

To dream, perchance to innovate



by social innovator **KEN BANKS**

BEFORE we begin, a caveat. There are entire collections of books promising to unlock the secrets to successful, disruptive, world-changing innovation. Enough, most likely, to fill an entire bookshop. If you're looking for a book that gives you a 10-step process to success then you'll not find that book here, or anywhere in our imaginary bookshop. It simply doesn't exist.

That said, *The Dream Café* is an enjoyable read. It follows something of a trend these days, breaking its content down alphabetically in a similar vein to Liam Black's fun critique of social innovation last year. (If you want a book that takes a hard, critical, entertaining look at the social innovation and social entrepreneurship worlds, I highly recommend Liam Black's *Social Entrepreneurs A to Z*.)

The "A to Z" approach may not be new, but it does achieve the stated aim of the authors to help make the book something you can consume quickly and easily, in bite-sized chunks. Attention spans aren't what they used

to be, even if you are working on the next big thing.

But, back to *The Dream Café*. Filled with those bite-sized nuggets of wisdom and advice, this is a solid read on a number of levels, taking the reader through techniques and methods that help create a conducive environment for innovation. And the title gives away what they think the best environment might be. Yes, indeed. It's a café.

In the world outside publishing, the authors spend most of their time creating cafés for their clients. "Our experience confirms that innovation is as much a product of place as it is of people." However unlikely it may sound, innovation folklore is littered with tales of epiphany moments at water coolers, garages or parking lots. If the sparks of innovation can be nurtured there, then why not a café?

The authors almost apologetically justify themselves. "Our research has led us to understand how the ad hoc informality that enables a café to become a location for



again. After all, most disruptive ideas are initially met with skepticism before going on and changing, well, everything.

As Arthur C Clarke reminds us, most ideas go through three stages:

- It's completely impossible.
- It's possible, but it's not worth doing.
- I said it was a good idea all along.

The book brings this to life by reminding us of Steve Jobs and his battle with the Apple board on his return. Jobs had to drag them kicking and screaming into his brave new world . . . no-one would argue now about whether he was right . . .

Other companies aren't fortunate enough to have that kind of visionary at the helm, and *The Dream Café* drives home what can happen to companies who fail to move with the times. Kodak gets a particular shout, but they could have also chosen Nokia, a very sad corporate crash if ever there was one. OK, I work in mobile so am particularly saddened by the demise of the Finnish handset maker, but Nokia was top of its game, arguably complacent with its position dominating the mobile market - and then came the iPhone, and it had no response. Since then its slide has been dramatic as it struggled to make sense of the smartphone world it found itself living in.

"Businesses today operate in a context where the unpredictability of competition and customer loyalty has changed the rules of engagement - one where chaos rules caution and predictability becomes the enemy of economic sustainability," the authors say. In today's brave new world, nothing is impossible. You can almost imagine a world without Google in five year's time, such can be the rampant demise of the corporate machine. The bigger they are, the harder they fall, no doubt.

But for now, while Google can at least be held up as one of the "new kind" of success stories, there's plenty we can learn from Google. From its 20 per cent rule, where staff spend one day per week working on anything they like, to the video games rooms and table football - and yes, no doubt cafés, too - Google is an incredible success story and there's much we can learn from its unconventional nature.

Indeed, the book's central pillar is that business has a lot to gain by emulating the 'radical and edgy ways of thinking' that we often associate with companies like theirs. Remembering my earlier caveat for a moment, though, it's worth reminding ourselves that while books like *The Dream Café* do a good job of unpicking the DNA of the Apples, Googles and Facebooks of the world, emulating their success remains a distant dream, whether or not you have a café in your office.

I enjoyed this book, and think it works well as a volume of ideas and innovation wisdom. If you're not convinced, I'd also recommend Scott Berkun's *The Myths of Innovation* - read with a flat white in your local café for maximum effect, obviously.



The Dream Café: Lessons in the Art of Radical Innovation

by Duncan Bruce and Geoff Crook, published by Wiley (£16.99).

brewing up extraordinary innovation can be emulated by business." The fact we've all spent time in cafés at some point in our lives - indeed, some of us spend more time in them than others - making it hard to argue against the kinds of random, serendipitous meetings of minds that can take place there. But nothing is guaranteed, of course.

Refreshingly, this book is very up-front about the scrappy, serendipitous, random side of innovation today. To truly appreciate it, you have to do exactly what it says on the tin - or cover, in this case - and put all of your misconceptions and skepticism to one side. Acknowledging that the "safety-first" approach to conventional innovation - including the "if it isn't broken, don't fix it" maxim - is from an earlier era is key. Companies who may have tried and failed to be serious innovators in the past need to dust themselves down, do a total reboot, forget everything and start all over

