

Gladwell on the History of Rock and Roll



How many best-selling authors would begin a public presentation by announcing that they don't want to discuss their books? And of that small group, how many would tell the audience that they would much prefer to talk about a now-defunct 70s rock band? The answer is, one: but then, **Malcolm Gladwell** is an original. The best-selling author of *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* and *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* was featured in the 51st session of the ongoing *Rotman Integrative Thinking™ Seminar Series* on April 3rd.

Many people refer to 'the story of rock and roll' as if it were a singular story, Gladwell told the crowd, but it is actually two stories. "In the 1960s and 70s, **Fleetwood Mac** went through a dizzying array of lineup changes, relationship issues, and

drug problems. If you listened now to their first few albums, you would have no idea who it was – they sounded nothing like the band we have come to know." At the other end of the spectrum is **The Eagles**, who came about their success in a much different manner. "Their very first album, *Desperado*, sounds unmistakably like the Eagles we have come to know, and they hit it big immediately. Only three years later, they released their first 'Greatest Hits' compilation; and then came *Hotel California* – which remains one of the best-selling records of all time."

The main difference between the two groups? "It took the Eagles just four years to create their greatest artistic achievement, while Fleetwood Mac took 16 years to make *Rumours*. As University of Chicago Professor **David Galenson** has shown in his research, creative people don't mature at a consistent rate: they can be either 'experimental' (like Fleetwood Mac), or 'conceptual' (like the Eagles.)"

Conceptual artists, such as **Picasso**, continue to innovate with ground-breaking new ideas throughout their career, while experimental types like **Cezanne** have one key idea for their whole career, which they continue to chip away at. "This distinction is important," says the UoF (Trinity College) graduate, "because in modern business, we

tend to favour one kind of innovator – the Picassos – and turn our backs on the Cezannes. And there are major implications."

Take the U.S. auto industry, which isn't known for being very innovative. "In fact, it has made several conceptual innovations – the muscle car, the SUV – that revised the very notion of how we drive." The Japanese, on the other hand, have not created new categories of cars; their focus has been on experimental innovations. "They work on things like reliability and low cost, over years and years."

Detroit is always looking for big ideas, says Gladwell. The problem? "The Cezanne model takes time; but North American managers want results now!" The same bias can be found in Silicon Valley, he says. "Show me a VC firm that will stick with a project for 10 years. Today, Picasso would be circled by VCs, while Cezanne would be ignored. It takes longer for us to warm to experimental ideas."

The trick for today's firms is to find a balance, he says. "It's no coincidence that the pharmaceutical, music and auto industries – all of which are wedded to the Picasso style of innovation – are in crisis at the moment. They need to change the way they think about innovation, and realize that there isn't just one story of rock and roll: there are two."

by Karen Christensen