

Making Breakthrough Innovation Happen

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The book is a collection of case studies on innovation. The foreword by Mr. Narang highlights the motivation behind the book, and the note from Mr. Mashelkar lends credence. The introduction by the author provides the backdrop on how the book came about and how the cases were selected. This book is on what the author calls 'orbit shifting innovation', generally understood as radical innovation. These are innovations that not only challenge the current beliefs and thinking but also redefine the industry. The book is divided into four sections, with two to three cases in each highlighting an important aspect of innovation.

In Section 1 the author stresses on the importance of the 'challenge'. According to him, if you choose a challenge that is not difficult or intimidating, it is unlikely to result in a breakthrough innovation. Taking on the challenge of eliminating unnecessary blindness, Dr. Venkataswamy created Aravind Eye Hospital, which redefined the way cataract operations are done. Reducing the crime rate in Trichy was a daunting challenge for Mr. Tripathy. His innovative approach is now a case study for others in law enforcement. Developing and producing Hepatitis B vaccine for the masses in India at an affordable rate was an impossible challenge. Mr. Varaprasad Reddy of Shanta Biotech is now not only a major supplier of Hepatitis B vaccine in India, but also the supplier of vaccines to WHO. Each and every case in the book illustrates the nature of the challenge and how these were met.

Section 2 focuses on a fundamental aspect of the innovation process - the need to question established norms and procedures in the quest for breakthrough ideas. This is difficult in organisations where procedures and norms have evolved over the years and questioning them is equivalent to questioning those in power. This is even more difficult in successful organisations because the past success of the organisation could be attributed to these very norms and procedures. The section flows naturally from the first time you are faced with an impossible challenge and existing methods or frameworks provide no help. It emphasises the need to repeatedly ask why and why not? The section also highlights the importance of insights into the innovation process. In essence, this section is about the process of insighting and developing strategies for making breakthroughs happen.

The third section deals with the essence of all successful innovation strategies - getting people on board. How does one get people to believe in and accept the challenge? How do you enrol stakeholders who are crucial for successful implementation of the strategy? The section provides examples of how the proponents sought and secured stakeholders' commitment. Concepts such as involvement, commitment and constant communication are highlighted through the cases. It also talks of burning your bridges as one of the strategies to signal commitment.

The final section is about how one sustains the motivation and involvement in the long journey towards making breakthroughs happen. It is easy to come up with a great idea or vision. Roadblocks, resistance to change and vested interests surface during the implementation. The cases in this section show that perseverance and belief in one's own ideas are crucial in this journey. It very subtly makes you realise that others need to see your unshakable commitment in the face of adversity, before they convert.

I found the book interesting for a number of reasons. First it reads like a theme-based storybook and the cases trigger a chord within you. Second, it is not just about product innovation. There are cases of marketing innovation, process innovation and innovative business models. Third, the cases in the book are from diverse areas such as fighting crime, municipal administration, R&D, new product development and health care. The diversity in cases provides a rich menu with something for everyone.

The book comes at the right time. Flush from success on the IT front, Indians are now confident and willing to take risks. From a nation of clerks and coolies, the desire is to transform into a nation of entrepreneurs. This book highlights the nexus between innovation and entrepreneurship. The cases of Su-Kam and Cavin Care on innovative entrepreneurs reinforce Schumpeter's theory that innovation is central to entrepreneurship. If one believes that innovation and entrepreneurship are fundamental to India's continued growth and success, this book provides shining examples and role models for us to follow.

The book is inspirational. When we talk of innovation, the names that normally get discussed are 3M, Sony and Apple. If you are looking for Indian names to add to the list, the book provides you with many. Furthermore, it is easy to relate to the proponents in the cases, as they could be just any one of us. Dr. Venkataswamy was a retired government doctor, Mr. Ranganathan was a small entrepreneur and Mr. Vasudevan was a manager. What was common were the apparently insurmountable challenges they faced. Their cases show how their commitment coupled with tenacious zeal transformed not only their organisations but also their industry.

A must read for innovators, entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, managers and students who are looking to make breakthroughs happen.

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