

# Thinking Managers

Robert Heller of [www.thinkingmanagers.com](http://www.thinkingmanagers.com) suggests that all managers need to grasp the value of the 'maverick'.

## Marvelling at the Mavericks

'Mavericks' are by definition a rare breed in business management and most walks of life. The behaviour of the human maverick can fall some way short of honourable and might even cut the corners of legality. But in reality, the best maverick managers point the way forward. Without them a great deal of great companies and industries could not exist.

You could easily claim that all great managers, certainly all important entrepreneurs, are mavericks, rule-breakers who disregard the herd and obey their own hunches and heart. None of these makers and shakers could ever be described as conformist.

Take the maverick Philip Knight of Nike, for instance, who has just retired as the shoe company's chief executive for the third time. That in itself is most unconventional; but when his replacements for the first two retirements didn't work out, Knight stepped up to the plate again. Remarkable recovery and revitalised growth soon followed.

Using the Nike story as a management model is hazardous, however. For example, Fortune magazine noted, 'What Knight actually does every day in his role managing Nike, in fact, is mostly a mystery'. He admits that the company 'has grown round my idiosyncrasies. They don't even know that they're idiosyncrasies any more, and of course neither do I'.

Knight is not out on his own in practising Management by Idiosyncrasy (MBI). John D. Rockefeller became the world's most wealthy manager, not despite his eccentricities, but because of them. The maverick traits of magnates explains their success in one obvious way: by not following the crowd, they follow the money.

Contrarian originality is not only a rich source of mould-shattering strategies like those, but of a continuous stream of new, idiosyncratic and quite often much better ways of managing and executing.

At Nike, Knight's maverick approach centred around letting people make decisions, rather than rely on him. One simple method was not to answer their questions; or, if he did give an opinion, to reserve the right to change his opinion, the next day if he wanted. By hiring the best people (including more mavericks) and shifting them about the business, Knight was able to optimise the impact of his doubtless ability to inspire.

You will not enter the 'value-added stratosphere' by conventional means. The maverick qualities of nonconformity, imagination, independence, belligerence and divine dissatisfaction with the status quo are prerequisites.

If you want transformation - and these days every organisation wants just that - you must accept that the conformist corporation man (or woman) is out, and 'individuals are in': to quote a contribution by Bill Fischer and Andy Boynton to a Harvard Business Review special issue on The High- Performance Organisation (July-August 2005).

For instance, does your business...

1. Celebrate individual egos and elicit the best from every team member?
2. Encourage members to be competitive?
3. Create chances for solo performances?
4. Choose solutions based purely on merit?
5. Put creativity above efficiency?

The five-YES company obviously has big advantages in a hotly competitive world in which mavericks hold the winning hand. Also there's an evident fit with the characteristics which another HBR writer, Robert E. Quinn, views as the 'fundamental' state of leadership, in which top management acts from its 'deepest values and instincts'.

That means being results-centred ('I go beyond familiar territory to pursue ambitious new outcomes'): internally directed ('I behave according to my values'): other-focused ('I put the collective good first'): externally open ('I learn from my environment and see when there's a need to change').

There's something of the maverick in all managers, but it's usually repressed by the dead weight of the organisation and a plethora of other heavy pressures that emphasise reason and caution and militate against emotion and experiment.

Knight has encouraged the latter, positive pair without needing to sacrifice the essential virtues of the first - and all by that simple sounding means of letting well-chosen people get on with what they are best at.

**About the author:** Robert Heller is one of the world's best selling authors on business management.

