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**I** brightness, blue, light-emitting diode, which opened the way for the now-ubiquitous white LED, is often told as a tale of against-all-odds innovation by a maverick genius. When Nichia of Japan ordered researcher Shuji Nakamura to stop the expensive work on the project it had initially funded, he ploughed on. He secretly sought patents for his breakthrough. He even triggered several explosions in his laboratory.

But what if the intransigence of Prof Nakamura's superiors helped to fuel his burst of radical creativity? And what if companies could harness such a force?

Babis Mainemelis, of Greece's ALBA Graduate Business School, suggests it is possible to reconcile the evidence that managers can build frameworks for creativity and the apparently contradictory finding that staff working in direct breach of managerial edicts sometimes achieve great imaginative leaps. Prof Nakamura is one example of the latter, he says. Others include Francis Ford Coppola, whose film *The Godfather* "violated Paramount's directives about plot, cast, budget and location", and Charles House of Hewlett-Packard, who defied orders from David Packard himself not to develop large-screen displays.

A new study backed by Adobe says six out of 10 adults consider themselves to be "someone who creates", but that much of our ability to create is untapped (the survey comes up with a suspiciously precise figure of 41 per cent).

Another, from FutureStep, part of

says creativity now ranks above customer focus and strategic agility as the quality most sought-after in managers hired for long-term impact. Jonah Lehrer's book *Imagine*, which explains the science of creativity, from Bob Dylan to Procter & Gamble, is topping bestseller lists.

This flowering of interest in creative people could be a signal that the recession's survivors are now refocusing on growth. It could be merely the latest reflection of a human desire to be recognised as autonomous producers of novel ideas, instead of helpless grunts, at the mercy of martinet managers at work and television tastemakers at home. It could be a sign of spring.

Whatever has triggered the appetite, corporate executives are desperate to sate it. The classic examples of creative good practice are 3M or, latterly, Google. They are regularly praised for setting aside free time for free thinking by staff. But companies could also encourage "creative deviance", says Prof Mainemelis. Early evidence from his follow-up studies – for instance, at an advertising agency – seem to support the proposition that managers could spark deviants' imagination with a combination of tolerance, reward and, occasionally, punishment of their rule-breaking.

He admits that "truly organising for creativity, not just celebrating it, does have some destabilising effects". Doubtless the LED pioneer's colleagues, who came in one morning to find their lab benches scorched by his unauthorised experiments, would agree. But

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Staff working in direct breach of managerial edicts sometimes achieve great imaginative leaps  
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conform, innovations covertly developed by creative deviants stand a better chance of being radical successes, or so the theory goes.

I have three main concerns. The most trivial is that a plague of organisations will wackily restyle themselves as "deviant-friendly", even though enshrining rule-breaking as one of the house rules seems to invite failure.

A second fear is that some clumsy managers will endorse creative flights of fancy among staff whose roles are strictly delineated for good reason – say, commercial airline pilots, accountants or surgeons. By all means, unshackle teams that design aircraft, surgical techniques or even accounting standards. But the limits on deviance must be clear. Tolerating those who creatively trespass out of bounds is one thing; turning a blind eye to others who leak commercial secrets, imperil customers' safety, or entirely neglect their day job is quite another.

Finally, I worry that the idea that leaders should be deliberately inconsistent in tackling creative deviants will set a bad precedent. Arbitrariness – singling out some employees for praise but randomly castigating others – is a cardinal management sin in my book. Still, with appropriate caveats, if it proves to be the best way to propagate a new burst of creativity, innovation and growth, it could be the exception that proves the rule.

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Case study FT May 1, 2012

## Minimal change can be best option

Why Berlin snack bar resisted change



**The story.** Konnopke's Imbiss is probably Berlin's most famous snack bar. Set up in 1930 in Prenzlauer Berg, a then working-class district, it has become legendary for its currywurst, a Berlin speciality of fried sausage served with ketchup, chilli sauce and curry powder.

By 2010, it had been run in the same location for 34 years by Waltraud Ziervogel – who took over from her father, Max Konnopke, who started the business and ran it until 1976. The snack bar had two branches – the original at the Eberswalder Strasse subway station and another in the suburban district of Pankow.

**The challenge.** Until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, customers at Konnopke's Imbiss were mostly workers who called in during the morning or at lunchtime, or families. But by the turn of the century that had changed, as Prenzlauer Berg had become a hip neighbourhood of young, affluent freelancers, tourists and partygoers.

Then, in 2010, Ms Ziervogel learnt that the snack bar would have to close for a year because of nearby construction work on a subway station.

**Strategic considerations.** The proposed disruption offered an opportunity for some fundamental rethinking about the positioning and marketing of Konnopke's Imbiss, not to mention the business model. Should it move to a spot with even more tourists and potential customers? Should it have a healthier menu? Other questions included whether to raise prices, extend the opening hours (the snack bar often had to turn away customers when it closed at 8pm) and even whether it should sell merchandise or start franchise operations. Received wisdom on strategy and marketing would have recommended changes on many if not all of the classic "four Ps": product, price, place and promotion. The new, affluent locals and the tourists could easily afford higher prices, while later opening hours and a more comfortable location would be in line with their expectations on service quality. The same would be true of more healthy options on the menu.

At 74, Ms Ziervogel also had to consider potential succession planning and her children, Mario and Dagmar, who, respectively, worked at the original and the suburban location.

**What happened.** During the construction work, the

snack bar operated from a small stand just 100m away. Despite being offered a substantial sum of money by city authorities to move away permanently, and potentially attract even more customers at one of the tourist hotspots, Ms Ziervogel declined. She decided to rebuild her stand in exactly the same place with almost the same 1960s look and feel, save for a refurbished, bigger seating area and a slightly different outward appearance. The menu remained unchanged, as did the opening hours and the prices. Ms Ziervogel resisted all temptations to modernise her business.

After the reopening, the queues patiently waiting for a currywurst every day were as long as ever.

**Key lessons.** In sticking to the same *modus operandi*, Ms Ziervogel understood three important issues. First, many customers – especially tourists, who

90

Percentage of customers who are tourists

€3.20

Price of a currywurst with french fries

make up 90 per cent of its customers – care about "authenticity". By not radically changing, Konnopke's positioned itself as Berlin's most authentic snack bar.

Second, as owner and manager, Ms Ziervogel had clear opinions about how to run her business, what to focus on and how to lead people. Too much change simply would not have fitted her or the culture of her business.

Third, successful businesses need to carefully balance and align different elements such as strategy, formal organisation, critical tasks, people and culture. Substantial changes in any of the "four Ps" would have required the rearranging of these elements in order to maintain their equilibrium. For instance, increasing the price from €3.20 to something nearer the €17 charged by some five-star hotels would have required different processes, people and organisational culture.

Urs Mueller and Veit Etzold

The writers are, respectively, head of practice group, consumer goods and retail, and programme director at the European School of Management and Technology

# ng deserves a corner office

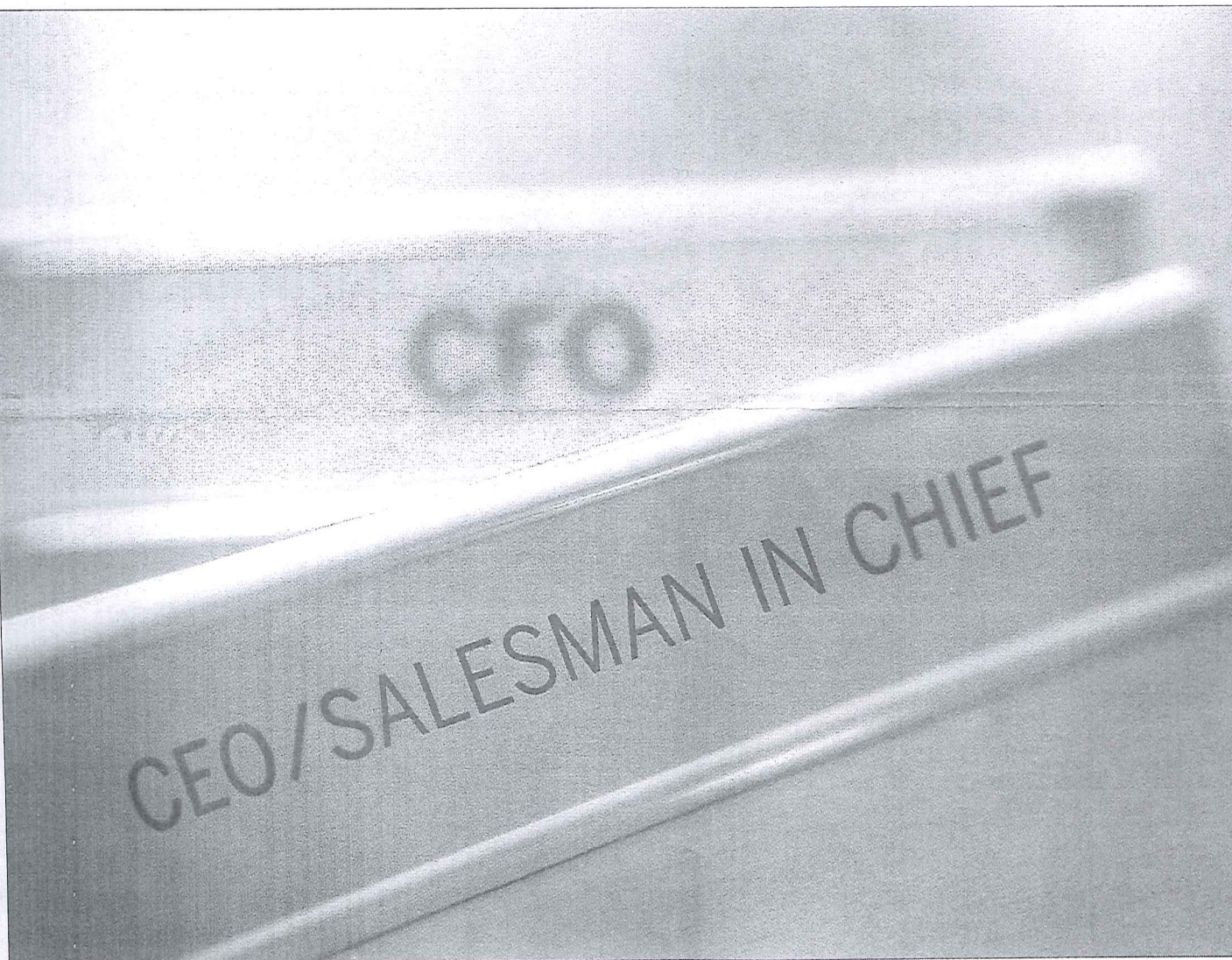
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FT Graphic/Corbis

**Sales leads: the company CEO is often salesperson-in-chief.** Sarah Blakeley (below), founder of Spanx, attributes its success to her experience of selling, including a spell as a chipmunk at Disney World

erly functioning democracy, if you can sell, you can slice through any obstacles of class, status, or upbringing in a way that is inconceivable in more hidebound societies.

Great salesmen need no other prop to succeed. Selling well, in this view, is also a reflection of a healthy character. It means you are the sort of person to whom people are drawn – hardworking, clean living, trustworthy – and you are likely to succeed at whatever you choose to do.

The opposing view is found in *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller's brutal portrait of a man crushed by capitalism, living out the last pathetic day of his life. Willy Loman is defeated by his work as a door-to-door salesman and by his failure to achieve the hollow dreams he has set for himself. For him, selling is a form of humiliation perpetrated for the vile purpose of commercial gain. Miller's play shows capitalism at its worst.

ers see it as the cause of scorched earth and ruined lives. Then there are those who shuttle around the middle, who recognise selling as a force for economic expansion and human improvement, while admitting to its Faustian lures.

The ability to sell can be a force for extraordinary good or evil, depending on the motivation of the seller. When the writer Hunter S. Thompson described the US as a "nation of two hundred million used car salesmen", it is hard to know if he meant it as a jibe or a compliment.

To excel at sales means you possess a power over people that can easily be misused. Put a formidable salesman together with a hateful idea, and you could end up with the Nuremberg rallies. Casanova turned his persuasive talents to deflowering nuns. Mahatma Gandhi used his to argue for the principle of non-violence. Bill Clinton sold his way into the White House and out

in business. In the US, millions more are employed in sales jobs than in manufacturing, let alone marketing, strategy, finance or any of the other parasitic business functions. All over the world, from the most basic to the most advanced economies, selling is the horse that pulls the cart of business. It is as ancient as the Athenian agora, as modern as the Gilt Groupe.

**N**ow sales faces a new threat, besides academic snobbery. Using vast databases of personal details, marketers can slice us all into ever slimmer customer groups. They can divine from our keystrokes and swipes what we might buy next. Targeted ads and store design can do the rest.

The art and science of selling is undergoing its greatest revolution since the late 19th century, when America's travelling pedlars were replaced by new corporate armies

