

Book Review

Andrew Carey.

Inside Project Red Stripe: Incubating Innovation and Teamwork at *The Economist*
Axminster, UK: Triarchy Press, 2008.

(Also available free on-line at <http://www.projectredstripe.blogspot.com>.)

By Howard A. Doughty

About a lifetime ago, the name of Stewart Brand was well known in a number of circles. He was connected in various ways to an array of countercultural and/or cyber-cultural icons including former California governor and current attorney-general Jerry Brown, Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, LSD advocate Timothy Leary, anti-orthodox anthropologist Gregory Bateson, media guru Marshall McLuhan, geodesic dome creator Buckminster Fuller, population bomber Paul Ehrlich, growth limiters Dennis and Donella Meadows, Hopi, Navajo and assorted other Indians, and any number of semi-mystical, world-saving, consciousness-raising, primitive-computer geeks and diverse hippies and Yippies. He was also an extraordinary entrepreneur, marketing himself above all. He is probably remembered most for his innovative periodicals, *The Co-evolution Quarterly* and *The Whole Earth Catalogue* in their many and varied manifestations. He is also credited with the invention of the phrase “personal computer.”

For the past twenty years or so, Stewart Brand has won new audiences. He has been a conference organizer for Royal Dutch/Shell, Volvo and AT&T. He co-founded the Global Business Network. He maintains that he hasn't changed, although he now endorses nuclear energy and genetically modified organisms. He participates in “wrenching” debates about information technology, copyright laws, intellectual property, and so on. Maybe it's the times that have been changing, and not necessarily in a good way. Stewart Brand would know. In 1996, he helped create the Long Now Foundation with one of its projects being the building of a 10,000 year clock.

I open this review with a reference to Brand because he seems to me to be an exemplar of the kind of innovative leadership that is (or should have been) the subject of the book under review. In *II Cybernetic Frontiers* (1974), Brand brought together modified versions of previously published works. One was a 1973 article from *Harper's* magazine, entitled “Unbinding—Conversations with Meta-naturalist Gregory Bateson.” The other was an expansion of a 1972 article for *Rolling Stone* called “Fanatic Life & Symbolic Death Among the Computer Bums.” As a former student of Bateson, I was delighted with the transcribed chats that Brand had with him, but they are not directly relevant here.

The computer bums are different. They were a group of early programmers who hung around the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the early 1960s. They were on a very long leash from their employer and, at first, passed some of their considerable “free time” inventing what was surely one of the first computer games called Spacewar.

It started out as a pastime, grew into an obsession and eventually became what Ricky James Roberson called a “way of life.” That assessment is probably excessive, but the point remains that a small group of proto-hippie-geeks showed that, left to their own devices, they could channel their considerable creative energies into a project that, in many ways, anticipated the digital age (and a few of its discontents), and they had fun doing it. The people in question established a largely self-selected group, and went on to careers of various sorts in software development, sales and marketing. Like Brand, they were energetic and idealistic. They recognized, more than most of their contemporaries, the kind of trouble toward which the planet was heading, and they were inspired to create not only a game, but a plausibly democratic approach to computing technology that would, in their wilder dreams, lead to a new, personally and environmentally healthy, highly populist application of cybernetics and what was emerging as information technology. Much that they had vaguely in mind has come to pass. Much that they had specifically in mind has been surpassed.

When I reflect on their youthful, carefree, boisterous, unrestricted ingenuity and their indifference to limits imposed by narrower minds, I feel a measure of admiration. Sure, some of their ideas were inexcusably naïve, and others were far more in synchrony with the institutions they wanted to reform, if not transform, than they may have thought; still, they had largely laudable visions and just enough clarity of perception to make them communicable.

The Economist Group is a different sort of beast. A collection of private companies that is engaged in publishing and other service industries, it is mainly known for the weekly newsmagazine that bears its name. *The Economist* holds to a “classical liberal” ideology. It is nothing if not durable, having been published regularly since 1843, and has made no discernible change in its political outlook. It adapted well to new circumstances. It changed its format to suit new tastes. As the millennium changed and the Internet was well in place, its owners evidently decided some innovation was once again in order.

Inside Project Red Stripe provides an account of the innovation strategy that followed. Its author, Andrew Carey, is a self-described “organizational anthropologist,” who undertook the work in the same manner as many anthropologists undertake field-work or, perhaps, as some sociologists engage in an exercise in participant-observation. He was, in short, “in” but not “of” the project. Immediately disappointing is the fact that the book reads rather like a set of field notes containing useful insights, revealing descriptions and hints of analysis, but remains very much a work in progress. I was disheartened that the bits and scraps had not been gathered together, sorted, arranged properly and presented with a coherent and explicit theme.

Andrew Carey, of course, is aware of such criticisms and rejects them. He explains at the outset that trends such as cultural relativism and postmodernism have undermined anthropologists’ self-confidence in offering an externally verifiable, objective narrative that would somehow explain what was being observed. So, he says, he declines to judge. Instead, he goes on, all he could do was to write about “her own experience of living

among these people and to record her own inner process.” (The use of the female third-person possessive pronoun was, I suppose, a nod to feminism as well.)

I was not greatly impressed. There is as much arrogance in assuming the importance of subjective accounts as there is in pretending to have rendered an accurate objective analysis. I will refrain from saying that personalized interpretations have their own kind of pretentiousness, or may simply be an excuse for intellectual laziness; but, it takes some conscious self-restraint to do so. My chief concern, however, is not stylistic or methodological. Moreover, I do not wish to come across as some sort of crude empiricist, wedded to outdated positivism. If Carey has chosen to write a book that swings wildly between being a diary, an essay, and series of bullets all peppered by asides, nudges and winks, then there is nothing to be done. If it is possible to separate the two, then I am more interested in what he is talking about, than the way in which he chooses to talk.

So, here is the story as well as I can winkle it out (and, to be fair, Carey does provide a “timeline” as well as an introductory list of “DRAMATIS PERSONÆ”) to help us through his tale.

It seems that in April, 2006, the Economist Group’s “Internet Strategy Group” decided to improve the corporate visibility on the Internet. The Chief Information Officer (CIO), Mike Seery, floated the idea of recruiting a team of half a dozen Economist employees (himself included), giving them their salaries, a \$200,000 budget and the task of coming up with “an innovative and web-based product, service or business model” within six months. In my view, they failed. Carey disagrees. It is, however, the reasons for their failure that may cast some light on issues of leadership, team building and innovation.

Before carrying on, it must be acknowledged that the judgement of failure is not universal. One blogger spoke of Project Red Stripe (hereafter PRS) as “an unmitigated failure” because it failed to complete its task and “imploded” after six months. Andrew Carey replied at some length. His main points of rebuttal concerned the team’s decision not to launch one allegedly excellent project out of worry about committing senior management to a “high profile venture” without full senior management approval. The project in question was an on-line philanthropy site which would unite “NGOs, professional advisers and corporate and private donors in a not-for-profit model.” The other was a “social networking site” which senior management expressly rejected. Whether through timidity, or because of explicit dismissal, however, the intended objective was not accomplished.

What went wrong with the project or the book or both?

Carey admits (or boasts) that he wants to “avoid a chronological narrative,” and has cobbled together his chapters in a “rather arbitrary” manner. There is an explanation that this will allow readers to take their “own path through the text and dip in and out at will.” I suppose this directive is rooted in some sort of literary anarchism, but it does not so much free readers to sample as the mood directs as it permits some essential points to be obscured or avoided.

One of these is power.

PRS began on 29 January, 2007. For the first month, participants played at “team-building exercises.” If the participants were going to be spontaneous and creative, they needed to be trained to do so. The CIO had already spent nine months planning for creativity, and the five added people had to go to a virtual Boot Camp in order to “get” the idea.

Meanwhile, an open invitation was given to the relevant universe to submit proposals and ideas for proposals. So, the second month was devoted to sifting through other people’s submissions. One-third of the time had already been spent, and the only real consequence seems to have been that the group had spent so much time worrying about process that it began to lose whatever self-confidence it might have developed in a less structured “incubator.”

A great deal of energy seems to have been expended on questions of leadership. It should be obvious to anyone with the wit to flip a light switch that Mike Seery was the leader. He had dreamed up the idea, spent nine months planning it and recruited the other members of the team. For a time, leadership seems to have taken the form of a “facilitator.” So, conversations like this were allowed to happen:

Tom: “I don’t think you need a facilitator. We should be able to trust ourselves to think.”

Stewart: “It was helpful having a facilitator [at a previous meeting] though.”

Steven: “I’ll do it.”

Stewart: “I don’t want you to.”

Mike Seery: “I don’t want anyone to be facilitator because it suggests they’re not interested in having an idea.”

Tom: “Imagine if we find we can do it ourselves. Then we don’t need to go and get one each time.

Stewart: “There’s a multi-million dollar industry in facilitating. They must be there for a reason.”

Mike: “If we’re going to do it ourselves, let’s do it for an idea that doesn’t matter.”

Tom: “I think we should see if we can work together as a team without having someone to hold our hand.”

Mike: “Even if we do decide to facilitate it ourselves, I don’t think we should do so tomorrow. We need to go away and do some research.”

Now, remember please, that these people — all highly trained, well-paid professionals, working in one of the world's most sophisticated information corporations — had already been “at it” for two full months. At the end of six months, Mike concluded that no form of rotating leadership or consensus model would have worked: “there were more people who wanted to be led, rather than lead.” What else would you expect from a senior manager?

As far as the actual content of the project is concerned, after some loose (and rather silly) talk about “motivations” and “inspiration,” Carey let's us in on the secret — the evolving project itself.

As mentioned, in the end, the options boiled down to two. The stronger was plainly something called “Lughenjo” (originally “Bavaria”), which was based on the idea that there was a lot of bad in the world and that it should be made good, especially for children. The RSP people displayed mostly appropriate emotions when they spoke about:

- The need to get children more interested in what they are doing;
- The importance of equipping First World kids with the skills to survive in a globalized world;
- Doing something to help kids with financial literacy;
- Giving children more information about food, health and so on;
- Dealing with issues of access to education, violence, bullying and gender discrimination in schools.

CIO Mike, the leader, insisted that “children don't want to take an active role in deciding who their leaders are.”

The articulated goals included:

- Getting all 120 million remaining children in the world into primary education;
- Helping disadvantaged children achieve their full potential by empowering them through knowledge, activity and community (later changed to helping poor kids take control of their lives);
- Halve global truancy by 2020.

Mike seemed to have second thoughts, and contributed: “Allow kids to create a better world by giving them the tools to make conscious political decisions.”

Now, who could disagree with any of that?

The problem, of course, was that they were running out of time, and the fear factor set in. What if they gave a charity and no one contributed? Tom said: “If we only get 2,000 people from among *Economist* readers, I'll think we've fucked this.” Stewart added: “I'm much more pessimistic. I don't think there are loads of *Economist* readers who are thinking, ‘If only *The Economist* did charity, I'd give money to it!’”

Soon after, on 14 May, Mike pitched the idea to the publisher of *The Economist*. Then, “Lughenjo” was scrapped.

No matter, there was a Plan “B,” which Carey calls “A Facebook for Good.” It was to have been a social networking site, entitled “HiSpace.”

Tom assessed it brilliantly: “We started off doing this for hippy reasons, couldn’t make it work and now we’re going to make money from it. That seems really cool to me. I like it.” Alas, “HiSpace” was shot down as well.

I am now going to take something back. I said earlier that I was “not impressed” by this collection of field notes. I am still not; but, I think there is a book somewhere in here. What’s more, I think Andrew Carey might be just the fellow to write it. He has, after all, a cleverly constructed sense of self-deprecating humour, which is what is needed to come to grips with corporate group work.

On page 160, Andrew Carey quips: “I know you won’t take me seriously unless I at least mention Peter Drucker. So here he comes.”

My heart-felt response was to mutter to myself, “I have been trying to take you seriously, but now that I must endure some of the old Drucker’s pithiest quotes, I can no longer do so.” I got over it. And, in a concluding paragraph, he tells us that he “makes a tremendous effort to appear nonchalant and likes to be liked. He says that he has worked in and around the publishing industry most of his life. He also says that he “trained as a psychotherapist before returning to type.” All those experiences and skills could be put to good use by taking his field notes in hand, adding a little structure, generating some serious questions about power relations.

Of course, as I said, Andrew Carey insists that the RSP was “not an unmitigated failure.” Some things were learned. The team did come up with some ideas that seem to be appearing, as if by osmosis, on *The Economist* website. Besides, as Carey quotes Russell Ackoff: “managers cannot learn from doing things right; only from doing things wrong.”

Of course, there’s at least one other point of view. On March 13, 2007 at 5:05 pm (time zone unknown), “Paul” said: “How about this for innovation – get rid of 90% of managers”. After all, the computer bums at MIT had no trouble without them. They spontaneously pursued ideas that interested them. Self-organized, self-motivated, mutually supportive and radically democratic groups can work miracles of innovation. In any case, it appears that the “incubation of innovation” is not likely to be repeated at *The Economist*.