

Curiosity, motivation and perseverance

Of feral cats and pet cats

How observations of the activity and roaming of cats reveal insights into breakthrough innovators



Early last summer an article in our local newspaper caught my eye. Some well-deserved visibility was given to my friend, Dick Warner (Professor Emeritus of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences), for the findings arising from his study of feralⁱ and pet cats. Dick and his colleagues attached radio transmitters to the cats to track their activity levels and roaming patterns in great detail. Of particular

interest to me was that they observed a marked difference in the activity level and roaming range between these two categories of cats, with the ferals being highly active nearly five times more often than the pets and one feral covering an area several hundred times that of the average pet.ⁱⁱ

At first blush my reaction was that the result was not entirely surprising. Feral cats, with no regular, reliable source of food available to them, would naturally range more actively and widely in search of sustenance. Pets, on the other hand, had no need to do so and, thus, would likely lazily stay closer to the hand that fed them. This fit nicely with a metaphor for the curiosity, motivation and perseverance of corporate employees and entrepreneurs, I thought, something along the lines of the business parable, “Who Moved My Cheese?”ⁱⁱⁱ Entrepreneurs rely only on their ability to bring a product successfully to market in order to put food on their table. Many corporate employees, in contrast, very willingly accept protection from such discipline of the marketplace and survive comfortably on a regular stream of paychecks from their employer.

Having said this, I sensed that something might be missing. Were there instances where the pet cats did, in fact, roam just as widely as the ferals? If so, under what conditions and circumstances was this observed? Answers to these two questions had the potential to truly complete the metaphor, since if a small number of pets behaved as ferals, we also would be able to account for the few, but exceptional individuals in corporations who are breakthrough innovators – those who exhibit a high degree of curiosity, motivation and perseverance in the face of challenges. The importance of these traits to their “connecting the dots” lay in the fact that the best innovators are active and roam widely in their curiosity; it is how they gather the “dots” that they later “connect.” With that, I emailed Dick and set up a time to meet with him over coffee to probe him a bit further than what I could pick up from the newspaper account alone.

About ten days later, as we discussed his observations derived from this and a number of earlier, yet related detailed studies he had conducted over several decades, Dick provided me with the missing piece in the puzzle. While none of the feral cats had been neutered, nearly every pet cat had been. He had, in fact, observed a consistent pattern of exceptional wandering from within the pet cat category – from the pets that had not been neutered!

The metaphor now had a new, yet unfortunate, richness to it. It was not only the presence or lack of food that made the difference between the two categories of cats, as if it were merely a matter of how content they were or how motivated they needed to be in order to survive. Instead, something more profound and disturbing was at the root of it. The neutered pet cats simply had the drive taken out of them!

If the metaphor held, the pet cats still represented corporate employees, but now distinguished into two sub-categories: (1) the neutered pet cats, having no drive to leave home, represented those employees who had lost their will to appropriately search for new ideas and challenge the system, and (2) the non-neutered pet cats, retaining their drive while being provided for by their owner, represented those employees who could still venture forth and be “insubordinate above and beyond the call of duty,” making significant things happen for customer and company alike.

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I bounced this off of my innovation research collaborator, Ray Price, who, as a cat owner, immediately responded that neutered cats were *a lot* easier to manage. Ray shared the metaphor with his colleague Karen Hyman, who further noted that the classical Greek view of drive, motivation and the creative urge in general was tied to the god *Eros*, who also embodied sexual drive.^{iv} Karen, too, while not anticipating this result, was fully on board with the reality of it as being consistent with that observed not only in the corporate present,^v but also in general over millennia.

Application of these insights

So where does this leave us in terms of working within this metaphor and applying it for advantage to innovation in mature firms? ➤

First, I suggest that it provides a clear basis upon which to challenge many motivational admonitions from management. If they come from the same management team that previously emotionally “neutered” the employee, it is no wonder that the charge to simply look elsewhere for new “cheese” rings hollow to them.

Second, this metaphor provides a somber warning, yet encouraging advice, to aspiring innovators. Its warning is that succumbing to being “neutered” ultimately will reduce your potential for impact. Its encouraging advice is that there is such a thing as being a non-neutered pet. In other words, you don’t have to work in an entrepreneurial start-up to experience the breadth of possibilities available to those who seek to make things happen. While it may be difficult and require different skills to succeed (such as being assertive, rather than aggressive), there is an extremely important place for such individuals in many large, mature companies.

Third, and finally, this metaphor also provides a warning and encouraging advice to management. If they truly want curiosity, motivation and perseverance from their employees as they pursue innovation and its benefits, managers must neither “neuter” them nor let them run wild. Instead, they must develop their employees in ways that encourage company-appropriate behavior in challenging the status quo.

My personal experience is that many of these skills are transferred tacitly from generation-to-generation within a firm, although intentional attention to them has the potential to turn around a dysfunctional environment. ■

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ⁱ A feral cat is one that has transitioned from being domesticated to wild. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feral>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.news-gazette.com/news/university-illinois/2011-06-20/feral-cats-travel-far-and-wide.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ Spencer Johnson, Who Moved My Cheese? (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1998).

^{iv} Ray and Karen lead an effort in our college that is reconsidering aspects of engineering education and how it might be enhanced by incorporating insights from fields such as organizational behavior and the humanities. Karen provided the following thoughts for those who might be interested in digging deeper into this metaphor and the connections that both the classical Greeks and more modern writers have observed: “*Thymos*, commonly translated as spiritedness or ambition, was understood by the ancients as part of the soul closely connected with *eros*. The wikipedia listing on *thymos* articulates the basic concept reasonably well (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thumos>). The ambitious, the courageous, the deeply philosophical individuals of classical thought and literature – Socrates, Alcibiades, Achilles – all are portrayed as having souls in which these elements of *eros* or *thymos* are abundant. For additional early insight, the Platonic dialogue *The Symposium* is worth looking at, given that it is a dialogue about love and *eros*. It uses metaphor and images to portray these aspects of the soul. There also are a number of good contemporary writers and thinkers who are very friendly to thinking about notions of “feral” animal spirits and their relation to human action and organizational behavior. Alan Bloom’s Love and Friendship has a good opening chapter on this topic, and Eva Brann, long-time dean of St. John’s College, is a very thoughtful writer on these matters. Finally, it would be interesting to explore Freud’s writings on *eros*, to understand how the ancient and modern perspectives are different, and how that affects modern organizational behavior and literature.” Karen later directed me to additional relevant references of note, including C.S. Lewis’ The Four Loves.

^v The following from Nobel Prize winner in Economics, Edmund Phelps, summarizes this, as well: “I personally hold that the classical spirit of challenge and self-discovery is a fundamental human trait. By showing how the risk-taking activity of individuals contributes to social benefits, economics helps societies to accommodate what Augustine called our “restlessness of heart.” This is the better part of our human nature. Societies that suppress this restlessness stagnate and die. The issue of morality in economics is neither the fairness of income distribution nor the stability of financial systems. It is how human institutions can be shaped to correspond to human nature—to man’s nature as an innovator.” From “Economic Justice and the Spirit of Innovation,” First Things (October 2009).

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