

TATA

REVIEW

APRIL 2014



Going for GROWTH

The past, present and future of ten
Tata companies, as seen through
the eyes of their chief executives

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‘Innovation needs mavericks and Everest climbers’

Ravi Arora, vice president, Tata Quality Management Services, has been closely involved with the group’s innovation journey over the past seven years. In this article, he talks about the various aspects of innovation as practised in group companies

Tata Quality Management Services (TQMS) has been driving innovation in association with the Tata Group Innovation Forum (TGIF). We have a team of four members who help to implement the forum’s decisions. Group-wide initiatives and programmes have been instituted by the team to serve as triggers to spark innovation.

One of the most popular programmes initiated across the group is Tata InnoVista, through which we try to inspire and motivate young middle-level managers to take up innovation projects. An amazing platform, it enables the capturing of new and innovative developments in the group — everything that people are proud of and want to tell others

about. The information is compiled on the Tata InnoVista website and is accessible to any Tata employee desirous of knowing about new developments happening across the group. Tata InnoVista begins in November and we get about 2,000 projects from Tata group companies across the world. In January, the online process of selection, which has been developed by CMC and involves more than 300 senior Tata executives, begins.

By February-March, 200 cases are selected that are presented across seven places spanning the US, the UK, Southeast Asia and India. The winners then come to Mumbai for the final round and the award ceremony. This year, the Tata InnoVista award ceremony was held on April 23.

An important step last year was to encourage rewards and recognition at the company level, and not only at the group level. This year, for instance, companies like Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), CMC and Tata Consultancy Services conducted internal InnoVista-like programmes. Both JLR and CMC even call their programmes ‘Internal InnoVista’. They got



“Innovation is like yoga; it may not be necessary for survival, but is useful for long-time sustainability.”

Ravi Arora, vice president, Tata Quality Management Services

hundreds of applications and about 10 to 20 percent were selected and sent for Tata InnoVista.

If more Tata companies initiate InnoVista-type processes internally and send the best ones to the group-level InnoVista, it will inspire more employees and enable the capture of a larger number of innovations. Many companies, including Tata AutoComp Systems and Tata Steel Europe, are considering the initiation of similar programmes next year.

Tata InnoVerse, an innovation hub, has been built on the premise that senior Tata executives should regularly identify, define and articulate problems and challenges faced by their company and engage Tata managers to find innovative solutions. Tata InnoVerse serves as a platform on which the problems can potentially be presented to 540,000 Tata managers.

We also have a sub-programme called Challenges Worth Solving, which is a high-decibel use of the InnoVerse platform. About a dozen companies participate in this programme and we take up one problem per firm, provided by its CEO/MD. The problem is communicated through various forums including TataWorld and tata.com to ensure that the right people — the experienced and the mavericks — provide solutions. We have a LinkedIn community of people who have attempted to crack these challenges. Tata InnoMeter is a measurement system to assess the state of innovation in a company — how good is the culture of innovation and its processes, and how important and strategic is innovation to the entity.

We also have smaller initiatives such as the InnoMission, where teams (about 15-20) of senior executives from companies visit different countries to learn about new technologies taking root there. We have already had InnoMissions to the US, the UK, Japan and Israel. The last one was to Israel about three years ago. We also invite eminent speakers — the best minds — from institutions such as the Harvard Business School, the London Business School, the University of California, Los Angeles, Insead and McKinsey to spend two to three days with senior managers and share their knowledge and experience.

INNOVATION YOGA

Innovation is like yoga; it may not appear to be necessary for survival, but is useful for long-time sustainability. Many companies — like individuals — do learn it, but aren't able to spend time practising it.

To make this happen, we constantly try and engage senior management in innovation programmes. About five years ago, we used to spend more time talking about 'why innovation?' Everybody now knows why it is important. Even companies in the commodity space are participating and winning accolades in InnoVista.

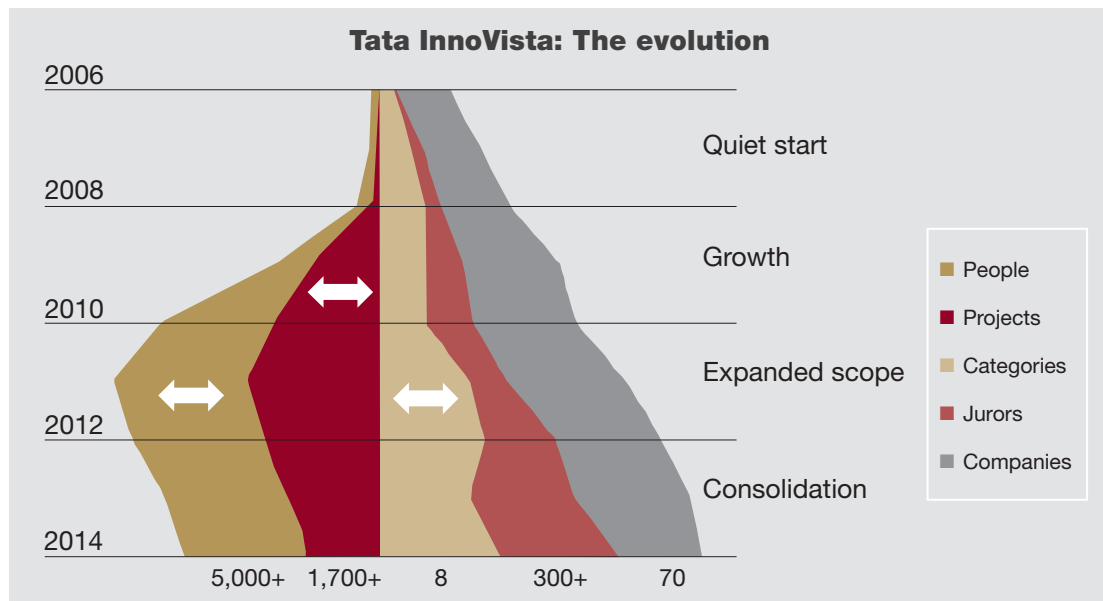
Innovation now gets a fair amount of timeshare and mindshare of the senior leadership in Tata group companies. In a few companies, it is discussed in boardrooms.

All group-wide innovation initiatives, other than InnoVista, require an engaging top management to ensure rigorous implementation. They are like coaches who have to be more disciplined than the teams. Companies that have demonstrated rigour in giving importance to innovating, implementing initiatives and identifying the right resources are reaping excellent benefits.

INNOVATION ENABLERS

Companies such as JLR and Titan Company provide good examples of implementing best practices in innovation. The latter, for instance, has something called 'innovation bazaar,' an ideas market place, where employees showcase select innovations, which triggers new innovations and collaborations.

Titan also has a programme called Interweave, an innovation enabler, which triggers collaborative ideas across four business units. The company also runs an Innovation School of Management, where 20 to 25 people from different units spend a few hours each week, learning about innovation and finding solutions to an innovation challenge. Experts and consultants take classes on ideation, innovation techniques and tools, mindset changes and execution. The participants are also taken to companies within and outside Bengaluru, which helps trigger new thinking. It is a unique



programme that has been in place for more than three years.

JLR also has an interesting programme in which employees are encouraged to come out with innovative ideas on Tata InnoVerse. Teams with selected ideas are then given two days to come out with prototypes. A recent example was the effective use of boot space for leisure purpose while the vehicle is parked.

OBSTACLES ON THE PATH TO INNOVATION

There is no company in the world that has perfected the art of innovation. Innovation needs a long-term view. Most companies know how to work on small improvements and incremental innovations, but they need to learn the art of working on long-term, radical innovation, which may not necessarily impact the quarterly results, but lead to an accrual of benefits over a longer term. To make this happen, firms need to find a way to commit resources to innovate. Most importantly, they need a brave and objective method to kill a project.

There are companies which feel that the market is down, morale is down and it is not the right time to work on innovation. Then, there are companies who spend time and resources, and manage to find funds for innovation even during bad times. Obviously, the latter spring up faster during the first showers or signs of

recovery, whereas the former would need many more showers to sprout. Programmes like Tata InnoVista and Tata InnoVerse PLUS have been designed to help companies maintain the rhythm of keeping a consistent focus and commitment towards innovation.

There are small nuggets of knowledge available within the group which promote innovation at team level. Titan, for instance, has a programme in which every functional head is allocated about ₹100,000 to fund small experiments leading to innovations. Once the funds are exhausted, they are replenished after they make a presentation to the senior leadership on how the funds were utilised.

It is important to assign the right resources: creative maverick people to think of new ideas; and Everest climbers who would be willing to take on the journey of completing the innovation, which is fraught with risks. The Dare to Try award in InnoVista attempts to spread this message to climbers and coaches alike. Looking ahead, I see senior executives across Tata group companies becoming more confident about managing the nebulous subject of innovation, yielding not only incremental innovations but also radical ones. This is important because the Tata portfolio in future and the markets it serves will demand a higher propensity to innovate. □

As told to Nithin Rao