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## Managing the Corporate Renegade

Sometimes the worker with the most unique, or difficult, style is the one with the most innovative and important ideas

By [Alaina Love](#)

When I was working as a human resources executive at the headquarters of a large multinational firm, there was a guy with disheveled hair who always wore a yellow and green plaid jacket and clashing bow tie who would periodically stop by my office to visit. "Michael" would slide into a chair and launch into a conversation about whatever happened to be on his mind that day. He was a corporate renegade who didn't much care about following imposed rules or protocol (hence the absence of the traditional blue suit and starched white shirt). He would rarely actually schedule an appointment to see me, yet he contributed to the knowledge base of the organization in ways that most people overlooked.

I can still vividly remember the depth and range of our discussions, and I'm grateful that I had the sense to follow my instincts and listen with an open mind. Michael might chat about the potential for improving our performance in India one day and the relationship between string theory and morphogenetic resonance the next. (Yeah, I was baffled by that one too!)

What was most interesting about Michael was his uncanny ability to transform what appear to most folks to be random, "way out there" thoughts into blindingly brilliant ideas. I never doubted that Michael was comfortably carrying a high IQ, but what I now understand is that he also possesses what I call a robust "Conceiver" passion. Characteristically, Conceivers are passionate strategists and big-picture thinkers with broad intellectual interests, who can absorb large volumes of information at a glance and quickly identify what is most important. I later came to realize the incredible value of Conceivers like Michael and the propensity of some organizations to marginalize people like him.

### THE ROLE OF "CONCEIVERS"

If you're a leader in a large enough organization, you've run into people like Michael. They don't always show up in a plaid jacket, but they have their own unique style. You find them playing the role of devil's advocate as they challenge plans and processes. They are sometimes the folks who infuriate co-workers with their tendency to exhaustively examine ideas—only to discard them later as inferior solutions. For Conceivers, life is a complex and compelling exploration of new and innovative ways to view the world. They contribute to organizations significantly by changing the quality and depth of the conversation and supporting the generation of breakthrough ideas. At the same time, Conceivers can drive the rest of us crazy as we struggle to keep up with the pace at which their minds work. They often generate ideas faster than we can process them, or their ideas seem so farfetched that we may disregard them as too outlandish to possibly work. There are times when we couldn't be more wrong.

Consider Peter Lorange, who has spent his career challenging the status quo in business education. He has taught strategic planning at some of the best business schools in the world, served as president of the renowned IMD in Switzerland (where he also held the Nestlé chair), and has now embarked on a new venture by purchasing the Graduate School of Business Administration (GSBA) in Zurich.

Lorange's philosophy of creating ongoing learning partnerships between corporations and B-schools, where contemporary events in the business environment are almost simultaneously applied to MBA education, has earned him a well-deserved reputation as a renegade. He's revolutionizing the knowledge transfer between the corporate environment and the classroom by placing the "corporate learning laboratory" on equal footing with academic theory. Learning in this model is no longer a one-way street. Students and professors teach and learn from one another, allowing ideas to be transferred from practice in the work environment to application in the learning environment, reducing the time it takes to combine theory and practice.

### TRUSTING RADICAL IDEAS

Typical of a Conceiver, Lorange has examined previously held beliefs about the educational process for MBAs and has discarded what he feels is no longer working. In his role as president of GSBA, Lorange is dismantling the long-standing model of academic hierarchy—removing layers, discarding titles, and deconstructing other roadblocks to the real-time application of new knowledge that is so critical to building capable leaders—those who can thrive in an increasingly competitive global environment. Has Lorange's vision of the new academic world been staggering for some and threatening to others? You bet. Yet it is a radical idea that is worth exploring and to which Lorange is fully committed.

If you are managing a "plaid jacket" Conceiver, I bid you both good luck and congratulations. The best advice I can provide is to sharpen your mental game and be prepared to meet his or her ideas head-on. Conceivers will synthesize knowledge faster than most others and will always look to find deeper meaning within it, which is why they are such valued members of a team. Ask insightful and intelligent questions as Conceivers navigate through the spider-diagram of innovations in their heads, and you'll earn their respect and trust.

Both of these will be essential since you'll be called upon to provide Conceivers with feedback about how they are perceived by others and assist them with smoothing the rough edges of their relationships with colleagues who may be intimidated by their intellectual horsepower or overwhelmed by their ideas. Sidelining corporate renegades by insisting on conformity may smother the flame of creativity so vital to business success.

Leaders who expect and welcome the challenge of the unleashed passion of these intellectual acrobats will be richly rewarded. This is the birthing ground of ideas such as Twitter and Facebook. In this "gray matter" tug of war, the leader will grow, the Conceiver will grow, and so will the organization—but only if everyone is courageous enough to engage in the conversation.

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