Pioneering can be learned

A *pioneer* has specific competencies that a *follower* does not have, or has to a much lesser degree. For example, the capability of gathering information but also processing this information for use in his own business, are skills that a pioneer has developed to a large degree. But people who are not pioneers can also learn these competencies.

Where do pioneers get their information and how do they learn from it? If you can find out you can possibly stimulate others to do the same. Whoever wants to start up something new or solve a problem, consciously or unconsciously follows a process of collecting information in order to implement the best solutions. This process can be reproduced in a circuit diagram that has been developed by Jan Buurma (see box). Pioneers apparently follow this process quickly and easily. In the same way, there are other obvious pioneering characteristics which can be linked to improving innovation potential and innovation climate.

>> Pioneers follow the whole process

The circuit diagram shows the most important differences between pioneers and followers. Pioneers are more observant of the things happening around them and they can switch to something new more quickly than other entrepreneurs. It all begins by following the whole process in the circuit diagram – sometimes more than once. Followers do only part of it. The pioneer follows one, two or more

strategic lines and seeks out structural solutions when making a choice. Sticking plaster solutions do not exist in his vocabulary. He can switch rapidly because he can find the right people and involve them in a short space of time. He can assess when he can do something himself and when he needs someone else (Lans, 2010). One entrepreneur in this research project admitted: 'If I go to the council office on my own, I just get worked up and angry. Now I take a communication advisor with me, and then they listen.'
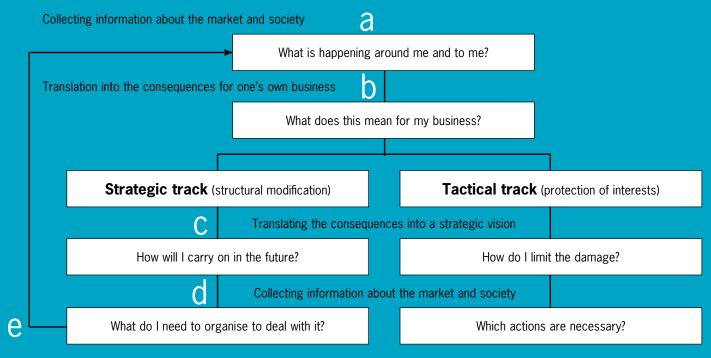
>> Creative and persistent

It is striking to note that pioneers do not have a defensive attitude. Instead of stamping their feet when a certain regulation works out completely wrong, or complaining that government authorities want to ruin agriculture, they try to be creative and are persistent in thinking up solutions for their specific problem. When it later appears that other people have also been dealing with this problem, they are not really interested. It is mainly the steps that lead from collecting information up to, and including, translating the

Four crop farmers have merged their three businesses and work closely together. They have operated under the name De Sjalon since 14th March 2008.

Circuit diagram for innovative entrepreneurship

Collecting information about the market and society

a

| What is happening around me and to me? |

Translation into the consequences for one's own business

b

| What does this mean for my business? |

| **Strategic track** (structural modification) | **Tactical track** (protection of interests) |

c Translating the consequences into a strategic vision

| How will I carry on in the future? | How do I limit the damage? |

d Collecting information about the market and society

| What do I need to organise to deal with it? | Which actions are necessary? |

e

Balancing and implementing the found solutions

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vision into concrete activities, that run quite smoothly. One pioneer gets a buzz from reading news magazines for example, and is very interested in what is happening in the outside world and knows how to translate this for his own business.

>> From the football field

At each connecting point, the pioneer uses different sources. To gather information he calls on 'information providers', such as traders and clients, but also his own experience. In translating this into consequences for his own business the pioneer uses 'interpreters'. This could include his own insights, but also things he picks up on the sidelines of a football field, from overseas examples or from the Chamber of Commerce (Lans, 2009). To translate this into the strategic vision, the pioneer seeks advice by 'creativity promoters'. He can test his ideas on partners, business partners, network supervisors. But other branches, a creativity course or an overseas visit can foster the pioneer's creativity. The pioneer translates the vision into concrete activities after he has consulted with experts, such as process supervisors or lawyers or via professionals, such as trade journals, retired growers or a model business.

>> The outside world is necessary

Implementing the solutions he has found is the most difficult step. Not because he cannot do it, but because he really needs the outside world to do it. It is precisely because the pioneer is ahead of his time and he has unexpected or strange plans, that he meets resistance: the council does not see why it should approve the plan; there are competing interests or bureaucracy slows everything down. The trick is to get all these parties, clients or personnel behind the plan. Pioneers are often soloists. They do a lot of abstract thinking and are less concrete. That works against them. There are also pioneers who are very good in bringing people together and they derive their innovations from this. A good example is the chrysanthemum grower who brought together various parties to find an innovative solution for structural problems in their sector with increasing costs. In this last step, pioneers have the support of 'implementers and supporters'. This group comprises diverse people and institutions such as communication advisors, researchers, subsidy funds, personal circle of friends or provincial government authorities.

>> Learning competencies

The entrepreneur that follows the circuit diagram quickly and smoothly has a number of specific competencies. He is, for example, creative, can think strategically, is persistent, can gather and analyse information, can collaborate in networks and communicate professionally. The question is; can a future entrepreneur or an existing one, learn these competencies? Can others stimulate the learning process? Thomas Lans en Jos Verstegen, both working for Wageningen UR and researching competencies, both believe that it is possible.

>> Eighty percent can be developed

Competencies that closely relate to someone's character – consider, for example, creativity – are difficult to develop for someone who does not have them. Changing one's character is after all difficult. Some people will always have to try harder to become an entrepreneur than others and will possibly never achieve that 100 percent. But Lans and Verstegen's proposition is that everyone can learn 80 percent of the needed competencies to be a good businessman (Mulder, 2007). Along with this, both researchers differentiate between starters and existing entrepreneurs. Stimulating someone to start a business requires different stimulants than stimulating existing entrepreneurs to become more entrepreneurial. To begin with, the idea is to create an entrepreneurial climate already at school level. This is happening more and more, observes Verstegen. Students have to manage their own mini-business, whereby they even have

to register with the Chamber of Commerce. As well as that, the introduction of competence-directed education has created more opportunities for initiatives directed at entrepreneurship.

>> Learning to see opportunities

Existing entrepreneurs will, above all, have to learn to discern opportunities and realise them. Lans and Verstegen indicate that it is also useful if entrepreneurs have an instrument to compare themselves with others in entrepreneurship. The government can stimulate the development and use of this tool. Experience has taught that the commitment to implement innovative behaviour can be lost in the daily grind. Moreover, it would be good for the government to stimulate network forming by promoting regional clusters where private business, research institutions, consultancies and other institutions work together on innovative entrepreneurship. In policy, set down objectives fosters entrepreneurship better than setting down means. It is also beneficial to set criteria for businesses in financial/economic regulations and stimulation subsidies. Another way to stimulate entrepreneurship is via exemplary role models. A pioneer that is in the limelight can be an important source of inspiration for aspirant entrepreneurs and colleagues. Farmers and growers that initially seemed unwilling to change, might do that after a business analysis. What about farmers that really do not want to? You have to leave them alone, say Lans and Verstegen in stereo. 'Agriculture does not only need pioneers.'