

# The strategist's bookshelf

## Constructive rebellion

Harvey A. Hornstein

Harvey A. Hornstein, Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, formerly with the Program in Social and Organizational Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University, now operates a private organizational consulting practice ([harvey.hornstein@gmail.com](mailto:harvey.hornstein@gmail.com)). He has written nine books, including *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (1997).

***REBEL TALENT: Why It Pays to Break the Rules at Work and in Life***, Francesca Gino, 304 pages, (HarperCollins, 2018).

My praise for *REBEL TALENT* by Francesca Gino, Harvard Business School's Tandon Family Professor of Business Administration comes with the caveat that the book's title is somewhat misleading. It's not about revolting against the corporate hierarchy, or about personnel who are leading the charge against the way things are in their organizations. It is about improving the organizational conditions and managerial behavior in order to encourage employees to translate an idea or invention into a good or service that creates value for which customers will pay. If you have any responsibility for fashioning work settings that might benefit when others devise and share creative, uncommon ideas, then read this book.

As a researcher, Francesca Gino has spent more than a decade studying successful rebels at organizations around the world: high-end boutiques in Italy's fashion capital, top restaurants, a thriving fast food chain, an award-winning computer animation studio. In her work, she has identified leaders and employees who exemplify "rebel talent," and whose examples both other managers and other employees can learn to embrace.

Gino believes that in turbulent times when competition is fierce the future belongs to the rebel — and that there's a rebel in each of us.

Cultivating rebel talent that is constructive and focused on innovative problem solving allows businesses to evolve and prosper.

The first six of the book's eight chapters are loosely structured around what the author identifies in the book's introduction as the five qualities of "rebel talent": novelty (seeking that which is challenging and new); curiosity (asking why); perspective (taking a wide view of issues, including seeing "what is" from others' perspectives); diversity (challenging existing social roles as well as reaching out to others who appear different); authenticity (enabling connection and learning by being open and vulnerable to others).

Chapters seven and eight describe what leaders in several well-known organizations have done to stimulate subordinates' innovative inputs. Additionally, in chapter eight, "Becoming a rebel leader," the author identifies, illustrates and discusses what she calls "The eight principles of rebel leadership." They are: Seek out the new; Encourage constructive dissent; Open conversations, don't close them; Reveal yourself-and reflect; Find freedom in constraints; Lead from the trenches; Foster happy accidents.

Finally, a three-page Epilogue raises issues that might prompt readers' self-reflection about how they are or are not fostering innovative thinking in their organizations.

Throughout the book Gino skillfully summarizes research findings and,

with equal skill, establishes their relevance to the book's central theme by discussing parallel events in organizations. A particular example of this, worthy of special mention, occurred when Gino reported what happened after Douglas Conant became head of Campbell Soup Company in 2001. Analysis of a Gallup poll taken shortly after he took the position showed that nearly two-thirds of employees and more than forty percent of the company's top management had unsatisfactory levels of involvement with work.

Conant sponsored creative changes that regularly brought him and other bosses into more frequent, direct contact with subordinates. As a consequence, consistent with what would be expected from research evidence previously discussed by Gino, she reports "employees were more fired up . . . they offered ideas that improved product quality and led to innovations."

### What is vs. what might be

Finally, for me, reading this book was fun. Its author is anything but parochial in selecting settings to illustrate the causes and consequences of beneficial innovative inputs to

organizations. Her examples include episodes from military history and events in a Harvard Business School classroom as well as in a Sheraton hotel, the Hippodrome Theater, a town in the Italian Alps, and the Rose Garden sports arena. Using a wide array of such examples, she shows how companies focused only on a "What is" approach are losing ground to competitors employing innovations that successfully pursue "What might be."

From time to time, to this illuminating mixture of research evidence and organizational effort, the author shares relevant stories from her life. Because these personal stories are about experiences that most of us have had, they are engaging ways of potentially deepening readers' understanding of how bosses and organizations might go about enhancing the generation and use of innovative ideas.

### Taking a rebel stand

What is missing from the mix is systematic advice to readers about when and how they should offer an innovative idea. After all, making an unconventional suggestion contains peril. What cues signal that a time has

arrived when the peril is low and the likelihood of an innovative idea's adoption is high? For example, should it be before, after, or while costs are mounting? Or, should it be after one, or two, or ten other ideas have failed? And, considering the *how*, in what order should the benefits of an innovation and the comparative benefits and/or costs of the current arrangements be presented? Should innovative suggestions be made in public (and, if so, who should be present) or in private? How should an immediate boss be involved? And so on. Clearly there is a need for such a dialog between leaders and their team members.

The book's message for bosses: What you do has the power to either create or crush the generation and use of innovative ideas in your organization. The choice is yours. If you are unhappy with the level of innovative thinking in your organization, don't gripe, look in the mirror, and then read this book.

### Corresponding author

Harvey A. Hornstein can be contacted at: [harvey.hornstein@gmail.com](mailto:harvey.hornstein@gmail.com)