may best fortify and inspire what creative energy may lie in his own soul. This is the last justification of hero worship.” Which one of us has not gained fortitude and faith from the incarnation of ideals in men, from the wisdom of Socrates, from the wondrous creativity of Shakespeare, from the strength of Washington, from the compassion of Lincoln, and above all, perhaps from the life and the death of Jesus? “We feed on genius,” said Emerson. “Great men exist that there may be greater men.”

It takes a man of exceptional vision and strength and will -- it takes in short, a hero, to try to wrench history from what lesser men

consider its preconceived path. And often history tortures the hero in the process. [Like Prometheus] chains him to a rock and exposes him to the vulture. Yet in the model of Prometheus, man can still hold his own against the gods. Brave men earn the right to shape their own destiny.

An age without great men is one which acquiesces in the drift of history. Such acquiescence is easy and seductive; the great appeal of fatalism, indeed, is as a refuge from the terror of responsibility. Where the belief in great men insistently reminds us that individuals can make a difference, fatalism reassures us that they can't. It thereby blesses our weakness and extenuates our failure. Fatalism, in Berlin's phrase, is "one of the great alibis" of history.

Let us not be complacent about our supposed capacity to get along without great men. If our society has lost its wish for heroes and its ability to produce them, it may well turn out to have lost everything else as well. ¹

Schlesinger's view of fifty years ago presents a powerful paradigm and a perplexing paradox. The paradigm of the lonesome hero as innovator is a powerful testimony to the human spirit. But is not the collective insight also important. One must ask the critical question: Can the power of the individual visionary be paired with the power of collaborative insight in any way that would be more effective? The Innovation Champion is a unique form of hero -- one who has experienced the transformative devolution of the ego that has plagued the lonesome hero. With the ego's devolution comes the innovation champion as spiritual warrior, who heroically challenges the status quo, is troubled by the artifice of homeostasis, and thus challenges, connects, and inspires others to collectively engage in the creation of a bold new future, and, in doing so, yields their personal self interest to the greater good. For, as the spiritual warrior has learned, what is in the greater good (the Greek *kathos k'alagos*) is also in their spiritual good. It is in this transcendent shift of the mind (metanoia) that Emerson knew so well.

Without Champions of Innovation, the corporate immunal rejection response kicks in, and new ideas are rejected as "foreign bodies." The principles are clear:

The Basic Law of Innovation Implementation

- 1) *Innovation Creates Change*
 - 2) *Change is Disruptive*
 - 3) *Disruptions Cause Conflict*
 - 4) *Conflict Triggers Control Reactions*
 - 5) *Champions are Essential to Lead/ Implement Innovation*
- The Most Important things the Champion Must do are:*
- *Focus Efforts on a Compelling Strategic Imperative for the Shift*
 - *Shift Mindsets, Language, and Architecture to the new Vision*
 - *Build a System of Trust among those expected to make a leap of faith*
 - *Create evidence to persuade the skeptics on the edge of commitment*
 - *Abide by the Principle: People Support What They Help Create*
 - *Establish Metrics and Rewards that Support the Shift*

The champion of innovation is a singularly unique individual who is willing to risk his or her career for the best interests of the organization. They possess a singular ability to build trust, while acting as passionate crusader. Unlike many of their less committed co-workers, they are empowered by belief in their vision, despite the lack of evidence. Their commitment to a win- win for all often is misinterpreted as disguised commitment to their own self-interest, causing non-believers to stand idle until results are produced.

Senior executives need to nurture and support these dynamic initiators of innovation, and provide the necessary “air cover” to give them the protection they need from snipers.

(see [How to Foster Champions by Robert Porter Lynch](#))

¹Arthur Schlesinger, *The Decline of Heroes*, from Adventures of the Mind, Knopf, NYC, 1960 pp 103-105