

New wealth is created not by prophets but by heretics. They are the ones who not only challenge the way a business runs but offer an entirely new way of thinking about an industry. Not satisfied with something better, they want something different.

**Gary Hamel**

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MAVERICKS.



## MAVERICKS

## HITTING A MOVING TARGET.

The tools of Lanny's consulting trade are big, flapping pads of paper and miles of masking tape that wallpaper notes around a room. When he picks up a Sanford indelible pen, Lanny goes into brainstorming mode with an intensity that can be more than a little daunting.

Now Lanny gripped the pen. It poised, expectantly, over the empty white page.

OK, so we had a word—Maverick—but what the hell did it mean? How did the word and Bill's career intersect? Was Bill a one-off manager; so unique that his experiences had little to offer to others in the business world? How could we turn Bill's scattered experiences into the usual "Ten Steps to Nirvana" that seemed to be a requisite of a respectable biz book? And what if...

"Whoa!" said Lanny a little testily. "First things first: Let's try to define just what constitutes a maverick."

Bill stepped up to the plate. "A maverick does the unexpected and goes against conventional wisdom," he said eagerly. I started to frame a question, but Lanny gave me the evil eye: The essence of brainstorming, as I well knew, was to dump as many ideas as quickly as possible without stopping to critique or "discount" them. So, we dumped, as Lanny's pen made nervous *skritch-skritch*s across the rapidly filling paper.

"A maverick attacks widely-accepted ideas and

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beliefs that bind us to the commonplace.” “A maverick is energized by statements such as: We can’t do that because... We don’t have the resources... It’s not our area of responsibility...”

I had heard those excuses before. Sometimes coming out of my very own mouth.

“A maverick is an individual who thinks and acts in an unpredictable manner that results in new insights into innovative ways to live.”

“A maverick appears to be a troublemaker, but is really acting with boldness and directness without regard to immediate consequences.”

Then Bill obligingly supplied “Alternative words,” a veritable flood: “Nonconformist, obstinate, troublemaker, mischief-maker, malcontent, rabble-rouser, individualist, free spirit, independent, eccentric, loner, free thinker...”

“In other words...” I interrupted.

Bill wasn’t finished: “...against the rules, skeptic, self-sufficient, self-contained, self-motivated, inner-directed, footloose and fancy free, freewheeling, ungoverned, autonomous, self-regulating, unattached, unaffiliated, enjoying liberty...”

“...in other words, he’s a royal pain in the ass,” I laughed.

“Let me recite something George Bernard Shaw wrote,” Bill said, intoning in his best Ontario drawl:

“*Reasonable men adapt to their environment.*”

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*“Unreasonable men adapt their environment to themselves.*

*“Thus all progress is the result of the efforts of unreasonable men.”*”

“Which means?” I asked.

“The difference between a pain in the ass and a maverick is getting things done. Accomplishment.”

“That’s why Kimberly-Clark never fired Bill,” Lanny giggled.

“So, the difference between the maverick and the pain in the ass,” I said, “is that the maverick is dissatisfied with the way things are—and does something about it, instead of simply bitching about it?”

Lanny and Bill nodded emphatically. What makes the maverick so infuriating (to control-freak managers, such as myself) is also the key to their success.

They’re bureaucracy-busters whose secretive back-channels unclog sclerotic lines of organizational miscommunication. They recruit ad hoc teams of like-minded, fast-moving conspirators (without getting anyone’s permission, therefore short-circuiting the organization’s tendency to say no). Their very sneakiness keeps vulnerable innovations off the corporate radar screen long enough for ideas to take some quiet test flights. And if they crash and burn? No big deal—or not as *big* a deal as if the project had been high-profile and, therefore, highly political.

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“So the maverick gets things done?” I asked. “But what are those... *things*?”

“The maverick,” Lanny intoned, “creates freedom...”

“...most people view it as ‘freedom from,’” Bill interjected. “The maverick sees it as *freedom to*. Freedom is a different sort of power.”

“And the maverick creates freshness,” Lanny added.

“Freshness?” I interrupted. The word seemed a little *soft*.

“Call it renewal,” said Lanny. “It could be in the context of a corporation developing new products, new businesses. It could be in the context of an organization in which management, processes and systems need revamping.”

“All companies are looking to grow,” said Bill. “There are three ways they do that: acquisitions—making a deal, when they don’t know what else to do.”

“Acquisitions have a terrible track-record,” said Lanny. “Only the investment bankers win.”

“Second,” said Bill, “the company buys its own stock. When a company does that, I say to myself: They don’t have any place to spend their money that’s *new*. When a CEO is in that kind of situation, he’d better find a maverick.”

“So the third choice for an organization is renewal,” said Lanny.

“In other words, innovation,” I said.

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Lanny shook his head. For such a nice guy, he can be brutally direct when you've missed a point.

"'Everyone's an innovator' is complete BS," he said. "The conventional thinking is, more ideas! But the organization has antibodies that reject too many new ideas. It can't handle the ideas it produces now."

"But the maverick knows how to evade those antibodies," Bill grinned.

Still, it seemed to me, this creature was awfully elusive, a will-o'-the-wisp.

Lanny agreed.

"When you brand somebody, when you call someone a maverick," he said as his pen paused, "in a way, it's an oxymoron. You're branding the unbranded. There's an ambivalence about branding, categorizing, that the maverick resists because it constrains his or her freedom."

"But how does a manager *see* a maverick?" I demanded.

"The maverick should have a sly grin on his face," said Bill. He had a sly grin on his face.

"Like the wind, mavericks are seen by their effects," said Lanny after he had pondered a moment. "You can't identify a maverick directly. They're unbranded, right? You know them only indirectly, by the residual effects of the maverick having been 'here.' You can only follow the maverick's trail after he has made it."

"*Whew!*" I laughed. It *did* seem a little metaphysical.

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“The maverick lives with the herd but isn’t a *part* of the herd,” said Bill, bringing us back to the metaphor.

“Look at it this way,” Lanny said. “Bill had autonomy, but he also had anonymity. The maverick is part of a secret society.”

“*Whew!*” again.

## INSIDE THE MAVERICK’S SECRET SOCIETY.

This “secret society” stuff is exactly what makes managers, such as myself, perennially paranoid—the sense that the troops out there on the production floor or in the executive rat-warren or in the newsroom are *up to something*. And because it was hidden, probably on purpose, it couldn’t be anything very good.

As we chatted I remembered the nights I had gone home after putting yet another edition of the *Register’s* feature section to bed, fearful that I had gotten behind the curve, that I was missing something, that I was woefully under-informed about the little rustlings in the newsroom’s underbrush—creatures of the night!—things that I *should* know and didn’t. Things that would hurt. Bad.

I didn’t question that paranoia. After all, that’s what I was being paid for—to *run things*. Right?

And now Bill was revealing the dirty little secret: All through his four decades at Kimberly-Clark, he had been running his own herd. He was one of *them*.

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“Does she court hara-kiri by seeking out her most unremitting critics to help with her most sensitive projects?”

It was a pretty good questionnaire—and, oddly enough, I really didn’t want to take it myself. Was it because I feared I would flunk? Or that I would pass?

I glanced up. The windows in Lanny’s office had darkened, reflecting three very tuckered-out people who had, we realized, just begun to peer into a very deep pool, one filled with many interesting (and, quite possibly) dangerous creatures. And might be bottomless.