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The living culture that drives innovation

René Carayol goes on an adventure of inspired thinking and innovation—with a twist

Having just received an invitation for yet another Innovation Day, it was tempting to either just ignore it or just delete it. However, there was something different about this particular invitation. It was from the Inspired Thinking Group (ITG). The invitation mentioned the enticing prospects one would expect from a leading 'new age' marketing services agency; 3D Scanning, Mirror Technology, Interactive Floor Screens, a Drone Zone and the Robot Room.

ITG recognised early on that marketing and technology have become synonymous today and are inextricably linked, and that one cannot be thinking about any form of marketing without simultaneously considering what can actually be achieved utilising the latest technological advances.

This is far more than just a strategic consideration: this demands a culture that thrives on innovation. This is much easier said than done—even today.

This is a business that has creativity and innovation seeping from all of its pores.

When serial entrepreneur Simon Ward set up ITG some eight years ago, he started with a blueprint of the culture that would feed innovation and be comfortable with rapid change.

They have gone on to build a rock-solid reputation for both top-drawer customer service and the ability to exceed customer's expectations by bringing an innovative approach to all they do. They have won numerous, well-deserved industry awards ranging from their stellar growth to their sustained innovation. From the outside of its funky HQ at Fort Dunlop in

Birmingham in the Midlands of the UK, it gives no clue to the magic that is constantly churned out by its young, driven and highly motivated workforce.

Many now get that the primary and perhaps defining platform for sustained business success is a healthy and positive culture. Despite this increasingly common consensus, there are still far too many toxic working environments with low morale and consequent underperformance.

Many attempts at driving cultural change tend to deliver ambitious mission statements that end up on grandiose plaques in prominent places but that are rarely prominent in the hearts and minds of those who matter—the workforce and the customers.

Simon is a unique—and understated—special leader who likes to shun the limelight and enable all praise and recognition to be directed at all those who work for him.

He is a bit of a maverick who likes to take on the things that others say can't be done.

In 2016, he could no longer hide his 'light under a bushel', as the management consultancy EY recognised him with their annual and globally recognised award of UK Entrepreneur of the Year.

His humility and modesty have never allowed him to fully capitalise on this award and definitely not boast about it.

I instantly decided to attend with a few colleagues to enable them to better understand how innovation and creativity is best incubated, fuelled and brought to commercial fruition. And, hopefully, catch up with Simon and - more importantly - catch him in action.

When searching for "what culture and values do we require to be successful?", far too many of

us settle for the bland and neutral that no-one will argue with, but that are also so 'vanilla' that they could be on the reception wall of any business. ITG went for broke. They didn't bother about trying to make it measurable or sensible. They were determined and committed to be the best—period. Consensus was the last thing on Simon's mind. He wanted to win, he deserved a 'band of believers', and needed to put the cynics off—and instantly.

As they say, "luck is preparation waiting for an opportunity". It's always constructive and illuminating to both observe and experience just how much work goes on behind the scenes to build and maintain a culture that is both values-led and performance-driven. It's best delivered by being designed from the 'bottom up' to foster constant innovation without ever losing sight of exceptional customer service: a rare and distinctive combination.

My colleagues were extremely excited, but I was hoping they would come away less starstruck with the brilliant technologies, and perhaps with a deeper conviction that it's the 'laser like' focus on the culture and not the product that affords sustainable creativity and innovation.

On arrival at the Fort, we found ourselves being greeted with an authentic smile from the two gregarious receptionists along with their unmissable customer centricity. They were curious, helpful and humorous. It did not feel like the reception of an extremely successful and fast-growing £100 million business - it was much more like visiting a new friend who was really looking forward to seeing you.

This was innocently enjoyed but perhaps not instantly recognised by my rather geeky colleagues.



“Luck is preparation waiting for an opportunity”

In a flash, Sue Mountford (one of the MD's at ITG) appeared from nowhere. This showcase of an Innovation Day was her baby and it was clearly obvious that she was in high demand and extremely stretched. She warmly welcomed all of us, despite the large number of the first wave of visitors for a very full day. Her infectious smile and self-deprecation conveyed a beautifully genuine greeting, putting the excited arrivals gathered in the reception at ease.

She moved ahead swiftly with both purpose and poise, and we were all soon delivered to our designated hosts for the morning tour. The tour would take us to various locations to view and experience the exciting and ground-breaking technologies being presented by the keen (and well-chosen) partner companies of ITG.

Senior marketers from brands such as M&S, Pizza Hut, Sainsbury's and Renault were joined by local schoolchildren to experience the drones, virtual reality parachuting, full-body laser

scanners and 3D printers, illusory dressing room mirrors that show shoppers in outfits without them having to change, and robots from around the world.

Having impressionable schoolchildren attend an event like this again demonstrates the inclusive vision of ITG, as they will leave stimulated and perhaps one day join this greenhouse of creativity, or search for an environment like this.

Incredibly but brilliantly, this was all taking place while the 600 or so ITG employees that are based at their HQ were occupied working at full pelt.

Many organisations might have preferred to have taken their guests and existing customers to a pristine and specialist exhibition site where there was more space and capacity for all to just mill around and see whatever they preferred to see.

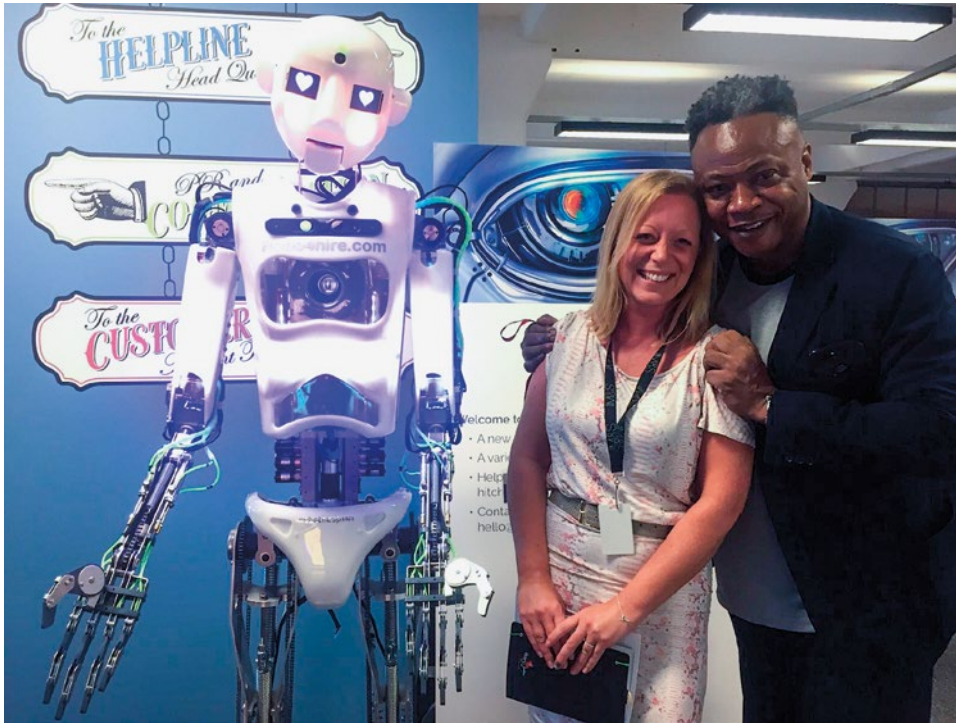
It was pure genius to host this at 'home', as this enabled all to breathe and smell the culture

of ITG in action. The atmosphere somehow felt comfortably fast moving, and everybody seemed to know precisely what their role was and then just got on with it. There was recreational space in abundance and many relaxed areas where people could gather to share their downtime with whomever was present, whilst informally (and, maybe, inadvertently), connecting and collaborating.

The HQ is spread over three floors with lots of rich insignia and branding, especially from the impressive collection of retailers that they serve.

My colleagues were lost in the uniqueness and relevance of the products that were on show, but perhaps noticed less about the verve and energy that they were presented with.

As I watched and observed my colleague's complete immersion and involvement in each of the presentations. Their wonderment being driven as much by the emotive and understated narrative of ITG's well-chosen partners, as the



ingenious gadgets and future thinking. It was a masterclass of collaboration in action. Everyone gets the logic of collaboration, but not many actually pull it off. ITG demonstrated that it's about the better use of resources and competencies, better decision-making and, vitally, better outcomes for their customers.

All present soon felt as though those presenting also worked for ITG. This was not luck—these are the benefits of selecting partners not just for their excellence but for their cultural 'fit'. The presenters were experts with their

technology offerings and we were left in their company for 20 minutes at a time. We soon noticed that there was a complete lack of jargon and acronyms, but everyone who presented was both proud and passionate.

It was becoming clear that this was also no accident—his was a living and breathing culture that feeds innovation. These Innovation Days serve to remind all about continuing to challenge the status quo, and to retain an external antenna on what's new and relevant in the outside world.

Simon was quietly the most competitive of individuals, but it's not obvious or ever articulated. His chosen competition is as tough as it gets: it's himself. He is so demanding of himself whilst, at the same time, consistently displaying his authentic generous and supportive side.

This competitive spirit pervades the business and drives a fixation on execution, which is what is behind their relentless desire to service their customers. This huge obsession with the customer also lubricates an inherent ability to absorb new methods of working, enabling change and adaptability. This is vital as it will prevent the formation of hard-wired processes that can disable once responsive and flexible cultures.

These clever and popular Innovation Days are a great way of stimulating and provoking new ideas and thinking for both the invited clients of ITG, but by having them 'in-house' it also encourages their people to remain alert to new possibilities as well as to fresh, new thinking.

By now, we had become accustomed to Simon quietly appearing in his usual, understated mode. He was around but not in charge. He was providing easygoing support and it became evident what makes this ultra-generous leader tick.

Simon was calm but meticulous to near obsession about what might have felt to many as the 'little things'. His attention to the seemingly little things were clearly manifested in Sue's approach at the start of the day. He remembered first names and referred to many by them throughout our visit.

One of the real moments of truth in any business is when asking the boss to describe the culture they are building. My insight is to focus on the clues they give on the behaviour not the outcome. When Simon talks about what he's looking for, it's so insightful and inspirational – it's never the numeric results, but it's always the behavioural outcome he desires. He espouses emotions like trust, energy, belief and high morale.

A little too good to be true? I needed to speak to some of the 'workers'.

By hanging around one of the refreshment areas, I was soon engaged in many conversations. Everybody was happy to talk about working at ITG.

"Nothing is ever perfect and this is well understood and absorbed at ITG. With a fast-moving 'finished beats perfect' approach, things will occasionally go wrong," agreed two

team leaders, nearly in stereo. “Knowing and accepting this is far easier said than done? This requires resilience from the leaders and a calm but determined approach to dealing with failure and disappointment.”

“We know and feel that we will not be hammered when things go wrong, but we will be supported to fix it. We will also get some straightforward feedback.”

The six of them laughed out loud. This drives their desire to try harder without the fear of failure or reprisal. A positive desire to win is so much more effective than an endemic fear of failure.

Further probing led me to believe that there is little evidence of micro-management at ITG, as this can quickly dampen creative spirits. The leadership team is empowered by having the authority to never have to seek permission. This ‘authority’ is also handed down to their teams. This is far more than delegation of tasks, as its local decision-making that has been galvanised. This builds trust throughout the firm. This is where the people ethos really hits home.

This extended trust is not without its inherent risks. But when things don’t go to plan, the leadership resists the tendency to wrestle back control. Strong leaders continue to give authority while providing the necessary coaching through learning from the missteps.

By now my technically gifted colleagues were at last, far more dazzled by the incredibly positive working environment than they were about the ground-breaking products and services on display.

Hallelujah!

But there was something bothering me about this wonderful environment. What if Simon was no longer there? Virgin without Branson or Apple without Jobs?

There is always the real danger of a growing reliance and dependency on a forceful, charismatic and popular entrepreneur at the helm. Simon’s natural approach to pushing authority down ensures that the business can run smoothly without him. Let’s be clear, he will always bring something unique, special and different with his inspiring vision for the

business and his infectious positive energy to all he meets, but he’s built an extraordinary, self-sustaining culture.

“We put on a lot of theatricals, including an 8ft stand-up comedian robot called Titan, who went down a storm. But there was a serious message behind the event: that marketers constantly need to innovate to continue attracting customers,” Simon told me.

“This extends beyond the products they sell, to the way they engage their customers with their marketing. Many retail marketers are too busy driving their business to fully get to grips with emergent technologies, and that’s where we come in.

“Our marketing services are built around innovation, and our teams are constantly investigating the latest technology for retail. We tried to make sure there was something for everyone – even me. I got to shake hands with G3PO!” Simon said, smiling broadly. ▲

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