

## **REVIEW: The Medici Effect**

*Where ideas collide, innovation happens*

Review by John Stuckey

*The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts & Cultures* by Frans Johansson. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2004. 206 pp.

This is a short book, not at all complex or likely to be controversial, and it's unfortunate that the editor who chose the dust jacket photo didn't read it.

The thesis of Frans Johansson's *The Medici Effect* is straightforward and seems hard to dispute: when and where "different cultures, domains, and disciplines stream together toward a single point," they may "connect, allowing for established concepts to clash and combine, ultimately forming a multitude of new, groundbreaking ideas." (p. 2) Johansson calls this convergence "the Intersection" and compares its effect in facilitating innovation to that of the fifteenth-century Medici family of bankers who, with a few others like them, brought original thinkers from many disciplines to Florence and into contact with each other, arguably triggering the creative explosion in the arts, sciences, philosophy, and commerce that we now know as the Renaissance.

Johansson defines truly significant Intersection ideas as being both creative (being new and having value) and innovative (being realized and not merely conceived of). He contrasts them with Directional ideas, which may be important but are extensions, improvements, or refinements of something already known. Intersection ideas and inventions are surprising and open up new fields, usually today taking advantage of opportunities offered by changes in population, science, and computation.

Nearly all of us, Johansson maintains, are predisposed to Directional thinking when it comes to confronting problems or challenges; true Intersection solutions depend on breaking down the barriers between traditional methods, fields, and disciplines -- something that those who have changed or combined dissimilar professions,

experiences, cultures, or fields of study are most likely to find natural. Johansson delves into the barriers hindering such thoughts for most of us and offers some exercises to help break them down.

Creative innovators, Johansson asserts, are prolific, uneven, and not intimidated by the risk of failure. Some of his explanations border on the tautological ("... the best way to beat the odds is to continually produce ideas. This is why innovators are so productive" and "... innovators don't produce because they are successful, but ... are successful because they produce") but they do convey a surface sensibleness.

Less intuitive, and therefore more interesting, are the lessons he draws from several studies he cites in explaining what might incorrectly be thought to lead to innovation, including brainstorming ("virtual" brainstorming is superior; make people brainstorm alone before bringing them together) and working under time pressure (even though people *think* they are more creative then, they need time to evaluate their ideas).

Failure, Johansson maintains, seems a necessary element in eventual innovative success. Not even the most creative geniuses succeed on their first and every effort, and an environment intended to encourage innovation should be prepared to reward creative failure as a necessary cost. He admits that rewarding failure is not an easy practice to explain to a manager and offers an explanation and some tactical suggestions. In fact, he cites a couple of studies that suggest that offering explicit Skinnerian rewards for success may dampen creativity. Other behaviors he sees as contributing to successful creativity include breaking away from the network of associates and ties that link one to directional pursuits, taking risks, and confronting fear -- especially the fear of failure.

That's really all there is to the book, stripped of its examples (which are often surprising and always interesting), definitions, and thesis repetition: important innovations come from collisions or combinations of different fields; observation and analysis suggest ways to encourage those encounters; failure shouldn't discourage an innovator, nor should he or she be afraid to break away from traditional settings and take risks.

The photo on the dust jacket is of an immensely complex highway structure where vehicles are carefully channeled onto ramps designed to guard against collision by providing no intersection at all. Vehicles in it travel in lanes only with others going in the same direction. Hello?

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*To read Ubiquity's interview with Frans Johansson, go to:*

[http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/interviews/v5i31\\_johansson.html](http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/interviews/v5i31_johansson.html)

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