Northumbria Research Link

Guiding idea generation in SMEs: What's vision got to do with it?

Abstract

It is known that new ideas are required if our organisations are going to survive and grow (Martins and Terblanche, 2003; Burns, 2008; Amabile et al, 1996). Without the ability to think differently firms quickly stagnate and decline (Cummings and Oldham, 1997; Hughes, 2003; Dickson, 2010). While it is understood that new ideas are vital to organisations there still remains a debate as to how our firms should guide or structure idea generation, indeed whether there should be any form of control at all (Leonard and Swap, 2005; Busco et al, 2012). Through in-depth qualitative research in a variety of SMEs this paper will show that a modicum of structure is necessary if idea generation is to be most effective. Building from this understanding the paper then goes on to argue that organisational "visions" (Gdanz, 2009, Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992) can be used to provide broad, loose frameworks for ideas. It is hoped that this paper will encourage further research into the ways in which visions can be used to guide idea generation.

Introduction and structure of the paper

Today's knowledge-based organisations depend for their success on creativity, innovation, discovery and inventiveness (Martins and Terblanche, 2003). Markets are subject to rapid change and fierce competition (Klijn and Tomic, 2010) and in these settings long-term performance arguably depends on an organisation's ability to think differently (Burns, 2008). This extends to small medium organisations (SMEs) who, due to resource constraints and intense competition, depend on ideas in order to survive (McAdam and Keogh, 2004; Banks et al, 2002). With this as the context, the ability to generate new ideas is vital as it serves as an underpinning for the introduction of new products and services (Amabile et al, 1996), finding organisational efficiencies (Houghton and DiLiello, 2009; Pullen et al, 2009), marketing products and brands (Powell and Ennis, 2007) and, perhaps most importantly, organisational survival (Martins and Terblanche, 2003). Without new ideas all organisations, irrespective of their size or sector, will stagnate and decline (Cummings and Oldham, 1997; Hughes, 2003; Dickson, 2010).

Although useful contributions have been made to the creativity and innovation literature by a wide range of researchers and writers including Penaluna et al (2009), Amabile et al (1996), Johnson

(2010), Politis (2005), Klijn and Tomic (2010) and Catmull (2008) this remains a developing subject area, particularly in terms of how organisations can structure or guide idea generation (Leonard and Swap, 2005; Hitt et al, 1996; O'Gorman and Doran, 1999). The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which organisational visions (Gdanz, 2009, Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992) can be used to guide or otherwise shape idea generation. While the present literature surrounding idea generation explores the concept of leadership in some detail (see Catmull, 2008; Kempster and Cope, 2010; Politis, 2005 among others) little attention has been given to whether the 'vision' i.e. the statement or communication outlining the direction of the organisation (Gdanz, 2009) can provide an appropriate framework to support the production of *relevant* ideas.

In order to build a persuasive case this paper will begin by defining the term idea generation, separating it from the understandings of creativity and innovation. Once the key terminology has been established attention will turn to a review of the present literature surrounding the guidance of idea generation, relating this to the 'visioning' literature as and where appropriate. Following a brief discussion of the methods adopted by this study the findings section will provide empirical evidence about the role that organisational visions play in guiding idea generation. The implications of these findings will be debated and possible areas of future research outlined.

Defining creativity and innovation

The current literature often confuses the terms 'idea generation', 'creativity' and 'innovation'. Without a clear understanding of them it will be difficult to set out the state of the current literature and make a compelling contribution to the field. Definitions of creativity often focus on the nature of thought processes and intellectual activity used to generate new insights or solutions to problems (see Martins and Terblanche, 2003). Others suggest that creativity is simply the 'generation of new ideas' (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), or believe that creativity is a social process that relies on fluid, open structures and a supportive culture (Davis and Scase, 2000).

Perhaps most helpfully, current definitions almost unanimously separate understandings of creativity and innovation into idea 'production' and idea 'implementation' respectively (see Amabile, 2006). This understanding is extended by further sources that define innovation as the intentional introduction and application of ideas, processes or products (West and Farr, 1990). From this evidence it can be suggested that creativity and innovation exist as part of the same system with the former preceding the latter.

Separating 'idea generation' from creativity is altogether more challenging. As stated above, certain sources believe that creativity is simply the production or generation of new ideas (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; Amabile, 2006) but it can be argued that this definition is too simplistic. The processes of creativity involve idea filtering and evaluation stages and these unquestionably require different skills and processes to those associated with the initial generation of ideas (De Bono, 1970; Penaluna et al, 2009). As a result of this there is a need to separate 'idea generation' as a term in order to explore the factors which affect it. Idea generation itself is the very first stage of the creative process and involves pulling information, concepts and experiences together in order to produce something 'new' (Staber, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Banks et al, 2002). As a result of the different skills attached to the initial generation of ideas it is useful to be able to define and explore it separately from the broader creative process. Although useful, this discussion poses one final question that must be answered; what is an idea?

Drawing from the literature including Ross (1951), Locke (1690) and Steiner (1988) it can be argued that for the purposes of this paper an idea is, "a tangible thought or suggestion which may or may not be expressed verbally but nevertheless adds to, transforms or manipulates current information, shared understandings or views in some substantial way." It is very important to highlight that the study from which this paper has arisen was not concerned with how ideas are implemented (innovation), or indeed how they are filtered or otherwise evaluated in organisations. The study, and hence this paper, concentrates on the factors that affect the *generation* of ideas in organisations.

The guidance of idea generation and organisational visions: Reviewing the literature

While the concepts of creativity and innovation are relatively well established within the business and management literature (see De Bono, 1970; Osborn, 1953; Davis and Scase, 2000; Roffe, 1999; Pullen et al, 2009), it is important to understand that our knowledge of this field is by no means complete. Researchers have attempted to describe and model the factors that influence idea generation and creativity such as the need for encouragement, freedom and challenging work (Amabile et al, 1996; Woodman et al, 1993) although these interpretations are now somewhat dated. Despite the informative nature of these studies more recent literature (Catmull, 2008; Chaharbaghi and Cripps, 2007; De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007; Jaussi and Dionne, 2003) has indicated a wider range of factors which are thought to influence idea generation in organisations. It can be argued that new interpretations are therefore required which take the full breadth of these

factors into account if researchers are to fully understand the issues which impact idea generation in organisations.

The notion of how one might guide or 'control' idea generation is hotly debated in the literature with a variety of authors advancing opinions about how important this is to the production of new ideas (Leonard and Swap, 2005; Hitt et al, 1996; Rudkin et al, 2001; Busco et al, 2012). Indeed there is a question as to the extent to which ideas can be 'controlled' at all (Baréz-Brown, 2006; Andriopoulos, 2001). Given previous empirical discussions on this front (Hitt et al, 1996; Busco et al, 2012), it is thought that organisations can exert some form of influence over idea generation and in this paper the word 'control' is meant to imply the way that managers and leaders guide, frame or structure idea generation towards a particular goal. It is not intended to indicate or describe any form of micro-management (Avramidis, 2008); simply the notion that organisations need to direct the production of ideas in one or more distinct direction(s) if they are to ultimately arrive at innovations.

Quantitative research into this issue indicates that firms attempting to impose strict financial controls are the least innovative (Hitt et al, 1996) while practitioner literature including Rudkin et al (2001) also advises that the generation of ideas can be hampered if tasks or projects are tightly framed. While one might therefore assume that a laissez-faire approach should be the order of the day, further research has claimed that an element of control is in fact a vital driver of idea production (Leonard and Swap, 2005). It is argued that too little monitoring can lead to poor levels of innovation, perhaps because 'good' ideas are not pushed through the decision making chain. Despite the literature containing a variety of views as to the level of control that is necessary for maximum idea generation, there is recognition that some form of guidance or structure is necessary. Without some form of structure it can be difficult to distinguish an idea from a fantasy (Reichenstein, 2005).

In light of the discussions above it is no surprise that there are thought to be a variety of ways of guiding idea generation in organisations. Practitioner literature vociferously argues that leaders need to engender particular behaviours in their organisations (Rudkin et al, 2001), whilst more traditional academic sources (Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Osborne, 1953; Amabile et al, 1996) make the case for mapping creative processes and/or building settings which encourage 'good' work. The reality of the situation conceivably incorporates elements from both schools of thought and it can be argued that because idea generation means coming up with things that are new (Powell and

DiMaggio, 1991), strict controls are indeed likely to stifle innovative thinking. In reality this is exactly what quantitative research into the field has already discovered (Hitt et al, 1996). Further sources make the point that leaders must not assume that their ideas are best (Amabile and Khaire, 2008); instead they suggest that those in leadership positions must provide 'paths through the bureaucracy', enabling their followers to think differently.

An interesting observation about the current literature is that despite an extensive search there are currently no research articles specifically focusing the use of organisational 'vision' as a method of controlling or guiding idea generation. Leadership as a theme is consistently highlighted throughout the idea generation literature (Catmull, 2008; Kempster and Cope, 2010; De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007; Ucbasaran et al, 2010), hence it is all the more surprising that the 'vision' generated by the 'leader' and/or leadership team does not appear to feature in this particular way. A reason for this could be the view that the notion of 'vision' does not sit well with the pursuit of new ideas. This issue will be discussed in greater detail at a later point of this paper.

Before going further it is vital to define 'vision'. The 'vision' is often explained as the direction of an organisation, set out by a leader, highlighting what needs to happen in order for it to reach its destination (Gdanz, 2009, Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992). Leaders must be able to clearly convey the current situation and indicate where they want people to be headed (Kets de Vries, 2003; Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002). It has been argued that when it comes to sustaining success, vision matters more than strategy because it can become a guiding force for day-to-day behaviour (Lipton, 2002). This is why one might naturally make the connection between visions and the guidance of idea generation. The thoughts of Lipton (2002) and Kets de Vries (2003) are echoed in other sources (Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005) although previous research indicates that vision statements are often incredible "squishy" topics for managers (Spragins, 1992). In other words it is believed to be difficult for a leader to create a robust vision that has relevance to all day-to-day operational roles and tasks. More recent contributions have attempted to address this specific concern whilst discussing the content of visions (Gdanz, 2009). The most compelling visions are thought to be more than slogans, with the best being goal-orientated and containing substance that is relevant to would-be followers as well as those in leadership positions (Gdanz, 2009; Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002). Building on this thought it can be argued that followers will be better engaged with a vision if they have had some sort of input into its formation (Powell and Dodd, 2007).

Current literature indicates that the most important part of the entire visioning process is communicating it as clearly as possible (Amabile and Gryskiewicz, 1987). Visions are meaningless unless followers are connected to them in a profound way (Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002). In order to support organisational creativity leaders must highlight the organisation as being innovative, supportive of new ideas and offensive (rather than defensive) in the marketplace (Amabile and Gryskiewicz, 1987, p35). On top of these considerations visions within SMEs (and indeed larger organisations) must evolve as the businesses themselves change (Powell and Dodd, 2007). Without this evolution it is thought that gaps will quickly emerge between the vision and reality, meaning that employees will struggle to relate their operational and professional activities back to the broader direction of the organisation. To encourage this evolution, leaders must not attempt to develop visions on their own (Lipton, 2002). By engaging primary stakeholders (such as employees and their representatives) in the visioning process leaders are thought to be better able to plan towards change (Schraeder, 2010; Kets de Vries, 2003).

The literature above is certainly informative and contains hints leading one to suspect that all organisations, including SMEs, might be able to utilise visions in some way to guide or control the production of new ideas. At the start of the literature review it was said that some element of 'control' is necessary if organisations are to produce appropriate and workable ideas (Leonard and Swap, 2005; Hitt et al, 1996; Rudkin et al, 2001; Busco et al, 2012) but the current literature does not discuss how this 'control' might be achieved in any great depth. It is understood that too little monitoring can lead to poor levels of innovation (Leonard and Swap, 2005) while firms that impose strict financial controls (Hitt et al, 1996) are generally the least innovative. This, however, is the limit of current understandings. Additional research is clearly needed in order to build an understanding of the frameworks or control mechanisms that best enable idea generation in organisations.

Further to the points identified above, the introduction highlighted that there is an informative and extensive literature discussing the ways in which leaders and leadership influences idea generation in organisations (Catmull, 2008; Kempster and Cope, 2010; De Jong and Den Hartog, 2007; Ucbasaran et al, 2010). It is therefore interesting to note that the connection has yet to be made between the visioning process and the guidance of idea generation. This is all the more surprising given the generally accepted view that 'visions' outline the direction of an organisation and what it needs to do to achieve its ambitions (Gdanz, 2009, Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Spragins, 1992; O'Gorman and Doran, 1999). It can be argued that the broad framework set out by the vision should theoretically provide an effective guide for the idea generation process, mitigating any issues

associated with micro-management (Avramidis, 2008) but still providing a defined path for employees to follow (O'Gorman and Doran, 1999; Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002).

Based on these discussions this paper will seek to investigate the following research questions;

1. How should the generation of ideas be guided or otherwise controlled in SMEs; how strict or loose should this structure be if organisations are to achieve an optimal level of idea production?
2. What role does the 'vision' play in the guidance of idea generation; do these statements, whether written or verbal in nature enable leaders and managers to provide a framework or structure for idea generation in SMEs?

Having outlined the basic debates in the literature surrounding the need to guide the idea generation process and linking these with the concept of vision, the next part of the paper will discuss the research methods adopted by this particular study.

Methods

The study that produced this data set was qualitative and inductive in nature. It was an exploratory research exercise with an ontological position between the relativist and nominalist schools of thought (Cooper, 1992; Collins, 1983). As stated in the introduction, ideas can be characterised as 'objects of the mind' or 'vague mental reconstructions of perceptions' (Magee, 2001) which leads to the conclusion that evidence of their existence may only be indirectly accessed (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). Truth in this study is likely to vary from place to place and from time to time (Collins, 1983) because knowledge in the information age exists not as an object, but as a series of networks and flows (Castells, 2000). This means that it is socially constructed, abstract and interspersed with personal understandings (Easterby-Smith et al, 2008; Bryman and Bell, 2007).

Due to the exploratory nature of this study a purposeful approach to sampling (Patton, 1990) was adopted with the research team seeking maximum variation (Creswell, 2007) between participating organisations. This approach helped to reduce the bias associated with collecting data solely in one sector of the economy or one specific geographic location. This being said the focus of the overarching study was on SMEs located in Devon and Cornwall due to access considerations (Thorpe and Holt, 2008) and the importance of these organisations to the local economies (Wetherill, 2010). While the findings presented in this paper provide intriguing thoughts which will help to guide future

research it would be inappropriate to claim that they represent a statistically reliable sample taken from across the UK.

Patton (1990) highlights that taking a purposeful approach to sampling by examining cases which illuminate the questions under study is likely to enable broader conclusions to be reached because data is gathered from a variety of settings and situations. This in turn allows for the production of more extensive generalisations and contributes to the development of formal theory. In order to build up rich contextual material it was decided to pursue micro, small and medium organisations across various sectors in order to achieve maximum variation in the sample. The participants in this study are given in **table one**.

Table One: Participating Organisations

Organisation	Sector	Approximate Size (f/t employees)	Location	
A	Healthcare	150	Devon	Medium
B	Arts	130	Devon	
C	Marine / Manufacturing	55	Cornwall	
D	Social Enterprise	45	Devon	Small
E	Public Sector	32	Cornwall	
F	Leisure	15	Cornwall	
G	Retail / Tourism	10	Cornwall	
H	Community Interest Company	4	Devon	Micro
I	Software Design	3	Devon	
J	Consultancy	3	Cornwall	

Fieldwork for this study used each organisation as a unit of analysis and consisted of a series of qualitative surveys which were followed up by semi-structured interviews. While surveys were distributed to all employees within a given firm, a stratified random sampling approach was used to select interviewees, ensuring that a diverse range of managerial and operational views were captured in each setting. Data was collected between March and December 2012, in total 104 useable surveys were returned and 57 interviews were undertaken.

Raw data obtained from the organisations listed in **table one** was collated, transcribed and then analysed using QSR NVIVO (version nine). Coding was undertaken in an open way, guided by the principles of grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), leading to rich narrative 'stories' of idea generation emerging from each setting. These stories allowed access to and

appreciation for the wider context (Tsoukas and Hatch, 1997), which is vital if qualitative enquiries are to produce meaningful analysis and discussion (Creswell, 2007; Easterby-Smith et al, 2008). The following findings emerged from the analysis of these stories.

Findings

In order to build an understanding of the role that vision plays in guiding the generation of ideas in SMEs it is necessary to begin this section by constructing an understanding of the 'control' mechanisms that operate in these settings. This will answer the first of the two research questions. The data emerging from primary research into this area showed a clear link between the presence of effective control mechanisms and the perceived number of ideas generated in any one setting. Evidence supporting this conclusion is given in **table two**.

Table Two: The Link between Control Mechanisms and Idea Generation

Organisation	I think that my organisation effectively guides or steers the idea generation process (number of responses)			Does this organisation generate lots of ideas (aggregate response from interviews)
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	
A	1	2	7	YES
B	3	6	7	YES
C	4	7	2	NO
D	0	1	18	YES
E	3	2	0	NO
F	3	3	3	NEUTRAL
G	0	3	0	NO
H	0	1	2	YES
I	0	0	4	YES
J	2	1	0	NO

It is important to state that the aggregate response presented in the right hand column of the table is not a quantitative measure of the number of ideas produced in each setting. This measure was determined by asking all survey respondents and interviewees whether their organisation generated "lots of ideas". This measure is therefore a perception from the workforce of the relative level of idea generation. Despite this not being a quantitative measure of "ideas" the picture painted is intriguing nevertheless. Inside the firms in which individuals believe lots of ideas are produced (e.g. organisations A, B, D, H and I), there is also a judgement that the firm guides or steers the idea generation process in an effective way. This finding supports the view that some form of structure or guidance is helpful to idea generation and very much confirms the thoughts of those arguing that

an appropriate amount of control is important for the production of new ideas (Leonard and Swap, 2005; Busco et al, 2012).

Despite making the point that guidance mechanisms are important to idea generation the data above do not shed light on what this level of guidance or control is, whether it is different in different settings or how organisations might best set up such systems to support the production of ideas. To address these points and fully answer the first research question relevant views and opinions in the dataset were analysed in detail. In order to gain an insight into the views of research participants and the realities of organisational life it is appropriate to explore quotations obtained during one-to-one interviews. When asked about the term 'control' and its importance to idea generation the following views were elicited, these appeared to paint a picture that too much structure or control can constrain idea generation.

"I think the word guidance is better [for defining the control process]. Being able to have some kind of oversight there to say "you are on the right track; you're on the wrong track; why is this good; why is it bad" and then kind of working from that basis of knowing which direction you are going in."

(Professional employee, software development company)

"…there needs to be a structure in terms of the company's aim and ambition and then if people's ideas sit within what we want to try and get done then it can work."

(Senior manager, community interest company)

"Well no, you definitely need a form of control but if it (idea generation) is too controlled then I don't think people will be open and give ideas so yes… control in moderation I think."

(Professional employee, healthcare organisation)

I think there needs to be structure because I believe that if you have no structure to the management of idea generation you end up with a lot of disgruntled and disillusioned employees… because you can't run with every idea everyone has and therefore there needs to be a structure to [demonstrate] how you let people down and how you encourage people and how you take things forward.

(Senior manager, marine organisation)

The views above certainly reinforce the perception that some form of control is necessary if organisations are to generate ideas. Building on the research of Leonard and Swap (2005) it can be

seen, particularly in the last quote, that guidance encourages engagement with the creative process. Other themes emerging from the evidence presented here involve providing boundaries for ideas, keeping things relevant and even providing feedback as to why things are thought to be 'good' or 'bad'. It is understood that without structure it is difficult to distinguish an idea from a fantasy (Reichenstein, 2005; Busco et al, 2012) although the findings of Hitt et al (1996) must not be discounted.   Given these views it can be argued that 'control' or guidance in terms of idea generation is perhaps about framing a problem or issue in broad terms rather than micro-managing processes and tasks. Evidence presented below adds weight to this understanding.

"I think there has to be a certain level of control with regards to that (idea generation) to kind of keep people on track as it were but not so much that you are going to stifle idea generation. So you know not being given too narrow a parameter to focus on for example."

(Professional employee, consultancy firm)

"[Control is] Not necessarily vital to idea generation because if you have got control then all you are going to have is a sanitised view from individuals… So I think it needs to be a bit more ragged now and again… You can discount it and explain why but at least you give people the opportunity to vent their obvious… what's the word… passion for this organisation because there is clearly a lot that."

(Senior manager, arts organisation)

The theme running through this evidence indicates that people must be given a sense of direction as too much structure will perhaps only lead to senior managers being presented with a 'sanitised view'. The first quote adds more weight to this argument by stating again that individuals need to be kept on track but control beyond that in the form of strict parameters is likely to stifle idea generation. This is all certainly very interesting but how widely held is this view? The following interpretation comes from organisation E, a public sector organisation, and adds more weight to the argument built up to this point.

"I'm not really sure that I am comfortable with the use of the word control there… yes, we need to frame and guide things but I associate the term control with micro-management almost. In those situations (micro-management) you aren't going to get many ideas at all."

(Senior manager, public sector organisation)

The words 'frame' and 'guide' appear once again with the individual in question also relating the term 'control' directly to micro-management. This finding confirms previous research into this area (Hitt et al, 1996; Rudkin et al, 2001). Alongside confirming the outcome of previous research (Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005), the findings presented so far add to the present literature by suggesting that the control or guidance of idea generation might take the form of broad 'frames' which channel but do not inhibit new thinking. Having discovered this, attention must turn to the second research question; whether organisational visions can provide this structure and guidance, enabling organisations to generate a greater number of ideas.

The Role of Vision in the Idea Generation Process

Evidence presented so far suggests that broad frameworks are needed to guide the idea generation process and analysis of prior literature suggested that organisational visions might be well placed to provide this structure. How does this proposition compare to the reality of organisational life in SMEs? Can vision statements provide a roadmap or foundation for idea generation? Evidence gathered from one particular setting suggests that this could be the case; the following quote expresses the importance of communicating a clear picture to all individuals employed by this firm.

"I think for us we are so behind with it (idea generation)… or so disjointed from doing it that actually it would be a stepped process and I think the primary and initial step would be to start communicating and giving the employees more of the bigger picture and more of an awareness of where things are at. Until that happens I don't think you could really take things much further forward because they're shooting at the wrong target."

(Senior manager, marine organisation)

This passage is without doubt a reference to vision (Gdanz, 2009; O'Gorman and Doran, 1999; Kets de Vries, 2003). Key points of note include the fact that communicating this picture should be the "primary and initial step" in encouraging idea generation and that without it employees would be "shooting at the wrong target." Exploring the present literature it can be argued that this view is similar to those advanced by Reichenstein (2005) and Amabile and Khaire (2008) with the latter specifically highlighting that leaders must attempt to provide 'paths through the bureaucracy' in order to encourage idea generation. Having established this within one organisation how does this view compare with others; are similar perspectives held in other SMEs or is this view unique to this particular organisation?

At this stage it is vital to highlight again that the qualitative nature of this inquiry means that individuals inevitably attach different labels to what is in reality the same issue (Cooper, 1992; Collins, 1983). Despite highlighting this crucial point, very similar findings to those above were uncovered in a wide variety of settings. One anomaly, however, in the data was uncovered in a community interest company. The leader of this organisation stated that he himself had a broad vision for the organisation but that this had not yet been fully articulated and communicated. Irrespective of this, individuals inside this business all had a strongly held belief that ideas were at the core of what this organisation was about and this perhaps goes against the view that any sort of defined framework is necessary for idea generation (Busco et al, 2012). Having made this point though it is important to state that a vision was present, it simply had not been communicated at that present point in time. Further analysis has, however, proved this to be the exception rather than the rule with evidence about the importance of the vision to idea generation being uncovered in several different settings;

"…Yes it (idea generation) would absolutely depend on how well the owner communicates what he wants to do with the organisation… I know there is a vision but it just seems somewhat distant from me and what I am doing. It is quite demoralising sometimes."

(Middle manager, retail/tourism organisation)

"So, yeah, it is kind of like that [but] it is just not as overt as that I think, it is a bit more tacit, and it (the vision) is so ingrained in the history of the organisation that we don't have to go "this is the vision everybody!" It has developed over time… and helps people to judge where an idea has come from and how relevant it might be."

(Senior manager, social enterprise)

"(Employees are) massively (linked into the vision). But then I think they would be because they are a creative team and it just would make no sense to have any of them not understanding it… But again it is about staff being aware of what the vision and the direction is so that they can understand that certain ideas will just not be appropriate… because they don't… you know… pertain to that framework so it all comes back to that doesn't it."

(Senior manager, arts organisation)

Examining these views in detail lends support to the view that an organisation's vision can be seen as a type of framework for idea generation, providing some degree of broad direction and structure which people can subsequently 'hang' or 'pin' their ideas on. The language used by various individuals indicates that an appropriate vision provides "clarity" and "understanding" (Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy, 2002) while the absence of vision in thought to lead to "distance" and individuals feeling "demoralised". A further theme present in the evidence above is that irrespective of any actual content, leaders must take time to ensure that employees are linked into the vision. If this link is not made then individuals understandably struggle to relate the vision to their day to day tasks and ideas (O'Gorman and Doran, 1999; Lipton, 2002).

Data gathered within this study demonstrates that leaders in organisations of all shapes and sizes must provide some form of structure for idea generation which provides a guide or roadmap that employees can follow (Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005; Busco et al, 2012). From the evidence uncovered during the literature search and the views captured during primary research it is apparent that organisational visions can indeed provide this structure or framework for idea generation, with individuals consistently making the connection between understanding the 'bigger picture' and feeling able to produce *relevant* ideas. It is believed that the vision can be seen as a roadmap for idea generation, providing clarity, outlining a 'target' for ideas and helping individuals to understand which ideas are 'appropriate' and which are perhaps not.

Conclusion

Studying the factors that influence idea generation in organisations is a complicated task. This paper has focused on arguably one of the more complex areas, namely whether it is helpful to control or guide idea generation and if so, whether organisational visions can be used to provide relevant structures or frameworks. Existing literature demonstrates how vital it is to avoid stifling idea generation through strict control mechanisms (Hitt et al, 1996; Leonard and Swap, 2005; Busco et al, 2012), and evidence has been found to support this research. Through in-depth qualitative research this study has found that successful leaders manage to set a structure that provides a roadmap for idea generation without mandating certain courses of action. It is perceived that this has a positive effect on idea generation.

Where this paper differs from previous contributions is its focus on the concept of 'vision' and whether these statements, written or not, can be used to guide the idea generation process. While

previous literature has suggested that leaders must attempt to provide 'paths through the bureaucracy' (Amabile and Khaire, 2008) if idea generation is to flourish, there has not yet been an exploration as to whether the vision can be deployed for this purpose. It is known that organisational visions can be very powerful tools to motivate and guide behaviour (Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; Kets de Vries, 2003), thus there is an obvious attraction to explore whether or not these statements can be used to provide some sort of framework for idea generation. Qualitative evidence provided in this paper captures the sense that there is a role for the vision in providing some sort of broad framework to guide idea generation although it is important to state that any framework must fit with the prevailing organisational context (Burns, 2008).

Evidence discussed within this paper outlines compatibility between the need to provide a broad, loose roadmap which frames the territory for idea generation and the generally accepted view of organisational visions being statements that outline the broad direction of an organisation and what it needs in order to reach its destination (Gdanz, 2009; Kilpatrick and Silverman, 2005; O'Gorman and Doran, 1999). Views from a diverse range of SMEs indicate that outlining a compelling vision is the "primary and initial step" in stimulating idea generation and consensus exists that visions can provide clarity, indicating where ideas are necessary thus helping leaders to shape collective achievement from individual contributions. Indeed, this research exercise has found that organisations with a clear vision are perceived to generate a greater number of ideas than those that do not have such a statement.

While this study is a useful exploration of the extent to which organisational visions can be used to guide idea generation further work is necessary if a full picture of the relevant issues is to be constructed. Something not explored by this present research is the direction of the relationship between idea generation and the presence of a vision. It is not clear from the data whether it is the case that organisations which are intrinsically more 'creative' are more likely to devise and communicate an appropriate vision or whether the presence of a vision is in fact a precursor to idea generation. This is an issue which should be examined in more detail during future research exercises. As stated at many points of this paper this research is qualitative in nature. Although this data provides a crucial insight into the whys and wherefores of individual mind-sets, quantitative data is arguably needed in order to assess the statistical relationship between the presence or absence of organisational visions and the dynamics of idea generation. Further work could also target communication issues, understanding more about the ways in which leaders can connect

individuals to their visions. This is an area of research that arguably merits further attention and this present study provides an outline that can be pursued and developed in more detail.

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