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Developing innovative competencies in view of biographies of innovative managers

Abstract: The article presents fragments of the author's own research, which was conducted among innovative managers. A thesis is advanced, that competencies and innovative behaviors of managers are also sources of formation of team and organizational spirit that fosters creativity and innovation of employees. The study focused on the factors influencing the innovation competence. The author pays particular attention to the subjective conditioning as well as to the educational and organizational factors, emphasizing their importance. Based on the results of the research, the article also presents a silhouette of an innovative manager. The author also highlights the need to develop innovative competencies, both in the executive and general education.

Key-words: silhouette of an innovative manager, managerial competencies, educational biographies of managers, development of innovation.

Introduction

For several years now, innovative competencies are of particular interest to many scientific disciplines, and are now regarded as „competencies of the future”, as the demand for innovation is growing. Particular attention is paid to competencies of the innovative managers, because „intelligent innovation” of managers [Mroziewicz 2008, p. 97] determines whether the work environment is perceived as innovative or not. These competencies of managers are extensively described in the literature [Cenin 1998, Szopiński 2004 and others], and researchers emphasize their leading role in the shaping of the learning organization and capital building of an innovative enterprise [Mroziewicz 2008 and others]. They provide the opportunity for the organization to continuously learn new values and patterns of thought and action, as well as new ways to

acquire and transfer knowledge [Morawski 2004, p. 118]. Creative and innovative competencies are highlighted as significant in each typology of managerial skills [see A. Rakowska 2000, Sitko-Lutek 2004, Szopiński 2004 and others]. Some researchers, E. Steiner and R. Weber [1993] for example, attributed the dominant role to the creative skills of managers, among them including:

- ability to generate a large number of concepts over a short period of time;
- constant search for new solutions;
- originality – creating innovative connections and ideas;
- ability to choose the optimal solution;
- perseverance in overcoming difficulties;
- motivation as a problem and a challenge;
- vigorousness and efficiency;
- consistency, regularity, courage;
- tolerance and respect for different opinions;
- avoidance of prematurely formed opinions;
- openness to criticism;
- relativistic view of reality;
- independence of judgement.

These competencies of managers provide organizations with openness, flexibility and adaptability, which in turn increase the possibility of reacting quickly to changes in the market environment, contributing to the competitiveness of the organization. They also enable the implementation of change and innovation.

In my researches I present a thesis, that competencies and innovative behaviours of managers are also sources of formation of team and organizational spirit that fosters creativity and innovation of employees (see: Amabile, West, Ekvall, Ryhammar, Basadur, Hausdorf, Isacksen, Karwowski, others). The working environment is a place particularly important for creativity and innovation, because it is linked with the idea of a learning and transgressive organization, which is characterized by the evolution directed towards flexibility, proactivity, continuous learning and innovation [Sułkowski 2002]. These organizations not only increase their chances of survival and development, but also contribute to raising the capital of an innovative society.

Developing innovative competencies in view of managers' educational biographies

Presented here research excerpts of educational biographies of managers are a part of a larger research project, which includes a survey of creative atti-

tudes (of managers and employees) and innovation climate in seven Polish enterprises. The project was conducted by the author in 2008–2009, and the research is now continuing. The whole study was quantitative and qualitative in nature, and the parts of qualitative analyses presented in the article are based on empirical material gathered in the course of biographical and thematic interviews, conducted with 15 deliberately selected innovative managers, out of 93 managers surveyed earlier. The presented research analyzes those aspects of the educational and professional biography of managers that had an impact on the development of their innovative competencies. Specific analysis categories have been identified on the basis of a qualitative empirical data. This article presents only a small part of research and discusses two specific aspects: *how the respondents define the silhouette of an innovative manager and the main educational factors influencing the development of their innovative competence.*

Silhouette of an innovative manager

Respondents defined the silhouette of an „innovative manager” in many various ways. They characterized it as: *a good manager who diligently carries out his/her duties, a person who creatively solves problems and conflicts, a unique person: a creator, a visionary, who introduces new concepts and trends in management.* Some characteristics of the innovative manager were pointed out by almost all of the respondents, namely: openness, broad perspective on the issues, the ability to creatively solve problems and conflicts, being up to date with changes, creativity. An innovative manager is (according to most respondents): *confident, constantly seeking, constantly introducing changes and improvements, communicative and good with people, able to inspire subordinates, listen to their opinions and to recognize good ideas.*

The ability of independent construction and improvement of management tools were also mentioned. Three respondents pointed to the personal development: *an innovative manager consciously develops as a person, knows him/herself, works on his/her weaknesses.* At the same time, according to respondents, an innovative manager should possess the typical characteristics of a „good manager”: *high motivation, the ability to respond quickly to new situations, the ability to make difficult decisions, orientation on goal achievements.* The distinguishing features of an innovative manager are also: *the ability to respond quickly to new situations, being people-oriented, having ‚soft’ skills in people management, team-building and relation-building, able to inspire and to put to use human potential.* Managers identified mostly with silhouettes of innovative managers presented by themselves. When describing the „model”, they often referred to their own experience, their characteristics and skills, successes, and even failures. The difficulty in defining the model lies in the fact that what some call innovation or even creativity, others consider only as minor enhancements, improvements.

Based on the statements the author has identified sub-competencies and drew up the list of innovative managerial skills. The table below shows the effects:

Table 1. Innovative managerial competencies in view of research on educational biographies of managers

INTRAPERSONAL COMPETENCIES	open popular, entrepreneurial, clever, consciously developing his own personality, knows himself, working on his weaknesses, outstanding, creative, honestly fulfills duties, calm, knows how to make right decisions, avoids biased decisions, <i>a decision can not hurt other people,</i> is aware of the effects of what he/she wants to achieve, paves the way for reaching this goal, develops spiritually (values).
INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCIES	communicative and having skills in making professional contacts, good observer, people-oriented, having „soft” skills in managing people, team-building and relation-building, able to inspire and to put to use human potential , knows how to inspire subordinates, listen to their opinions and to recognize good ideas, has the ability to negotiate, open, knows how to put to use other people’s potential, resources, and knowledge, consults important decisions with a team / department, is open to the staff’s suggestions, knows how to discuss and is not close-minded, open to the human aspects of life, <i>because something can always happen,</i>

	<p>allows for the possibility that subordinates can make a mistake, <i>because different people learn in different ways at different rates, an employee can make a bad, wrong decision at any given time,</i></p> <p>helps employees solve their problems, supports them,</p> <p>is able to communicate as well with a cleaning lady as with the president,</p> <p>takes responsibility for subordinates,</p> <p>follows the development of subordinates: do they improve? are they suitable for the job?</p> <p>knows how to create a sense of community and at the same time is aware of the importance of a single action,</p> <p>when building a team, knows that <i>there can not be a situation with one person being alienated; it is good when there is some healthy competition - people's interactions will be entirely different,</i></p> <p>open to other cultures and experiences of others.</p>
CREATIVE COMPETECIES	<p>has a broad perspective on issues,</p> <p>has the ability to creatively solve problems and conflicts,</p> <p>follows changes,</p> <p>creative,</p> <p>a visionary who introduces new concepts and trends in management,</p> <p>has the ability to respond quickly to new situations,</p> <p>seeking better solutions for himself and other people, organizations,</p> <p>does not stop at one solution to any given problem,</p> <p>solves problems not in a standard way,</p> <p>does not stop at what he/she has already achieved. Looks for new areas for development,</p> <p>benefits from the knowledge and bends that knowledge to fit his / her place of work, a specific problem, so as to use it in a very active way,</p> <p>constantly seeking,</p> <p>able to create something, form several versions or ideas to create a single one,</p> <p>has the ability to see "the big picture" from many various sides, aware of different perceptions - economic, spiritual, human,</p>

	open to all ideas, likes changes, has new ideas that embrace changes, shows tolerance and openness to change.
INNOVATIVE MANAGEMENT SKILLS	has the ability to independently design and improve management tools, effectively carries out missions and strategies, introduces a new way to manage, adapts company's tools and structures to the needs, constantly improves and changes <i>activities, procedures</i> .
CHARACTERISTICS OF A "GOOD MANAGER"	high motivation, ability to react to new situations, ability to make difficult decisions, oriented on goal achievement, well prepared, takes responsibility for his/her decisions, quickly makes decisions, quickly responds, knows what his/her team and subordinates are doing in order to properly assign work, propriety, well-developed planning and strategic skills.

Source: own research, Nawrat 2009.

An analysis of the innovative manager was used to develop a model of innovative managerial competencies [Nawrat 2009].

Another part of the interview focused on the educational factors that have shaped the innovative skills of the respondents. The interlocutors pointed to a wide variety of factors, which the author then grouped into narrower analytic categories. Respondents were also asked to rank the categories, and so, as key they have chosen: subject's background (predispositions, character traits, abilities, temperament), and the second, equally important, factor was the influence of the work environment - which was also found to be extremely important. These factors, however, must be interlocking and mutually reinforcing: *even an outstanding manager or employee will not use his abilities in adverse conditions* – said one of the respondents. Even though these two categories were distinguished, the respondents felt that all the other groups of factors (including: family, education and environment) have played an important role in the formation of their innovation as well. Presented below are parts of the research, categorized analytically.

Subject's background

The respondents talked about their internal predispositions, already existing in childhood, that contributed to the subsequent choice of becoming a manager, while shaping an innovative attitude. They exchanged the following characteristics: *desire to lead, leadership skills, charisma, a seeking attitude, early independence, the need for independence and personal freedom, a strong intrinsic motivation to learn and succeed, high aspirations, the desire to rise in the world, the ability to set him/herself goals, perseverance in pursuing goals, high tolerance for change, the ability to rise to the challenges, resistance to failures or rather ability to use them (learning from mistakes)*. These are the predispositions, which helped the test subject during school years to learn new skills associated with social functioning, and to cope with social and life situations. A characteristic feature of the managers' biographies was also the early independence in making educational and life choices. Most respondents made important choices between the ages of 12 and 15 (choice of profession, high school, the decision to study in another city). This was the result of combining the personal factor of favorable family circumstances. Respondents also demonstrated resourcefulness, charisma, courage very early (primary school, high school). Here is an example:

As a child, at the age of 15, I was trading by myself, abroad. At the age of 12, I was hitchhiking all over Poland.

The development of one skill group has stimulated the development and learning of other, new skills. The number and diversity of experiences multiplied, resulting in a wider range of possibilities: in the area of activities, decision making, problem solving.

Seven of the respondents exercised various social functions in the course of school education (class president etc.). These social functions developed, according to the respondents, the skills involved in managing people, building relationships, cooperation and coordination. Below is the statement of one of the respondents:

I've always liked to be an organizer. I preferred organizing than being organized. I believed that, in many situations, if I took doing something upon myself, then I would stay in control and the thing would get done.

The desire to control – him/herself, the situation, and sometimes other people, appeared repeatedly in the statements of the respondents. Moreover, the majority of respondents pursued simultaneously with education their extracurricular interests (sports, playing in a band, scouting, etc.). This allowed them to develop not only the interests and passions, but also skills in social interactions in different contexts.

Family considerations

Family had an impact on the development of innovative attitudes in most subjects by providing them at an early stage of development (childhood, primary school) with adequate stimulation while supporting and giving enough space for independence and self-reliance (our interviewees). Impact of the family consisted of:

- showing various possibilities,
- development of cognitive curiosity,
- stimulation of courage in independent decision-making,
- development of ambition and motivation to learn.

Characteristic of the respondents' experience is a sense of freedom and independence, which is *an area of freedom* experienced in childhood. Several respondents described this area as a very important learning experience shaping innovation. Experiencing a sense of freedom prompted the first recalled attempt to take responsibility for themselves, which resulted in increased self-reliance and a sense of independence, autonomy, and subjectivity. Space for independence has allowed the respondents to better understand themselves, discover their strengths and weaknesses, increased their trust in themselves and self-confidence.

Educational considerations

Shaping of respondents' innovation was greatly influenced by informal and non-formal education, which, according to them, was mostly subjective, because it resulted from already formed (in childhood) attitude manifested by *desire, curiosity, openness, reflexivity, ability to combine different elements*. The relatively small role of formal education in shaping innovative attitudes of respondents is found to be interesting by them. Overall, in managers' minds, formal education played a very important role in their lives and careers – it enabled acquisition of knowledge and skills, development of thinking, memory, analytic skills, ambition, and desire to learn. However, it was of little importance in shaping innovative attitudes. The respondents indicated few significant school events and relatively little role-models – teachers stimulating creativity and innovation. Respondents with higher education in humanities listed the highest number of experiences in the field of formal education that contributed to the development of innovative attitudes. According to them, these studies opened them to other people, to diversity (especially ethnology, cultural anthropology), gave basic tools and skills relevant to managerial work such as: tools of effective communication, conflict resolution skills, negotiation, knowledge about people and their behaviours (pedagogy, education studies). Below a statement of one of the interviewees:

I have a degree in ethnology, cultural anthropology, it involved trips, interviews with new people; here I gained skills in networking, I've always been an open person, but during an internship I gained those skills, going away for our internships we tried to find interesting places far away, I conducted a lot of interviews with people, on very particular subjects, distant from what we're talking about now, but I learned a lot.

School education has been recognized by the respondents as a „springboard” for further development and career, but not as a source of significant experiences, especially those that shape innovation.

Organizational considerations (including work-related considerations)

An early career start (first jobs in high school, right after graduating from high school or during the first two years of college) is typical of the respondents (except for one person). Work commencement accelerated *maturation to adulthood*. Combining work and studies resulted in the need for *more effective time management and multitasking*, which to some extent prepared the subjects to perform managerial functions, which among other things require such competencies, and developed creative skills of *combining different areas*. According to the respondents, the environment that contributed most to forming their innovative approach is professional work environment, and especially being a manager. All respondents emphasized that they learned through working most of what they now need to perform professional tasks, especially in terms of practical skills, but also in terms of innovation. Working as a manager *compels an innovative approach* – as stated by one of the respondents. Another interviewee noted that: *now you can not be a non-innovative manager, because nowadays innovativeness is a must in this profession*. The link between functioning in an innovative company and shaping an innovative approach, was described by one of the respondents:

I haven't learned that, you have to have certain personality traits that one does or does not have. You have to be a conscious man, because only then you can develop certain character traits. Awareness is the ability to understand the specific mechanisms, touching upon the true understanding, and not learning something. In this company you can learn how to be an innovative manager by participating in the culture of the company, working here and participating in various types of training.

This statement shows how greatly the coupling of two key factors: on the one hand the organization, on the other hand specific subject characteristics; influences formation of innovation attitudes. Another respondent noted that everyday work tasks and situations are a factor in innovativeness formation:

I am often confronted with problems of legal nature, when there is a conflict, I have to face it, together with legal counsel, I have to decide whether a certain solution is good. The company is the place where you can profit, experiment. This is what shapes my innovation attitude, not knowledge. Work is a form of education, an ability to exercise. You don't always have it. You can have it, when you have the right attitude.

Another respondent said that working as a manager brings with it daily a number of „exercises” and „trainings” in creativity and innovation. This statement appeared in majority of responses. Below are examples of „training” situations selected from the various statements of managers:

pulling the plan; finding something; doing something difficult, that had to be done; conflict resolution, negotiation with a client, preparation of a strategic plan, designing a new course of action, dividing responsibilities, being up to date with what is going on, motivating subordinates, decisions and choices, obtaining information, improving sales.

According to respondents, organization educates an innovative manager by creating the right conditions, working environment fostering innovative attitudes.

In the last sequence of questions, the respondents were asked to describe a way to enrich their education, so it would serve the development of innovative competencies. Managers indicated the following:

planning development activities, interpersonal skills: negotiation, contact with people, noticing other people and their needs, cooperation and communication at a higher level, teamwork, talking and listening, sharing responsibility, the ability to develop intrinsic motivation, prioritizing, building and strengthening each other, developing independence and responsibility, ability to follow what is happening, openness, ability to see the big picture, look at the problems from different sides and levels (economic, spiritual, human), ability to adapt company's tools and structures to the needs, ability to build a vision and paths to goal achievement, using the capabilities, resources and expertise of other people, spiritual development, opening up to other cultures, experiences of others, travel, climate and environment change.

According to the respondents, forming innovative skills in the process of formal education would require to expand education programs and content, as well as directing students rather towards developing their attitudes and personal qualities, than the acquisition of knowledge and intellectual skills training only. The attitude of innovation is related, according to the respondents,

to: opening up to „the new”, to other people’s differences; the search for self-identity and autonomy; non-standard approach, crossing borders, flexibility. In most cases, formal education failed to provide educational opportunities for these key attributes and skills for innovation. The two exceptions are people who showed a pro-innovation impact of higher education, as was mentioned above, they were both graduates of the humanities.

Summary

Biographical research excerpts quoted in the article do not cover the entire spectrum of the complexity of the issues discussed here, they are only a voice in the discussion. Analysis of managers’ educational biographies draws attention to the need and necessity to incorporate programs developing innovative skills into formal education, as well as, once again highlighting the role of work environment in shaping the attitudes and behaviors of innovation. The importance of the problem becomes apparent when faced with higher expectations of modern world which employees and managers have to meet. The European Union Strategy for 2020 serves as a good example of this. One of the priority areas it rests on is „smart growth – developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation” [Communication from the Commission, Europe 2020, p. 5], and one of the seven key projects has been defined as: „Innovation Union”⁵. In addition, one of the main objectives of lifelong learning is now becoming the creation of an “innovative person” – a person that is independent, innovative, knows how to recognize new opportunities and creatively transform reality and him/herself.

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⁵ Innovation Union – a project to improve framework conditions and access to finance for research and innovation so as to ensure that innovative ideas can be turned into products and services, which in turn will contribute to economic growth and job creation” [Communication from the Commission, Europe 2020, pp. 5–6].

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