The ideas man

PART BOFFIN AND PART PROPHET, there is also something of the salesman in Roger La Salle's insistence that innovating – developing new products and services or better processes – is child's play. "It's so simple" is his mantra. However, the engineer, entrepreneur, academic and inventor has the pedigree to back up his words. La Salle was part of the team that developed InterScan, the Australian microwave landing system that won an international competition in the 1980s, and he worked for Motorola and Invetech (now part of Vision Systems) in the 1990s. He has invented successful devices, including clocks that receive a radio signal so they never lose time, and a looping tool for a telephone linesman that pays for itself in efficiency gains after 10 days. "That is still very successful and 20 years later no one's got around the patents," he says. The author of how-to books on innovation and a former judge on the ABC's *The New Inventors,* he travels the world working as a motivational speaker in various guises: as a government consultant (he is a director of the Victorian government-supported centre INNOVIC); as an academic (a chair of innovation at Queen's University, Belfast); and as a mentor to individual businesses. And he still lodges a provisional patent for something every 10 weeks, he says. "I'm working in anti-static, I'm working on locks, heaters – I just do this for fun."

PAUL JONES

Roger La Salle: 'You can put pressure on people to be creative'

Innovation to you is not about quantum leaps, but small incremental changes. Isn't this "improvement" rather than innovation?
I define innovation as change that adds value. Take Microsoft – they are the world champion innovators. They constantly migrate their product to a better place, and then make it non-backward-compatible so you're forced to buy it. That's classic, consumer-driven innovation, or market push. You can innovate anything. One of the greatest drivers of change is frustration. A lot of people don't realise that. Every product or service essentially exists for a single reason: because it serves a need. Most often needs are expressed by a curse. So if you listen for the curse, you'll find the frustration – [then you can] solve the problem. It's so simple.

How did your experience as an entrepreneur contribute to your theory?
Having been an entrepreneur, I realised that with new products and services, the biggest risk by far is market risk. How do you eliminate that? Take a product and find out how many are selling in the world. If you can improve it and come to the market with a better one at a lower price, it's pretty easy to do a market forecast. The fact is, if you use that approach, it's almost no risk – as distinct from people who sit in a darkened room and invent something and go to the market with something quite novel. That's high risk.

What's a recent example of your theory helping a company to innovate successfully?
I did some work in Scotland a year ago with a company that makes canoe paddles. Now they've got a whole new range of canoe paddles coming on to the market as a result of a one-day workshop. They've got ones that glow in the dark if you lose one at night. They've got canoe paddles that unscrew for survival storage stuff inside them, ones that join together to make tent supports. Simple stuff.

You see innovation as more about engineering than culture?
I get frustrated when I see [a company's] innovation manager, and he thinks that title gives him licence to turn up in a T-shirt and jeans and sit on a beanbag, and that makes him creative. That's dumb. Being innovative is an engineering pursuit, just like designing the next iPod. You can be practical and systematic about it. I actually find you can put pressure on people to be creative. All you've got to do is give people some simple tools, a forum and some reward – often little more than recognition – and you're innovating. When we get into this stuff about creating an innovative culture, you spend a lot of money doing that. And on buying beanbags. This is an engineering process. Innovation doesn't have to be a matter of luck. It's a process you can install and instil and inspire people to do. Give them a process and force them to use it, and ideas will just fall off the hook. The next thing, of course, is to be able to evaluate those.

'Listen for the curse. One of the greatest drivers of change is frustration'

GINA McCOLL