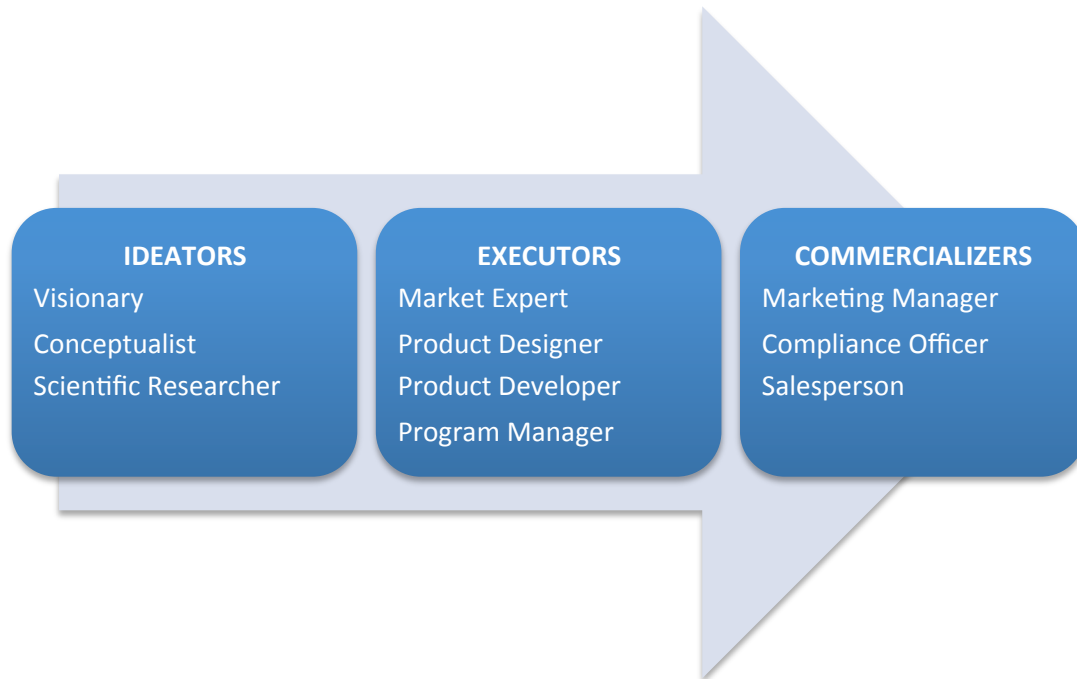


Who should lead your innovation process?

Innovation is the current watchword for success, the key to corporate growth or survival, the Holy Grail of business. Well, perhaps that's going a bit overboard, but it's hard to argue persuasively that innovation is unimportant.

So, we all want innovation to thrive within our enterprises. But who is the best person to lead the innovation process in your company? That's a challenging question. The answer, uttered like a true management consultant, is: "It depends."

Consider three broad categories of corporate resources that contribute to the innovation process:



Who Are the Key Resources?

Let's first define the responsibilities and activities of the 10 resources named here.

Visionary... Many think of the visionary as the most obvious leader of innovation. He imagines a future that most others cannot. He is a bold thinker in broad strokes. Important details are often lacking. Infeasibility is commonly encountered along the way. Without a visionary the most disruptive innovations would not be possible. He may be the CEO but is more likely to be a founder, CTO, or an otherwise close associate of the CEO.

Conceptualist ... She is a generator of many new ideas, often of more modest scope and realistic nature. Her ideas tend to be less revolutionary and more likely to be feasible than those of the visionary. The number of ideas generated is always more than can be managed, so a filtering process is mandatory. Like the visionary, it is likely that the conceptualist cannot lead the innovation process to its conclusion, partly because even newer ideas tend to get in her way.

Scientific Researcher ... He is the plodding, science-based investigator of truth. Given a rather broad domain of inquiry, he is engaged in discovery that, his employer hopes, will eventually result in some level of commercial success. Some truly revolutionary outcomes sometimes result, but the path is difficult and often lengthy. Purely science-driven innovation seems now to be limited to well-healed industries and governments. Scientific researchers are rarely equipped to lead innovation to its commercial endpoint.

Market Expert ... One who understands a particular market is indispensable to the monetization of innovation because revenue derives from sales, which are ultimately tied to user demand, which is in turn embedded in the characterization of a market and its evolution. She must be consulted early on to determine whether and when an idea should be implemented as a product or service. Without market knowledge an innovation is likely to either die a graceful death or consume resources to an ungraceful end.

Product Designer ... The designer is often thought of as the most creative person within the innovation process because he creates something tangible: a product concept and sometimes a physical model. This characterization often underappreciates the creative contributions of others. Nevertheless, the designer's role is essential because it generates something that can be tested and refined by the market expert and by prospective customers.

Product Developer ... The developer executes the detail work of making a product real and producible. She is often an engineer of some kind. She must achieve performance feasibility, surmount materials and manufacturing obstacles, meet cost targets, and ultimately convert (or modify) the designer's work to yield a commercializable product or service.

Program Manager ... The program manager oversees the innovation process once a product concept has emerged. Most see him as the natural leader of that process for some period of time. He defines the tasks, assigns resources, manages the program timeline and budget, and reports progress to the executive ranks. While this role is obviously important, it is seldom the most indispensable one.

Marketing Manager ... The marketing manager deals with the delicate relationship between product and market. She defines the product's market positioning, identifies various categories of customers, sets pricing targets, develops resources for the sales force, and repeatedly assesses the reactions of customers to identify needs for future product revisions.



Compliance Officer ... For products that must meet regulatory requirements (e.g. FDA, CE, IEC, CAP) prior to commercialization, the compliance officer takes the necessary steps to assure that these requirements are met. For medical products, meeting these requirements is especially burdensome, and those compliance activities often affect the timing of the innovation process.

Salesperson ... Whether direct or indirect, salespersons maintain the relationships between the supplier and its customers. Their activity is most intense prior to a sale; thereafter, they serve to transmit user feedback to the supplier organization. While some simple products may be exclusively saleable online, truly innovative offerings always require a human connection to serve as explainer-in-chief.

If You Had to Pick One

I believe there are only two of these resources who could successfully lead the innovation process from start to finish. The first is the Visionary. Acting through force of will and widespread respect within the organization, he might pull it off. But that person must be unusually multi-talented and be available to act with singular focus on his vision. That's a tall order.

A more likely candidate is the Program Manager because, by definition, a program manager is a juggler of diverse resources and is often committed to making things happen over the long haul. Nevertheless, multiple diverse talents would be required. For example, it is rare to find a full appreciation for ideation and visioning in an experienced program manager.

A Better Idea: Optimize With Handoffs

A more rational and realistic approach is for different resources to accept the leadership role as a product concept migrates through the processes of ideation, development and commercialization. Of course the handoffs are critical in maintaining momentum and preserving learnings along the way.

Many leadership combinations are possible, but certain ones seem more likely to be successful than others, specific capabilities and personalities aside. Any of the ideators could take on the initial leadership role, but it is advisable that someone else should take on that role once a product concept is defined. The next assignment is also variable; my preference generally rests with the program manager as the person most likely to keep the process on track. Although another handoff is not essential, the best candidate among the commercializers is the marketing manager, the resource with the longest-term required involvement.



Despite these suggestions, personal skills, individual capabilities and organizational influences can override these generalized preferences. But engaging multiple leaders is usually the way to go. That approach offers the highest level of institutional buy-in and the greatest potential for ultimate success.

One important caution will resonate with any organization that has experienced an innovation failure owing to faulty leader selection. Do not choose an individual, regardless of stage in the process, who is conflicted by other existing priorities or political influences. That's especially problematic when an innovative concept is forced to compete for resources with an established, successful product line. Some competition is inevitable, but don't tempt fate!

