



MAURO PORCINI: THE ERA OF EXCELLENCE

BY RAFFAELE PANIZZA

Mauro Porcini is both a philosopher of late capitalist industrial processes and the chief design officer of PepsiCo. Here he unpacks his consideration of the power of "design thinking" to reshape our world for the better, and explains why the best processes demand the best people.

According to Mauro Porcini – senior vice president and chief design officer of the colossus PepsiCo in New York since July 2012 – excellence is far more than the culmination of a creative process. It is a new geological era. Excellence represents the true Anthropocene, and we've been catapulted into it by the digital age. Now every flawed idea is inevitably superseded by a better vision, thanks to a Darwinian mechanism that rewards the most empathic and not the most voracious, the good and not the bad. In this scenario, the smallest players can overtake giants thanks to the unprecedented availability of venture capital flowing into ecosystems conceived by all kinds of visionaries, all over the globe. "For years we've been living in a world of incremental innovations, where products and services have been updated with superficial restyling, in keeping with the lipstick-on-a-pig formula," explains Porcini, who dropped into Condé Nast's offices while visiting Milan. "But now we've entered an age of substantial innovations." The motor of this change is not a product but a process, summed up in what Porcini calls "design thinking", as he explains in his book *L'età dell'eccellenza: innovazione e creatività per costruire un mondo migliore* ("The Age of Excellence: Innovation and Creativity to Build a Better World", published by **Il Saggiatore**). This rationale implies a natural penchant for innovation, experimentation and prototyping, an approach that Porcini assimilated at Milan Polytechnic before embarking on a brilliant career. After an illustrious stint as head of design at the multinational 3M, he moved on to Pepsi, where at the age of 46 he now heads a team of 300 spread across 15 design centres around the world. "In terms of interdisciplinarity, we're unique. Our approach conditions everything at Pepsi. One of my team members teaches design thinking at all company functions."

Do you think you might have written an overly optimistic book?

No, because I see myself as an innovator, and innovators need to be optimistic. That doesn't mean being naive, but seeing the snags and having the right mindset to solve them. The world is bound to fall into the hands of unicorns: people who are proactive and always looking for root causes, aesthetics with a holistic soul. Unicorns can't waste energy on pessimism.

So unicorns are good.

Being good means being a functional part of projects and kindling the

desire to share. Bad people cause colleagues and co-workers to take preventive backup measures to try and neutralise hostile scenarios. This leads to a series of redundant actions, like the secretive development of parallel projects where sharing is just a pretence, which is harmful for productivity and organisation. All too often companies underestimate this factor and reward professionals who obtain excellent business results but lack interpersonal skills, who are disruptive and shatter synergies.

Then what happens?

Companies spend millions on outside consultants to improve processes, and they fail to realise that the mistake was putting a bad person in charge of those processes in the first place. A process is like a brush: if you put it in the hand of a fool or a Picasso, you get different results. In the age of excellence, there'll be no space for products and services designed by bad people.

Why?

Because they'll oblige companies to give the right answers to the wrong questions. And those firms will be swept away.

Who protects the unicorns while they're maturing?

Mentors. They can be official guides or a series of informal guides whom the young innovator pieces together to create their personal "meta-mentor". I did it myself. At 30 I was already head of design at 3M, interacting with top executives in their 50s and 60s. I often said or did naive things, so I made myself a rule where I'd think about what my greatest role model would have done in the same situation. What would that level-headed vice president write in this email that requires such careful mediation? How would my favourite minimalist designer conceive this piece? How would someone like Kanye West revolutionise the status quo? What kind of playful approach would DJ Tiësto take to this project? And so on. It's a very important filter for nurturing your skills and building character.

In your team, how do you avoid inhibiting budding talents even when they're naive?

In practical terms, I created a division called Quick Cycle Innovation, comprising 30 people with very diverse profiles who have to create products extremely quickly, from conception to market launch. What happens if they fail? Nothing. It doesn't matter. But the culture of learning through

failure teaches people to create brands even with few resources, going against the idea that nothing can be done without billions. And then there's the "15 rule", where we encourage people to dedicate 15 per cent of their working hours to projects of their own imagination, and they do it on company time.

What works more than billions?

The design thinking process: creating feasible, desirable and marketable products, from prototyping until you get them to work, proceeding with a constant and iterative approach, as our professors at Milan Polytechnic taught us. At that point, you learn the highest form of synthesis: between beauty and functionality.

In the age of excellence, how do you protect yourself from those who poach other people's ideas?

Simply by being the best at realising those ideas. In today's world, patents are becoming less important, except in special fields like pharmaceuticals. One figure proves the point: 97 per cent of patents never recover the cost of the filing fees even after the launch of the related products. To defend your vision, the only real bulwark is the relevance of your design solution for the end consumer. This attitude to innovation spawns other innovations exponentially, supporting or competing with the original idea, and creating an enlarged ecosystem where new and better solutions keep emerging and eventually prevail. Competition is more open and aggressive than ever, and it's focused on the end user – people, human beings. The winner is whoever creates relevant 360-degree solutions, in multiple dimensions: the best product, the best brand, accessible with the best experience, communicated in the best way, distributed in the best way, and with the best possible service. All of that together. By not investing in one of these dimensions you risk leaving the door perilously open. If you don't solve a problem for your target audience, someone else will.

What will your New York offices be like when the pandemic subsides?

We'll follow a hybrid model. I think there's a need to go to a physical place where you collide with other human beings. Essentially we'll use the offices for three things: to create as a team, because the age of one-man shows is over; to cooperate to establish the best possible processes; and last but not least to celebrate all our successes together. **5**



L'età dell'eccellenza. Innovazione e creatività per costruire un mondo migliore, by Mauro Porcini, is published by Il Saggiatore.