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The long road to innovation  
What makes a country more creative?

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The spoken word applies.

(Greeting)

However different the traditions and situations may be in China and Europe, one probably irrefutable fact applies to both economic regions: In the long term, innovativeness determines our success in the world economy. Only those who always stay a few steps ahead of the competition in developing new markets, products, services and procedures can secure themselves a leading position. The only question now is how something as fragile as creativity can be managed economically. It's not enough merely to promote forward-looking, high value-adding sectors or increase the budgets for education and research. Rather, it's more about attitudes, working practices, value systems and, of course, pure handicraft. This puts demands on everyone: teachers and journalists, professors and parents, bosses and trade unionists, bankers and politicians, scientists and inventors. In the following, I will summarise what many years of personal experience and extensive research have taught me about what each and every one of us can contribute on the crucial road to creativity and innovation.

1.

Give your most creative minds a 10% break from their daily tasks. It's an investment that pays off on average 100% of the time.

Groundbreaking new ideas spring forth from the minds of brave and creative individuals. However, ideas are only a first step. Successful companies leave much of the job of transforming such ideas into genuine innovations to small teams of employees with different functions and from different departments, who collaborate in a very open and informal manner and can step back from their everyday chores when required. This shows us that we need more interdisciplinary exchange, more job rotation, more think tanks, more basic research, more networking and more cooperation between institutions that may, at first sight, appear to have little in common.

2.

The idea of landing on the moon didn't bring us anything – except the 200,000 patents that took us there.

Such teams (as well as eccentric inventive personalities) are highly prized by companies that encourage innovation. They may not produce practicable results right away, but when they do, they completely redefine entire sectors and areas of our lives, opening up new perspectives for Mankind, changes that make life more pleasant and more worth living for. They must become the heroes of our modern societies – alongside all the sportsmen, actors and pop stars! Major prizes and all the media can help in this process by providing exciting reports about leading innovators and consistently separating fact from opinion when presenting new technologies.

3.

We love inventors and creative boffins above all else. As long as they're foreign!

Trendsetting companies place great faith in the innovative strength of their own employees, and the world's leading countries believe in every one of their citizens. After all, we all know that reality is only partly defined "objectively" from the outside. The rest is determined by how we interpret this. Sport isn't the only domain in which success and failure are primarily determined by mental factors.

4.

Innovation is not possible without curiosity. Why then do teachers constantly ask, "What do you know?" instead of, "What don't you know yet?"

It all starts in kindergarten and at junior school. Creativity, originality and independent thought must be supported and encouraged. Unthinking and superficial criticism, the alleged necessity of conforming to all that is customary and normal, and squeezing children into an education system targeted at the masses can rob them of much of their love of novelty and experimentation. Of course we need standards, rules and guidelines. But we also need the striving of ingenious individuals constantly seeking to broaden their horizons. So don't let us trample it underfoot through excessive pressure to succeed at school or exaggerated instruction at universities! What is more, the half-life of knowledge is getting ever shorter. Today, we need a love of lifelong learning, curiosity and the ability to question everything time and again.

5.

Every global company can be turned into a family-run business. You just need enough families.

Innovation is the fruit of individual minds or small teams. We therefore need decentralisation, deregulation and the creation of small, complementary units. This doesn't mean that large institutions, companies or authorities should be discarded. Rather, they should be reorganised to promote entrepreneurship and the delegation of responsibility so that the advantages of flexible, entrepreneurial creative cells can be fused with those of the mighty and powerful superstructure.

6.

52 times a year, you play the lottery to try to become a millionaire. So why not give new technologies just one try?

All the financial, fiscal and control options imaginable must be used to ensure that enough domestic and foreign venture capital is available for putting new ideas and techniques into practice. In so doing, all the players on the market must be aware that only substantial risk can produce substantial returns in the long term.

7.

Man can learn only from his mistakes, not his successes. Have you already made enough mistakes today?

Creativity is not accidental. You can block it or promote it. The tools used to encourage creativity are well-known: the Law of Big Numbers (pursuing many ideas), lateral thinking (combining apparently unrelated areas), error tolerance (fear of failure breeds hesitancy), developing functioning suggestion schemes, forbidding all well-known innovation "killers" (arguments like "We've always done it that way"), maintaining intense, informal communication and, of course, all forms of brainstorming (generating ideas without hasty criticism).

Unfortunately, such demands appear hard to put into practice, and old-style compartmental thinking is widespread. And yet most innovations aren't quantum leaps at all anymore. Rather, they are the result of the surprising transference of one preset structure or practice onto another, a process we know and love from watching our children learning to think and speak. Anyone whose thoughts move only along the busy motorways of normal associations needn't wonder if the variety of life passes them by on the unknown paths to the left and right.