

Time to get creative



Sunil Sinha
on the innovation
journey of the
Tata Group

For the majority of its 100-plus years of its existence, the Tata Group has been predominantly domestic in its orientation. That has changed over the last few years as the Group extends its global footprint, just as it has enhanced its performance and competitiveness. But we have a long way to go yet on the journey from Indian to international and, in the days to come, one of the main ingredients in making this critical transition will be innovation.

A little more than a decade back, the Group embraced the Tata Business Excellence Model. This methodology, and the quality philosophy at its core, has helped make us more competitive while giving us a sound platform to grow, within India and beyond its shores. However, there's much more that needs to be accomplished.

Companies that are market leaders and global successes share some sterling attributes: they think, aspire, question, experiment and, most importantly, they innovate. It was this understanding that prompted us to look at innovation as a strategic approach to global growth. Our approach was three-pronged.

Communication and recognition

We amplified the message of innovation and recognised innovators. Towards this end, a number of initiatives were launched.

► Tata Group Innovation Forum (TGIF)

This initiative got going with the charter to bring together a community of 'innovation enthusiasts' from across Tata companies. The role of TGIF members is to assist their companies in experimenting with ideas, propagate the relevant ones and spread them through the enterprise. In any group there will be experimenters. If the environment they function in is not discouraging, the innovative spirit can be propagated. For propagation, people have to be thrown together to be able to share. Finally, the innovative idea needs to be tried by many in different circumstances.

► Innovation workshops

We at Tata Quality Management Services conduct workshops that

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have well-known experts talk about the innovation approaches and ideas that could work for the Tata Group. Among these 'gurus' have been Clayton Christensen, Langdon Morris and David Wittenberg. In similar vein was Manufacturing Innovation and Design, a programme organised by the Tata Management Training Centre (TMTC) in association with Stanford University. The follow-up to these workshops was relatively weak in the beginning, but is now gaining in strength.

► **Innovation publications**

In order to capture and disseminate the learning from our various innovation initiatives, the Group Publications team at Tata Sons, in association with TMTC and other organisations, has been bringing out publications that cover innovation best practices from around the world, the experience of our innovation missions to the United States and Japan, and other material that adds to our understanding of the innovation subject.

► **Tata Innovation Day**

Two years back, we started celebrating innovation day to recognise innovators from different Group companies. Thousands of Tata managers participate in this event and many hundreds of innovative projects are evaluated. In 2007, more than 100 teams from over 40 companies, including some international ones, participated in various categories and competed for awards.

Learning and adapting

In the last two years, we have been organising missions — mainly comprising senior Tata executives — to some of the most innovative companies in the world. These missions have taken us to the United States, where we visited innovation champions such as Microsoft, Intel, HP and 3M, and Japan, where we had the privilege of getting a close look at the likes of Nissan, Fuji, Ito En, Olympus, Toshiba and Hitachi. The idea is to copy openly where we can, or to otherwise learn from those who know better.

The key learning points from the innovation missions have been:

- Innovation is not serendipitous in these companies. There is a clear vision for innovation and the R&D to back it up. Expected innovation outcomes are tightly aligned to strategy and business plans.
- These companies carefully nurture the environment for innovation. Employees are provided resources and encouraged to work on projects that may not be directly linked to business goals.
- In most of these companies, technology has been

the backbone of innovation. They build multiple research and technology platforms and have several business verticals to leverage these platforms.

- Collaboration with academic institutions is common and extensively used. The companies have a systematic process to identify, review and transfer technology from projects undertaken in partnership with outside institutions.
- Innovations are positioned to influence existing as well as prospective customers. Proper market and customer research serves as a valuable input to R&D.

In 2007 the Confederation of Indian Industry organised a visit to Cambridge in which some Tata executives participated. A slew of leading companies, including Kodak, Nokia, Boeing and Microsoft, opened their corporate research centres in Cambridge to the guests.

The main learning points were:

- There is no single driver or dominant player which precipitated the Cambridge innovation phenomenon; it evolved over several decades. But the availability of high-quality talent and research leads from Cambridge have certainly acted as a powerful facilitator.
- Three factors have played a critical role in creating the Cambridge innovation and entrepreneurship archetype: availability of top-drawer research minds and facilities, easy accessibility of finance, and an ambience which stimulates learning. Also, an informal environment encourages healthy dialogue between investors and innovators.

Research orientation and partnerships with academia

Outstanding research facilities are fundamental to the growth of any organisation, even the nation. Partnerships with academia play a crucial role in this respect.

TQMS and a few Tata companies have initiated efforts to promote the culture for innovation and also trigger actions for innovative projects. The key learning from our innovation missions to the United States and Japan was that innovation is an organised, well-drilled process. Not all people in a company can be expected to be innovative, so the formation of cross-functional teams around innovative platform technologies can prove more than useful in the crafting of strategic innovations.

Keeping these points in focus, a Group-wide study was conducted to identify challenges and sow the seeds for the creation of an ecosystem for innovation. We have a fair distance to cover in this odyssey, but we have paved the path that will take us far on the innovation road. ●