The periphery: Where radical innovation occurs

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Bio

Gino Cattani is Professor of Management & Organization Theory at the Stern School of Business, New York University. His research focuses on social evaluation and the evolutionary bases of creativity and innovation. He served as the Deputy Senior Editor of Organization Science and is currently Associate Editor of Management Science.

Simone Ferriani is Professor of Entrepreneurship at the University of Bologna and Honorary Professor at Cass Business School and a lifetime member of Clare-Hall College in Cambridge. His research interests include entrepreneurship, creativity, and social networks. Recent publications have focused on processes of social evaluation, the origin of entrepreneurship and the social side of creativity.

References


Personal Response

Is it possible for insiders to match the creativity of those on the periphery?

Yes, it is possible as long as insiders train themselves to bring fresh eyes into their social world.

To accomplish this, they must learn to look to the margins, if not outside the world in which they want to innovate. They should cling to their usual context and comfort zone with one arm, but reach its edges with the other.

This means challenging assumptions or beliefs that are too often taken for granted, exploring unusual social environments, reading poetry if one has always read history books, learning a musical instrument if one has never done so, or travelling to the southern hemisphere if one usually travels north.
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dical innovation requires a different mindset; one that is able to escape conventional thinking and conceive novel ideas. Game changers are often dismissed as eccentric or mad, however, which means that their ideas gain no traction. Cattani and Ferriani contend that those novel ideas very often come from outsiders: those on the periphery of industry.

This reveals a paradox that needs solving, which Cattani and Ferriani call the Core-Periphery Conundrum. They have the power, status, and money to be heard. However, their insider status hinders them from achieving radical innovations.

A POTENTIAL SOLUTION

Cattani and Ferriani turn to historical case studies to attempt to determine which mechanisms take someone from an outsider to paid-up member of the establishment. One such example is that of John Harrison, discussed in Ferriani’s TEDx Talk in Bologna in 2019. Notably, the talk directly inspired the theme “Outsider” for TEDx2020 Bologna edition, which took place Sunday, September 13 and turned out to be the largest ever TEDx event to take place in Italy, with over 2000 people attending.

Another case study that the professors examine is Coco Chanel. She was born an outsider but eventually made her way to the centre of the elitist and exclusive haute couture industry. Chanel was considered a social outcast at the start of her career but is now an icon of high fashion.

Entrepreneurship in the fashion world was dominated by men. Not only was Chanel a woman but she was also born into a low social class. Nevertheless, Chanel was able to escape marginality and become a revered and established authority.

Chanel’s novel thinking eventually became legitimised. How she achieved this could help others on the peripheries to do the same.

LEGITIMISING OUTSIDER NOVELTY

After examining the Core-Periphery Conundrum and using a mix of statistical analyses and historical case studies, Cattani and Ferriani have developed a series of insights into how outsiders can legitimise their ideas. Think of this like a road map from marginality to mainstream. These are steps Chanel took that could work for other outsiders too.

The researchers lay out six steps for those on the periphery to find their way to the core, where they’ll have access to the resources needed to realise their novel ideas.

1) Reframe Disadvantages

Outsiders lack the respect and credibility of powerful incumbents, which places them at a disadvantage. Rather than letting yourself be defeated by such disadvantages, use them as your motivation. It is precisely your outsider status that enables you to think differently and create novel ideas.

2) Leverage Disadvantages

If you’re on the periphery, then you have a certain freedom from social pressures and constraints. You haven’t been indoctrinated by traditional education. This is an advantage because it allows you to think more freely and critically about social and technological problems. This distance from the core is an advantage; make use of it.

3) Understand Different Audiences

Different communities respond to ideas differently. Your approach may not be popular with one audience (e.g., critical) but does appeal to a different audience (e.g., peers or users), or vice versa. If you can get your message to the right people, they might respond more positively, allowing your radical innovation to gain traction.

4) Overcome Rejection

Many fail not because their ideas are bad but because they gave up. Outsiders will face constant rejection, criticism, and opposition. In order to succeed, therefore, you must be resilient, tenacious, obsessive, and stubborn. Gaining stamina in the face of adversity will be another advantage you’ll gain over those in the core.

5) Change your Language

Many who fail to achieve recognition, which means innovators have to somehow span both the core and the periphery. Cattani and Ferriani look at case studies of outsiders whose radical ideas made it to the core. From this, it should be possible to design a methodology for how a game changer can escape marginality.

6) Find your Way In

Outsiders need to find a way to get their foot in the door since they don’t have access to the same platform that insiders do. Be constantly on the lookout for entry points which throw your novel idea into mainstream public debate. This may be via a crisis that your idea can solve, or a sympathetic audience willing to support it. Stay alert and look for possible entry points.

Harrison’s invention and Chanel’s style were ultimately legitimised. How they accomplished this could help others on the peripheries to do the same.

Gino Cattani is Professor of Management and Organization at the Stern School of Business, and Simone Ferriani is Professor of Entrepreneurship at the University of Bologna. Both professors have researched creativity and entrepreneurship independently but they’ve come together for a common goal: to solve the Core-Periphery Conundrum.
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