



# Sustainable Innovation is a Whole Team Affair

## What can we learn from Start-ups about innovative ‘disruption’, and defending against ‘disruption’?

The Belbin team has recently explored how successful ‘Start-ups’ transition into becoming sustainable ventures for on-going innovation.

Whether you are innovating to ‘disrupt’ as the new kids on the block, or are an established player seeking to manage ‘disruption’, teamwork is a big part of the solution.

‘Disruption’ is somewhat of a trending word, but what’s the difference between disruption and innovation? Well, according to Forbes in a great article by Caroline Howard:

*“Disruptors are innovators, but not all innovators are disruptors — in the same way that a square is a rectangle but not all rectangles are squares. Still with me? Innovation and disruption are similar in that they are both makers and builders. Disruption takes a left turn by literally uprooting and changing how we think, behave, do business, learn and go about our day-to-day. Harvard Business School professor and disruption guru Clayton Christensen says that a disruption displaces an existing market, industry, or technology and produces something new and more efficient and worthwhile. It is at once destructive and creative.”*

Innovation is an enabler for driving profitable disruption, and defensive innovation is handy when your industry might be on the receiving end of the disruptors.

When pondering the meaning of “innovation in the context of real business teams, a simple multiple-choice questionnaire can be enlightening.

Which of these three options resonates most strongly with you when thinking about how your organization currently approaches “innovation”.

## What is innovation to you?

### Option A:

*“Doing the same old pointless thing in a different way. Alternatively, creating something brilliant in such a way that it takes twice as long and costs three times as much.”*

*From the Urban Dictionary*

### **Option B:**

*“While individuals may display creativity, innovation occurs in the organizational context only, by bringing creative ideas to life.*

*Innovation is linked to performance and growth through improvements in efficiency, productivity, quality, competitive positioning and market share. It typically adds value by changing old organizational forms and practices. Organizations that do not innovate effectively may be destroyed by those who do.”*

*Form The BIA (Business Improvement Architects)*

### **Option C:**

*“Innovation is just a cool sounding buzzword that we use a lot in our mission statements and company values. We don’t really delve into how it actually needs to be done these days.”*

*Many big organisations (how many will still be here in 5 years?)*

Innovation as a cultural norm will be a product of effective teams, not just a few creative individuals (although you will definitely need these guys too).

Individual behavioural Team Role profiles and reports offer valuable data and insight into the actual strengths, weaknesses and biases that impact not just team development, but also how your team tackles on-going innovation.

People can play more than one ‘Team Role’, and have a unique blend of behavioural preferences. Identifying these is key to effective innovation as a process.

Identifying why innovation actually matters to the organisation and how to sustain it is also important.

### **Why is innovation important?**

*“In order to attract talent and keep them engaged, large organisations need to create contexts in which individuals can direct themselves, expand their capabilities and make a meaningful contribution. If not, talented people will join organisations that do, or worse, they will start new competitors.”*

*Philippe de Ridder – Board of Innovation*

To get the ‘innovation bit’ right, the first step is often simply in realising that “Innovation is not a solo pursuit”.

Getting the “people bit” right takes effort, but is critical to subsequently being able to get the rest of the process right whether you are a small or large player.

Back to Start-ups, whilst mostly “innovative” they are notoriously volatile, and survival rates are not great.

An amusing take on this comes from a great article called the “Disruption Machine” by Jill Lepore in the New Yorker:

*“The upstarts who work at startups don’t often stay at any one place for very long. (Three out of four startups fail. More than nine out of ten never earn a return.) They work a year here, a few months there—zany hours everywhere. They wear jeans and sneakers and ride scooters and share offices and sprawl on couches like Great Danes. Their coffee machines look like dollhouse-size factories.”*

Not all Start-ups are small anarchic swarms of ruthless entrepreneurs seeking to take down the establishment, but common to all seems that quest for innovation. Bigger players will need it to adapt or keep up.

Amongst the noteworthy points from Belbin’s most recent work with successful Start-ups and innovation were...

**“Ideas remain ideas unless they are evaluated and implemented.”**

Those strongest in pure “creativity” (the Team Role of Plant) aren’t necessarily strong on the ability to objectively evaluate their own ideas, or see the practicalities of how they need to unfold in commercial reality.

Good ideas may also be borrowed or embellished from elsewhere, a trait often associated with the Role of Resource Investigator, and these folks can be weak on follow through.

The analytical Monitor Evaluator, organised Implementer and conscientious Completer Finisher can offset weaknesses of creative Plants and exploring Resource Investigators.

Whilst these Role types may not often be superficially associated with “innovation”, they help refine the process and make it truly sustainable.

**“When it comes to successful innovation, all Team Roles have their part to play.”**

We often liken the innovative process to a big funnel.

A volume of ideas gets poured in at the wide end, then get progressively vetted, culled, synthesised and refined as they cascade towards a feasible solution at the narrow end.

The quality of what gets “spat out” at the end is in direct proportion to how well the diverse Team Role contributions inherent in the team have been timed along that journey.

Things can go disastrously wrong for example if ideas skip important Team Role contributions such as sober analysis or practical evaluation.

Missing the input from what some may even see as being merely the “fluffy” or purely socially oriented roles can also result in progress being slowed or blocked by unnecessary levels of friction, conflict, cognitive bias and ego.

Good Teamworkers and Coordinators help to avert destructive interpersonal clashes that occur all too easily in a “creative” environment, and help the right people to be engaged at the right time.

**“Innovation is a ‘WHOLE TEAM’ affair - too often we think it’s about giving lead to the ‘clever, smart’ people.”**

Lots of creative intellect can bring profound advantages, but if poorly managed and timed, can just as easily bring about associated weaknesses, biases and intellectual combat.

Those who originate ideas don’t always take kindly to seeing them critiqued, which is essential before their raw ideas are pushed through to implementation.

They may defend their ideas in their entirety to the bitter end when collaboration with others is needed to help evaluate, adapt and refine those ideas (or indeed abort the unworkable ones).

For example if dealing with an entrepreneurial Plant / Shaper combination, the Plant component espouses ideas and the Shaper pushes to just “get on with it” (possibly brushing aside justifiable dissent).

**“Truly innovative businesses need to encourage action, thinking and relationship roles. To concentrate purely on creativity is risky and very rarely sustainable.”**

Creativity is integral to innovation, but even the best ideas come to nothing without balanced approaches to processing them.

Action oriented folks are needed to help make it all happen, and the relationship oriented roles to help develop the people and engagement factors.

Other thinking styles will help balance risk and opportunity.

**“The most innovative teams have a genuine ‘mix of people’.”**

Teams that can harness diverse strengths across the spectrum of the innovation process can best sustain genuine innovation over time.

If Role contributions are consistently absent, such as those of Implementer or Completer Finisher, great ideas can fall well short of execution for lack of practical organisation and follow through.

All Team Role styles have a part to play in innovation.

Working with ‘Growth Accelerator SMEs’ – no more than 250 employees, Belbin has seen patterns associated with the journey from Start-up to stability.

Typically founders and founding partnerships have significant Plant, Resource Investigator and Shaper.

This profile is commonly associated with entrepreneurship.

Plants are originators of new ideas and ways of doing things.

Resource Investigators can “sell ice to Eskimos” as the saying goes, and maintain enthusiasm for innovation.

Shapers have the courage to overcome obstacles and the drive to push themselves and others towards the objective.

Entrepreneurs are often a powerhouse of ideas, drive and enthusiasm for their ventures, but how often do these ventures rise and fall without the consolidation of opportunities?

Different people are needed to round out a successful team and offer balanced capabilities, which are crucial to sustain initial growth and innovation as a cultural norm.

Someone is needed for example to manage the people and engender harmony within the team.

The Role of Coordinator helps to manage people, and Teamworkers maintain relationship dynamics within the team.

Someone is also needed to put the brakes on reckless thinking and actions when needed.

An analytical Monitor Evaluator is valuable for slowing down the pace at appropriate times, and evaluating opportunities and risks.

A good Monitor Evaluator can serve as a voice of reason, telling an entrepreneur what they may not want to hear, but probably really do need to hear (if not hastily overruled).

A good Specialist Role cannot be ignored either, it brings subject matter expertise into important projects.

### **What are the Big 6 tips we have learned from good start-ups?**

1. Give freedom for different Roles to contribute and to be valued.
2. Allow for failures from “calculated” risks and experimentation.
3. Understand the genuine strengths and weaknesses of all employees as early as possible to use them to best effect (Belbin profiles are invaluable here).
4. Attract, nurture and retain appropriate talent. People need to be more than just a good “functional” fit, they also need to be a “behavioural” and Team Role fit for the team.
5. Leadership needs to value innovation, but also realise it’s a team process.
6. Remove ‘Job title’ snobbery / entitlement; develop a culture where all contributions are welcome (when they are well timed).

For example, Belbin’s snapshot of how the 9 behavioural Team Role types will often fit best in the life cycle of a project (irrespective of functional role and title):

*Identify Needs and Initial Direction – Shaper, Co-ordinator*

*Ideation – Plant, Resource Investigator*

*Plans – Monitor Evaluator, Specialist*

*Contacts – Resource Investigator, Teamworker*

*Organisation – Implementer, Co-ordinator*

*Follow Through – Completer Finisher, Implementer*

Genuine and sustainable Innovation is thus a “whole team” affair.

So whether you are seeking to “disrupt”, or to defend yourself against “disruption”, Belbin can help you to better innovate for survival as a team.

Check out [www.TeamRolesAustralia.com.au](http://www.TeamRolesAustralia.com.au) to see more.

**Sources:**

*Jo Keeler, 'HRD 2015' presentation on Innovation and Teams.*

*Caroline Howard, Disruption vs Innovation, Forbes, March 2013*

*Jill Lepore, The Disruption Machine, The New Yorker, June 2014*

*Tom Robson, Recent data from facilitation and consulting work with over 35 actual Start Up teams (and in-depth use of Belbin profiles and report data).*

*Sabre Corporate Development, Recent facilitation and consulting work with organisations, and Belbin profile and Report data.*

*Belbin UK, Linked In Group for Belbin Users.*

**Article by Talan Miller**

**Managing Director of Sabre Corporate Development / Belbin Australia**

**CONTACT:**

Sabre and Belbin Australia

T – 1300 731 381

E – [Admin@SabreHQ.com](mailto:Admin@SabreHQ.com)

W – [www.SabreHQ.com](http://www.SabreHQ.com)

