

# The human side of **INNOVATION**: the power of people in love with people

Mauro Porcini explains to Alan Hosking how unicorns and kindness provide opportunity for growth.

FROM THE US



## PROFILE

Mauro Porcini is Senior Vice President and Chief Design Officer at PepsiCo in New York, US. He is President of Foundation Politecnico di Milano USA and author of *The Human Side of Innovation - The Power of People in Love with People*.

### WHO ARE THE “UNICORNS” YOU TALK ABOUT IN YOUR BOOK? WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO FIND THEM?

Unicorns are the ideal innovators, they are “people in love with people”. They are individuals who are passionate about creating excellence for others. I spent a lot of time in

the book describing them and their skills, and detailing their superpowers so you can find and hire them, and then develop and retain them. I did this because they make the difference between meaningful and successful innovation, or failure and irrelevance. They trump design processes and tools – they themselves are the secret ingredient of the innovation recipe.

Some of their qualities seem obvious. They are change-agents, dreamers and risk-takers. But when was the last time you heard an executive ask prospective hires if they were optimistic, kind or curious? Or if they have an aesthetic sense and humility? Or if they’re storytellers, and know how to have fun? These qualities can give a competitive edge to you and your organization by driving quality, efficiency and excellence. But they are too often neglected.

There are 24 gifts that define a unicorn. These partially come from natural talent, but they still need to be trained and developed. Someone with natural talent who doesn’t work to improve their talent will ultimately be less successful than someone with less natural talent who focused on training and practice.

They are difficult to find because there is no school or institution out there that teaches all of these qualities holistically. If you are lucky, you learn them by doing. You discover them through failures and successes, through the culmination of your experiences. Then you are in a position to share what you have learned with others to help them develop these qualities themselves.

### WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT ENTREPRENEURIAL, SOCIAL, AND ENABLING GIFTS TO LOOK FOR IN PROSPECTIVE HIRES?

The unicorn’s entrepreneurial gifts are the set of skills that directly impact our ability to build an innovation strategy. These traits shape the way we manage a whole series of variables, processes and situations that may come up in an innovation project, whether it’s a personal project or an entire business strategy. The entrepreneurial gifts include the ability to be a visionary, experimenter and an executor of strategies and projects. Unicorns must be original, intuitive and proactive. Lastly, they must be risk-takers, especially as our society continues to innovate at such a breakneck pace.

The unicorn’s social gifts are indispensable for working with other people and navigating dense social networks. These characteristics are fundamental for innovating holistically, by utilizing a community’s collective know-how, and avoiding dangerous roadblocks on the way. These skills include kindness, trust, love for diversity, respect and empathy. They also include the ability to be charismatic storytellers, generous mentors and to have fun with others.

The unicorn’s enabling gifts give the individual the mindset, the culture and the energy required to move forward when navigating the unexplored and prickly territory typical of innovation. These gifts include curiosity, humility, confidence, optimism, resilience, attentive listening and the ability to be comfortable with discomfort.

### YOU TALK ABOUT THE VALUE OF KINDNESS. WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?

Simply, it is important because our society needs it. Ethically and morally, it is the right choice. More specifically to business and industry, kindness can be valuable not only socially, but also economically. Strategic kindness, spread across the entire organization, is a formidable driver of effectiveness, productivity and quality.

Kindness can facilitate bonding amongst team

members. It inspires employees to support each other, work for each other and achieve their goals together. This is especially important in a hyper-specialized world, where you need cross-functional teams to work in full synergy with one another. The time for the one-man or one-woman show is over. You need a one-team show, and kindness is an incredible glue for that team. It removes the inefficiency of having people betraying each other’s trust and doing redundant back-up work because of that lack of trust.

Kindness within teams can help us individually, by saving and supporting us in our moments of weakness and making us aware of our blind spots. Kindness creates a far better working environment because, of course, we prefer to work with kind, considerate people rather than mean or malicious people.



If kindness can drive productivity within a single team, imagine that level of productivity multiplied and scaled to the hundreds or thousands of people in an organization. A widespread culture of productivity benefits the organization on both the macro and micro level. On the other hand, an unkind company culture can be like a cancer, sapping productivity and motivation from within.

### AND WHY IS KINDNESS MORE



**IMPORTANT TODAY THAN IN THE PAST?**

Good question! For a long time, kindness was not considered a necessary skill in business. We were actually taught the opposite. We were told that being tough on our teams and putting people against each other was a good strategy for extracting the best out of them. It's a Darwinian kind of approach. The business world was apparently not made for kind people. Instead, they have often been perceived as weak.

In the book, I share how a lack of kindness has never been efficient, but these companies could afford that inefficiency because of certain circumstances. For too many years, established products and brands have been protected by huge barriers to entry, such as the scale of production, distribution and communication. It was almost impossible for a regular person to compete with those big companies. Therefore, these barriers were protecting the good products, as well as the many mediocre ones.

Today, however, the situation has changed. People can now compete with big brands much more easily than ever before. You can invent a product and get funding online or through the proliferation of funds hunting for the next start-up. You can produce this product at a lower cost, thanks to new technologies and globalization, and you can reach the end-user directly, through e-commerce and social media, bypassing

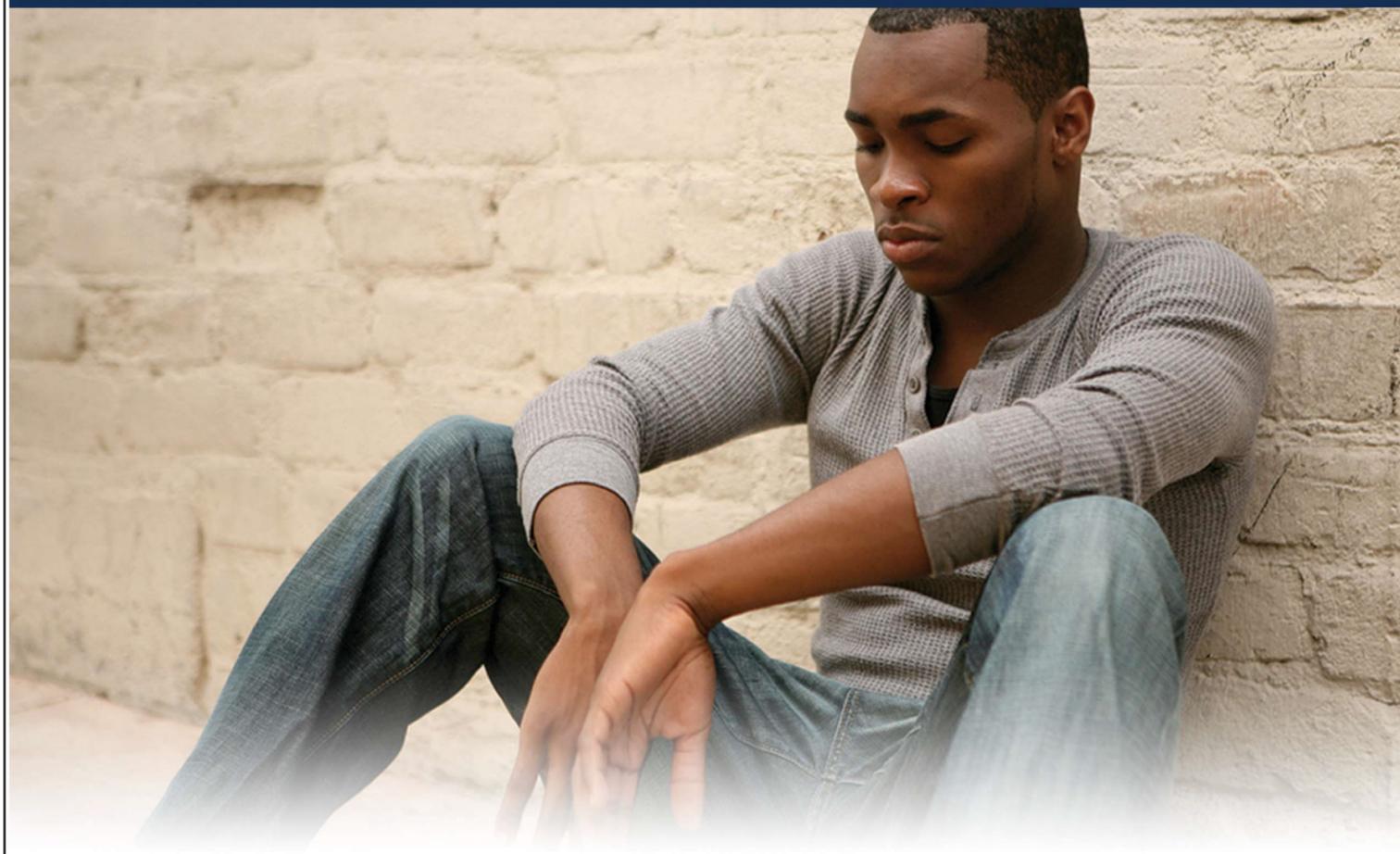
traditional large-scale distribution and massive media investments that were once necessary.

Nowadays, this means that any organization, big or small, has only one choice: it must create extraordinary products based on people's needs and wants, at every level from object to packaging, from branding to service, from communication to experience. Mediocrity is no longer defensible. Focusing on the human being, in an authentic way, becomes the most powerful way to distinguish your company and product. Either excellence is produced or someone else will do it in your place. I call this time we live in "the age of excellence." It is a magical moment, in which business and economic interests are finally re-aligning themselves with the interests of people and society.

In this scenario, your company needs the highest levels of effectiveness. It can't afford the lack of productivity of the past. Therefore, it is crucial that your people are able to work in the most efficient way possible. If you work in a corporation, you know how sensitive these enterprises are about the level of productivity and effectiveness of the organization. How many of them see kindness as one the key drivers of that productivity and effectiveness? Kindness is one of the many unexpected values that unicorns possess that can transform a company. This, along with the unicorns' many other traits, may uncover incredible opportunities for growth for any organization. ■

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