

The Concept of Innovation Activists:  
*Distributed Leadership for Collaborative Innovation*

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**Abstract**

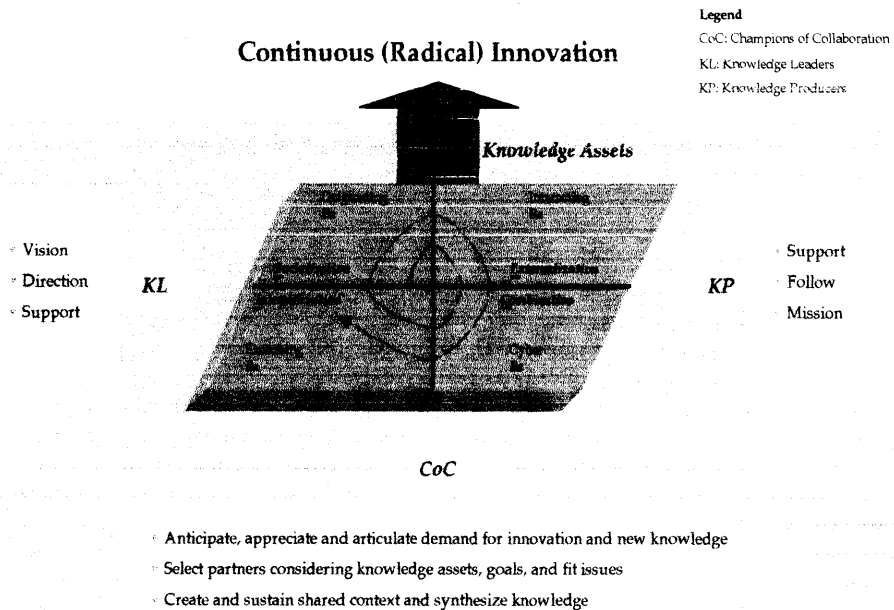
*Management practices at extraordinarily innovative Japanese firms have been widely researched and extensively documented. I have begun to look "behind the scenes", and examine more closely the question of "who plays the most critical role in radical innovation?" In particular, I examined the distributed leadership roles that are essential for projects involving radical innovation in the knowledge-creating company<sup>1</sup>. In this article, I propose the concept of innovation activists – distributed leadership for collaborative innovation.*

**Why Do I Care About Innovation Activists and Why Now?**

Researchers and practitioners from different disciplines have studied the roles of individuals in innovation processes for many years and provided many useful guidelines to business leaders. For example, Donald A. Schön suggested that radical innovation requires the emergence of a champion who will identify with the idea as their own, and contribute to promote the idea by going far beyond the requirements of their job.<sup>2</sup> Schön emphasized that a new idea either finds a "champion" or dies. Peter Drucker also suggests the importance of leadership roles in innovation. In his view, the "entrepreneurs" innovate and they always search for change, respond to it, and exploit it as an opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

Edward B. Roberts and Alan R. Fusfeld indicated that champions/entrepreneurs sell ideas to others in the organization, get resources, and take risks.<sup>4</sup> In "Leading the Revolution," Gary Hamel emphasized the importance of revolutionaries for business concept innovation.<sup>5</sup> Hamel added that in most organizations, there are few individuals who can think holistically and concretely about new business concepts. On a leader's new work in a learning organization, Peter Senge suggested that leaders are designers, teachers, and stewards.<sup>6</sup> I think all these existing notions provide some useful guidelines to business executives around the world. But, who anticipate, appreciate, and articulate demand for innovation and new knowledge; select partners considering knowledge assets, goals, and fit issues; and create and sustain shared context and synthesize knowledge were not yet explained in the existing studies.

In my study of leadership roles in the knowledge-creating company, with the perspective of collaboration in innovation processes, I have discovered that distributed leadership of innovation activists are critical. In my view, there are three main types of innovation activists: champions of collaboration, knowledge leaders, and knowledge producers. Figure 1 briefly outlines of roles of the innovation activists in the knowledge-creating company. Ikujiro Nonaka and Noboru Konno originally proposed the concept of *Ba* that is shown in the figure.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I propose the concept of innovation activists and briefly introduce the major roles and key characteristics of the champions of collaboration.



**The Knowledge-Creating Company**

**Figure 1: Innovation Activists (CoC, KL, and KP) in the Knowledge-Creating Company**

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I define innovation activists as the people who work with others to anticipate, appreciate, and articulate current and future demand, and in so doing set the direction for innovations. They use their personal and corporate resources to mobilize commitment in others, create a shared context for teams when appropriate and help synthesize the knowledge that is needed for radical innovation. Innovation activists typically demonstrate a type of personal character that naturally inclines others to work with them. Among these innovation activists, the champions of collaboration (CoC) generally come from middle-level positions.

Knowledge leaders (KL) generally come from top executive positions. They provide knowledge vision and set direction for knowledge creation and innovation. Sometimes they provide emotional and/or financial support to the CoC. They protect CoC from organizational politics. Knowledge producers (KP) generally come from middle-level and front-line employee positions. They support and follow the CoC as well as KL, and pursue their missions in collaborative innovation processes. These roles (CoC, KL, KP) change over time. CoC of one project sometimes work as KP in another and KP of one project could work as CoC in another. As organizations are now increasingly engaging in intra-organizational as well as inter-organizational collaboration in innovation processes, the notion of innovation activists will help business executives to set an intellectual agenda for fostering collaborative innovation. In this article, I propose the concept of innovation activists and describe the key characteristics of the CoC.

## Champions of Collaboration: Catapulting Radical Innovations

Radical innovations involve exploration of new possibilities and require new knowledge. In my view, a radical innovation could be an entirely new technology, product, system, service, and/or a new business concept that requires synthesizing new knowledge. To compete in a rapidly changing and complex marketplace, companies need to create and synthesize knowledge faster than ever. To do so, knowledge-creating companies need innovation activists (particularly the champions of collaboration) to advance radical innovations. I argue that CoC:

- anticipate and articulate demand for innovation and new knowledge;
- select partners by considering issues relating to knowledge assets, goals, and fit;
- create and sustain shared context and synthesize knowledge in collaborative innovation processes.

Interestingly, CoC are not necessarily chief knowledge officers or top business executives or inventors. Rather, they come from many backgrounds and positions in the knowledge-creating company. The CoC are not always visible as they sometimes play their roles from underground, and often they do not mention their contributions to an innovation project unless someone asks them. Learn-Break-Create is their common pattern of making things happen. Their personal characteristics and whole-hearted commitment are critical for radical innovations in the knowledge-creating company.

### Key Characteristics of the Champions of Collaboration

**Hungry.** CoC are conscious and eager for creative destruction. Their strong desires for radical innovation arise through the recollection of their self-knowledge, “*biishiki*” (aesthetic values/personal sense of beauty), and past personal experiences. Their foresight and synthesizing capabilities contribute to catapulting radical innovations in the knowledge-creating company.

**Hot.** They are passionate in their conviction. Such conviction emerges when their interests occupy their consciousness and they become a part of it. CoC know that to create new knowledge they must love it, and to love a new knowledge they must know it. To do so, sometimes they break the rules. But, their “*toujishaishiki*” (wholehearted commitment) helps them to learn-break-create in collaborative innovation processes.

**Harmonious.** They think holistically and maintain a rhythm for balanced collaborative relationships with partners within and outside of their organization in the innovative process. They create shared context and energize collaborative efforts among the people involved, and help to synthesize knowledge. Although they prefer harmonious conditions in collaborative innovation processes, sometimes they leap ahead if it will contribute to catapulting radical innovation.

**Hearty.** They are generally fun-loving and flexible, but stick to their commitments. They think that fun, flexibility, and border-less mind-set are critical for seeing, feeling, and experiencing realities in their pure form.

**Healthy.** They are energetic enough for persistence and overcoming any challenges they face in collaborative innovation processes. They are healthy enough to transform their creative frustrations into irresistible energy for radical innovations.

## Challenges Ahead

The innovation activists (particularly the champions of collaboration) are not always visible, sometimes they contribute to catapulting innovation without even announcing their presence. They may come in many shapes and positions. Business executives must remember that radical innovation is primarily driven by individual initiatives. To find those individuals, I suggest business executives look at the energy source of a radical innovation project, because CoC motivate and stimulate others to generate and combine energy, and propel the innovation project forward, maintain its rhythm and balance, and keep it focused during downturns, transitions, and crises. Once again, CoC do not work alone. They need KI -- the willing protectors and supporters -- and KP -- the willing followers -- who support them in collaborative innovation processes.

I argue that CoC do not necessarily need to be a lone genius or an expert scientist or an engineer or an elite, rather they need to be the *synthesizer of knowledge* with whole-hearted commitment and irresistible spirit for collaborative innovation in the knowledge-creating company. I suggest senior business executives to: 1) create physical and psychological environment where innovation activists can emerge and thrive; 2) find innovation activists and facilitate them to catapult radical innovation; and 3) strategically design and develop mechanisms for nurturing of individuals those who have the potentials to become innovation activists. Finally, I think that innovation activists may also contribute to sustainable innovations -- innovation that considers social, economic, and ecological imperatives -- in any sectors (industry, university, government, and non-profit-organizations) and anywhere in this planet earth. Further studies in the area may also contribute to foster collaboration for sustainable innovations at the global scale.

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## References

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<sup>3</sup> P. F. Drucker, *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and Principles* (New York: Harper Business, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> E. B. Roberts and A. R. Fusfeld, "Staffing the Innovative Technology-based Organization," *Sloan Management Review*, Volume 22, Number 3, Spring 1981, pp. 19-34.

<sup>5</sup> G. Hamel, *Leading the Revolution* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> P. M. Senge, "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations," *Sloan Management Review*, Volume 32, Number 1, Fall 1990.

<sup>7</sup> I. Nonaka and N. Konno, "The Concept of Ba: Building a Foundation for Knowledge Creation," *California Management Review*, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 40-54.