Innovation for development

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Does India have an academic culture that encourages innovation? It is important that our economic ambitions are rooted in a policy that nurtures creativity.

Photo:R. V. Moorthy

KEY TO SUCCESS: Third-year Students of Delhi College of Engineering with their latest innovation, Supermileage Vehicle. Photo:R. V. Moorthy

In the 15th Century, China reigned supreme in innovations. And hence was a global power. It produced a variety of arms and ammunition. Tea, porcelain and its silk were sought all over the world. It had the largest fleet of dhows. In 1421, Emperor Zhudi died. Immediately afterwards, the Mandarians feared losing their primacy to explorers. China shut its doors to the rest of the world.

Another great innovator of the 1970s, Xerox was on the verge of taking over a new world of digital electronics. But after its innovative champions died, Xerox lost its primacy in the world of computers. Others took over with their bigger and more sustained innovations.

Both stories have a similar lesson, said Gerard J. Tellis of the Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California. The product champions faded and inner power struggle in organisations and systems destroyed the environment needed for innovation and new product design. This was the first point he placed before a meet organised last week to mark the launch of an Indian chapter of the Product Development and Management Association (PDMA), the premier global advocate for product development and management professionals. Its mission is to improve the effectiveness of individuals and organisations in product development and management and to foster continuous innovation.

Prof. Tellis had a significant point: "We have so many departments in universities, but not one for innovation. That's what my centre does. I take two separate courses in innovation and what it means to an organisation," he notes.

At the meet, professionals highlighted one point: India does not have many global branded innovations to display. Not that there is dearth of talent. Indians abroad do innovations and do it successfully to make successful enterprises.

So what does it take to innovate?

Dr. M.S. Ananth, Director, IIT-Madras, which hosted the PDMA meet, had this to say: ``Innovation can be born out of an ideas factory or come from a magic garden. If it comes out of an ideas factory we need a hands-on approach directing people to do the things the way they ought to be done.

If it's the product of a magic garden, we need a hands-off approach, let people do their own thing and hope something innovative turns up."

To create an atmosphere for innovation and new product development, IIT-Madras got a 6.5 acre-plot from the State Government, where a research park would come up.

The brains of IIT would work with the industry towards this end. For improving the right brain activity "which is the creative, imaginative side of the brain," a programme on engineering design had been evolved.

"We hope this magic garden approach will produce innovations." The PDMA meet in Chennai had a few tangible ends to achieve: Engineering meets marketing: in the sense designers, manufacturers and marketers could meet in a single forum to produce innovations that the market needs.

Trying to infuse the idea of product development, new products management and innovation among industry and academics and make them PDMA members and take its benefits including a certification that the association offers.

Making educational institutions talk about and include product innovation and develop it as part of the course.

PDMA leaders who were in town unanimously agreed that it is hard to have a separate course for these ends, but the concept can be weaved into the existing curriculum. A few courses on innovation are on the anvil.

"We can certainly create a course with elements of innovation, new product design and management for a university, if there are takers," said Hamsa Thota, president-elect of PDMA in the United States