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## **Internal Entrepreneurs – Competitive or Collaborative**

By Susan Foley

The recent passing of Ken Olsen, founder of Digital Equipment reminded me about the unique culture that he put in place. He built an environment that was both competitive and collaborative. Ken knew that a certain degree of competitiveness was healthy in an organization. He also knew that being collaborative was a key ingredient for getting things done across organizational boundaries.

Although many Digital employees thought that the competitive environment was unhealthy there were others that felt that it inspired and motivated them to achieve things beyond their expectations.

In our research we found that internal entrepreneurs are both collaborative and competitive. They are highly collaborative when they were working in their teams. They are collaborative to a point when working across the organization. They told us that at some point you have to move on, you can't wait any longer. Their competitive nature would eventually kick in. They had to keep things moving.

As a way to keep the competitive spirit going, Digital set up the New Ventures group to nurture and develop new innovations. It made sense to set up a group where new ideas and niche products had a chance of seeing the light of day. Even if some of them were competitive products.

Around that time we started building a new imaging system for the insurance industry. One day my boss Sandy handed me an email from Ken asking him why our group was building another imaging system when the company had already invested millions to build the existing one. I knew from the look on his face, that I was the one that would have to respond to Ken. There was a sense of urgency in my boss's directive to respond quickly and succinctly. The truth was that the existing system was not designed to handle the volume of claims that the insurance industry needed. So that's all I said in my email to Ken. It didn't take long before I got a response, one word – proceed.

Internal entrepreneurs aren't always so lucky to get a positive nod to go ahead with their projects. Although we were building a competitive product inside the company, it solved a problem that our customers required. The project was moved into the New Ventures group where it got the care and feeding it needed to be developed and launched successfully into the market. Being competitive worked in this case. It doesn't always.

Like internal entrepreneurs, organizations must find the right balance between collaboration and competitiveness.

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