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## **11. The dark side of entrepreneurial passion: restraining employee innovative behaviour?**

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### **Introduction**

Most studies focus on the positive outcomes of entrepreneurial behaviour and emphasise the pivotal role of the passionate entrepreneur in determining firm success (Man et al. 2002; Ahmad et al. 2010). However, there is also a dark side in entrepreneurship as Kets de Vries pointed out as early as 1985. He suggested that the traits and behaviours of entrepreneurs that allow them to succeed in their businesses can prove to be detrimental in their roles as managers or co-workers (Kets de Vries 1985).

Research on entrepreneurial passion suggests that entrepreneurs have enthusiasm and love for their ventures (Cardon et al. 2009). For the owner-manager, a business bears meaning beyond economic utility, perhaps becoming an extension of the self. Consequently, the inner make-up of the key power holder greatly influences how the business is run. The owner-manager may meddle in even routine operations, centralise power and restrict others' initiative (Kets de Vries 1996). In the context of small companies, the owner-manager has the responsibility of serving as the primary brake or catalyst of innovative behaviour within the firm (Carrier 1996; Bouchard and Basso 2011; Castrogiovanni et al. 2011).

On the other hand, employee-driven innovations are found to be key sources of competitiveness for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2010; Hoeve and Nieuwenhuis 2006; Feldman and Pentland 2003). Research on employee-driven innovation places primacy on the idea that every employee can have innovation potential irrespective of their position or level of education (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2010). This chapter discusses the tensions and contradictions between employee-driven innovativeness and entrepreneurial passion

of the owner-manager. The overly positive view of entrepreneurship can therefore be challenged (Verduijn et al. 2014).

This chapter illustrates why there is a reason to be against such manifestations of entrepreneurial passion, which bring out some of the darkest sides of entrepreneurial management. This study addresses these manifestations by investigating the interplay between the owner-manager and the employees while analysing how entrepreneurial passion may restrain and condition employee innovative behaviour within a small firm. The study is based on an intensive case study in one Finnish small service company. Our results indicate that entrepreneurial passion restrains or conditions employee innovative behaviour, which means there is reason to be against “entrepreneurship” – or at least much more cautious than most of the previous literature has been. In terms of structure, this book chapter first provides a theoretical framework consisting of entrepreneurial passion, entrepreneurial management behaviour and employee innovative behaviour. Next, we continue by describing our methodological approach before presenting our main findings. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Entrepreneurial passion and entrepreneurial management behaviour*

Entrepreneurship is an emotional journey (Baron 2008), and passion is embedded in its practice (Cardon et al. 2009). The interpretivist orientation views passion as a socially produced and reproduced phenomenon, where passion is mobilised in certain organizational situations and characterised by historically situated cultural and social practices (Gherardi et al. 2007). Entrepreneurial passion consists of “*consciously accessible, intense positive feelings experienced by engagement in entrepreneurial activities associated with roles that are meaningful and salient to the self-identity of the entrepreneur*” (Cardon et al. 2009, p. 517). From this perspective, passion becomes integral to entrepreneurial and managerial identity (Simpson et al. 2015). At its best, experiences of entrepreneurial passion aid in motivating coherent and coordinated goal pursuit (Cardon et al. 2009).

Previous studies have emphasised the positive consequences of entrepreneurial passion while overlooking the potentially negative side. Cardon et al. (2005) suggest that while entrepreneurial passion can be inspiring, it also can be hurtful to oneself and others, leading to dysfunctional consequences. Previous studies about the dark side of passion have suggested that the experience of passion may produce response patterns that are obsessive, blind or misdirected (Vallerand et al. 2003). For example, this dark force can be seen in entrepreneurs’ resistance to exploring alternative options (Cardon et al. 2009). Simpson et al. (2015) have criticised the current research on entrepreneurial passion for its teleological assumption: passion is understood as a solely positive emotion that influences entrepreneurs’ cognition and behaviour in a helpful manner.

The literature thoroughly highlights the pivotal role of owner-managers in running their firms. Management in small firms is unique, often characterised by personalised preferences and informality. Few studies have focused on the interactional nature of passion to investigate how entrepreneurs’ actions and performances of passion impact

others. Although leadership is a major entrepreneurial task, entrepreneurship research primarily has focused on the relationship between leadership styles and organizational performance (Vecchio 2003; Ensley et al. 2006; Hmieleski and Ensley 2007). However, affective experiences at work influence employees' behaviour (Seo et al. 2004) and Breugst et al. (2012) argue that there is a lack of knowledge about how managers' entrepreneurial passion influences employees' actions. In small companies, entrepreneurs and employees are in frequent and direct contact with each other, making it more likely that entrepreneurs will affect employee behaviour considerably (Ensley et al. 2006).

### *Employee innovative behaviour*

The employee innovative behaviour literature underscores that innovative behaviour extends beyond the right of the owner-manager and every employee has an innovative potential (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2010). Innovative behaviour among employees has been defined in various ways and some definitions emphasise the phases from idea generation to idea implementation, others refer more to an attitude (Dorenbosch et al. 2005), or activities such as problem identification and finding solutions (Basadur 2004). Regardless of the vantage point, employees' innovativeness has been found to play an essential role in ensuring the competitiveness of SMEs (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2010; Hoeve and Nieuwenhuis 2006; Feldman and Pentland 2003). Besides the economic value created for the company, the possibility for employees to engage in innovative behaviour and in innovations improve also the work life quality (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2010). However, existing research suggests that employees cannot operate alone, but innovative processes can be seen as the outcome of a continuous interplay between the managers and employees (Heinonen and Toivonen 2008). Researchers have noted the need for the leader to be sensitive during the innovation process. Leaders should encourage innovation, evaluate and develop employees' ideas, act as role models and be innovators themselves; simultaneously, they must be careful not to be overly dominant and discourage subordinates from expressing their ideas (Mumford et al. 2003; Hunter and Cushenbery 2011).

We argue that acknowledging the context (Welter 2011) is of the utmost importance in understanding employee innovative behaviour, particularly when investigating employee innovative behaviour and its potential barriers. For example, Aaltonen and Hytti (2014) demonstrated that the barriers caused by everyday work practices are important – even if commonly ignored in the innovation literature. Innovative behaviour among employees primarily has been studied in large firms and public sector organizations (Moriano et al. 2011). Following de Jong and Den Hartog (2007), our interest lies in expert services – but with a particular focus on the small firm context and the role of the owner-manager as a gatekeeper or promoter of such behaviour (see also Carrier 1996; Castrogiovanni et al. 2011, Aaltonen and Hytti 2015). Thus, our contribution rests in providing a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between the expressions of entrepreneurial passion and employee innovative behaviour in the small firm context.

### **The case company**

We conducted empirical research in a rental and real estate company. This micro-sized company has implemented several service innovations in the past few years. The owner-manager of the company is a middle-aged woman who established her agency in 1999 as part of a franchising chain and has been leading the company ever since. The company operates in a competitive field of business, making the constant renewal of service processes and new service innovation essential for survival. The owner-manager holds 70% of the company shares, while two employees each hold 15%. The owner-manager actively participates in the company's daily activities and informally leads the operational work. The open culture allows for abundant discussion and encourages co-operation between the owner-manager and employees.

### **Methodology, data collection and analysis**

An event-based criterion was applied in selecting this case (Neergaard 2007), and for the purposes of this research, we rely on the idea of an intensive case study strategy (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2016). During the two-year research project which focused on managing and measuring innovation at work in a Finnish small and medium-sized companies, we built an understanding of the roles of the owner-manager and employees in their everyday activities by relying on different data sources gathered from the case company. The first author conducted participant observation for one week, participated in eleven office meetings, arranged two company development workshops and conducted four interviews with the entrepreneur and one with all employees. The analysis is based on the transcribed data from the development workshop, where the owner-manager, Paula (all names are pseudonyms), and three employees, Irene, Emma and Anna reflected on the company's innovation practices and related tensions (see Reference removed for anonymity) (Aromaa and Eriksson 2004).

In the first phase of the analysis, we paid attention to the fact that the interaction between the entrepreneur and the employees was shaped by the role of the entrepreneur as the prime mover in almost all matters. This led us to investigate the case and findings through the theoretical lenses of the "dark side of entrepreneurial management" (Kets de Vries 1985) and employee innovative behaviour (Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2010).

### **Results**

In this section, we present relevant findings from our case company, where the owner-manager and the employees talk about the innovation practices of their firm. The seven extracts we will introduce fall into two thematic categories emphasising the role of the passionate entrepreneur: (1) the owner-manager as the leading innovator of the firm and (2) the owner-manager as the leading decision maker of the firm.

#### *The owner-manager as the leading innovator of the firm*

*The owner-manager develops ideas alone.* At the workshop, the owner-manager discusses how she comes up with ideas during her leisure time during the weekends and holidays.

Yeah, I've had time to think. I've sat on the sauna bench, warmed in the sauna and done trips on a row boat. I have like a long process there where all the time I'm thinking about it [the idea], it just sort of grows and then I'm all like yes! I feel absolutely convinced that these are great ideas! And I can hardly wait to tell you all about them! (Paula, Manager)

Summertime is the most hectic season in the company. At the workshop the employees critically reflect on Paula's behaviour when she comes back to the office with her ideas.

While you are away, we have been working really hard. When you start with your ideas, we feel like you seem to have little respect for the work we have been doing during your time off. (Emma, Employee)

There is also another problem with owner-manager's habit of elaborating her ideas during the leisure time.

And you have thought it [the ideas] out so far in your head. And then you get terribly disappointed when we are not really excited about them. (Irene, Employee)

Interpretation. The owner-manager's habit of developing new ideas during her leisure time poses two problems. First, during the holiday season, the employees are very busy and work under pressure. When the owner-manager returns to the office with all her new ideas, the employees are not in a welcoming mood. The owner-manager's timing for presenting her new ideas is sometimes poor. The employees feel that she does not show them respect for working hard during her holiday when she presents new ideas immediately upon return. Second, the employees feel that they are excluded from the innovation process because they are not involved in developing the ideas but are only presented the outcome that the owner-manager thinks is ready for implementation. As a result of the owner-manager's passionate but solitary brainstorming, the employees find it hard to make sense of her thought process. Sharing ideas at an earlier stage could reduce negative group reactions and save the owner-manager from the disappointing reaction of employees who are not excited about her ready-to-implement ideas which from the employees' point of view may be far from ready.

*It's like back to the drawing board.* When the owner-manager and employees reflect innovation practices of the company, the employee describes how the owner-manager as the main innovator of the company. The employee raises a problem how the employees cannot see themselves as contributing to the innovation practice of the company.

All our new ideas start from Paula's black notebook. Her ideas are the liveliest and loudest, even shocking and upsetting. She presents her ideas as if to suggest that we will begin to act in a totally new way. It's like back to the drawing board. We [employees] can hardly recognise our own ideas at all. (Irene, Employee)

Interpretation. Even the employees perceive the owner-manager as the main innovator of the company. Although, in the small service company, the employees have an important role in the continuous development of the customer service practices such as developing documents, forms and checklists used in customer service processes, the

divide is clear between the owner-manager and the employees. Owner-manager's radical innovations, noted in her black idea notebook and presented in a very passionate manner and pompous ways, construct the employees' ideas as incremental. It seems that even if the owner-manager is aiming to inspire the employees with her passion (Breugst et al. 2012; Cardon 2008), the employee's reflection in this extract illustrates her wish how the owner-manager should hold back her enthusiasm, which seems to produce patterns that are blind, causing some reluctance to discuss and re-evaluate her ideas flexibly (Vallerand et al. 2003; Cardon et al. 2009).

*The owner-manager presents too many ideas.* The owner-manager actively participates in trainings and projects. During the workshop, the owner-manager gives out ideas how they could develop customer service procedures. Suddenly, she questions the way how the company is adopting new things.

Do we...have too much of everything? Maybe we have too many ideas that we would like to implement. (Paula, Manager)

The employee immediately agrees with the owner-manager.

We try to adopt too many new practices and procedures that sound so good and fine. When we try to do everything, then we sometimes end up doing nothing. I think we should prioritise and schedule our ideas better. (Irene, Employee)

Interpretation. The owner-manager feels passionately about all her new ideas and wishes to implement them all simultaneously without questioning their importance or the organizational capacity. The extract illustrates how she is often in an intense, flow-like state of total absorption (Csikszentmihalyi 1990), which is associated with affects like enthusiasm and zeal (Smilor 1997). The owner-manager expects the organization to be agile and ready for change and have resources for implementation. However, the extract illustrates how from the employees' perspectives, this overly-passionate behaviour towards all new ideas results causes them to try to adopt too many new practices and procedures, leading to distractions, work fragmentation and an inability to implement the ideas.

*Promoting ideas during the night-time?* The owner-manager's passion for elaborating ideas in any time of the day has ignored the practical issues from the employees' perspective.

Night-time is best for ideas! The daytime is too hectic with customer service. (Paula, Manager)

We don't have time to develop ideas when we are serving customers and when the telephone is ringing all the time. (Emma, Employee)

Developing new ideas should be scheduled to the calendar. If we have agreed that we do something, we should have time to do it! (Irene, Employee)

Interpretation. For the owner-manager, the lack of time for developing ideas is not an issue because she is flexible, finding time to develop new ideas. The owner-manager entrepreneurial passion makes it difficult for the owner-manager to slow down and

realise that other work tasks and duties represents a major obstacle and limit employee ability to commit to the firm's renewal at her same level. Thus, while the owner-manager and employees all seem equally motivated to develop ideas, their different roles and emotional attachment to the company create a need for more systematic organization of firm innovation. Thus, there is a need for more systematic organising of innovation in the firm due to the owner-manager's and employees' differing roles and emotional attachment to the company (Aaltonen and Hytti 2015).

*The owner-manager as the leading decision maker of the firm*

*I can see how I grab things for myself.* The owner-manager reflects how she too easily participates in decision making concerning issues which are part of the employees' everyday decision-making activities in serving rental customers.

I can see how I scoop the issues and make the decisions on behalf of you. Even though you are doing such good rental estimates and choose exactly the same new tenants to the apartments as I would do. (Paula, Manager)

We all [employees] share an attitude that Paula is needed to come and say her final word. Everyone of us will wait until she comes and makes the decision. Only then we know for sure. (Emma, Employee)

Interpretation. Albeit wishing to delegate decision-making to the employees, the owner-manager takes care of the decisions and the employees have learned to avoid making independent decisions and ask the owner-manager first in order to avoid mistakes. The behaviour of the owner-manager resembles the patterns identified in what has been called the "dramatic organization" where the owner-manager centralises power to herself and meddles in even routine operations (Kets de Vries 1996). In this small service company, the owner-manager feels emotionally responsible for not leaving the employees alone with decisions, which illustrates how her motive is more altruistic than egocentric.

*Let's put this behind the ear.* In the workshop, the owner-manager had a certain habit of dealing with the ideas. For example, when an employee suggested an idea concerning collective information sharing after the trainings but the owner-manager was not fully convinced on the employee's idea, the owner-manager answered to the employee by using the idiom.

Let's put the idea behind the ear. (Paula, Manager)

The employee seemed to know how the owner-manager's idiom was synonym for forgetting the idea.

No! We shall do this, because this is really important! (Irene, Employee)

Interpretation. In the company, the owner-manager and the employees elaborate ideas together but nobody documents them. They are only stored in the mind of the owner-manager who elaborates and combines them with other ideas. Hence, from her perspective they materialize in one form or another. From the employees' point of view they disappear and are forgotten. The owner-manager always listens to the ideas of the

employees, but from the employees' perspective a great number of ideas disappear and they see the situation as if the ideas will be forgotten by the owner-manager. Owner-manager's reluctance to implement the ideas of the employees associated with the simultaneous avoidance of the open rejection of them can be interpreted either as a form of the avoidance of conflicts, the demonstration of power or unwillingness to let the others to get enmeshed in her endeavour – the firm.

*The owner-manager taking many personal contacts.* The discussion in the workshop turns into customer relations and how to get ideas from the customers.

Getting ideas from the customers, I think it is the capability to read between the lines when talking with them. (Paula, Leader)

But our customers have personal contacts only with Paula. They can't contact us directly because we don't have our own, personal phone number or e-mail addresses. This is one reason why it is difficult for us to establish long-term customer relations. (Irene, Employee)

Interpretation. The owner-manager establishes personal connections with customers and the information of what was discussed remains only in her head. Thus, the employees cannot rely on continued customer contact as a source for new ideas and improvements. However, she wishes for the employees to take more initiative and to be more proactive in their customer relations.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we have found how the owner-manager's entrepreneurial passion restrains or conditions employee innovative behaviour within a small service company. First, we apply research focusing on owner-manager entrepreneurial passion (Cardon 2005; Cardon et al. 2009; Murnieks et al. 2014) to understand the behaviour of owner-managers as leaders and co-workers in their organizations. We also underline the pivotal role of owner-managers in running and influencing their firms (Beaver and Jennings 2005; Jones and Crompton 2009; Lans et al. 2011; Man et al. 2002). Finally, we rely on research into employee innovative behaviour (de Jong and Den Hartog 2007; Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen 2010; Basadur 2004), considering the interconnections between owner-manager entrepreneurial passion, management and employee innovative behaviour.

Previous studies have shown that the leader acting as an innovative role-model can increase idea generation in the whole company (see de Jong and Den Hartog 2007). However, our case study illustrates that the owner-managers need to be sensitive to the situation and style when considering the introduction of new ideas. Actions, performances and displays of passion may limit employees' innovative behaviour as it excludes them from the innovation process in various ways. The passionate behaviour of the owner-manager deprives the employees of the opportunity to truly participate in the innovation process as they are sometimes only invited to the implementation phase.

We wish to emphasise that we do not view owner-manager entrepreneurial passion as purely negative or dysfunctional; however, in our case, it creates a social reality in



which employees feel disempowered to produce ideas for new innovations. Instead, they are overwhelmed by those proposed by the owner-manager and assign her the role of innovation practitioner. Hence, the findings also illustrate the normalisation of employee behaviour to remain in a more passive role. In this sense, both the owner-managers and the employees are playing their roles accordingly.

From a practical perspective, if owner-managers wish to change their organizations' working practices, they need to become experts in analysing their own behaviours and practices in order to learn how to change them. The owner-managers wishing to engage their employees in innovative behaviour should restrain their passion. In meetings, they might purposefully be the last to speak and wait for employees to come up with ideas first before expressing their own ideas. It also would be beneficial to create particular events as "idea development meetings" in order to allow employees to come to meetings with a particular mindset and level of preparedness rather than turning every routine meeting into an innovation arena. In our view, these suggestions imply emotionally controlling one's passion for the business and getting things done. If the leader agrees that knowledge is dispersed throughout the organization, then tapping into that innovation capability is necessary for the future of the firm.

## Conclusions

Entrepreneurial passion of owner-managers has been understood primarily as a positive phenomenon. Meanwhile, the literature largely has ignored the interactional perspective regarding how this entrepreneurial passion impacts employees. On the other hand, employee innovative behaviour has been taken for granted and seen to be constrained by individual factors, such as education or personality. Consequently, existing literature assigns responsibility for the employees to be innovative and engage in the innovation processes in the firm. The findings from an intensive case study on a small owner-manager-led firm illustrate how owner-managers' entrepreneurial passion for ideas and entrepreneurial management behaviour restrain and condition employee innovative behaviour. Consequently, this study contributes to understanding how employee innovative behaviour in small firms can be restrained by the owner-manager's entrepreneurial passion, which is a reason to be against entrepreneurship as a passionate accomplishment. A critical examination of the case shows how the passionate owner-manager performing the role of primary innovation agent casts the employees in more passive roles in terms of developing new ideas and acting innovatively.

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