

## MANAGING SERIAL INNOVATION - LEARNING FROM SOPRANOS

*Blogpost by Susanne Justesen, INNOVERSITY RESEARCH in July 2006*

Over the last couple of weeks I have become increasingly fascinated with the hugely popular and most talked-about TV series "Sopranos". The mobster series features the life of depressive mafia boss Tony Soprano and the life of his two families. Apparently, no American show on cable has ever been more successful with both critics and fans - and with good reason. I love it!

Watching The Sopranos on DVD is a great evening get-away from my writing, reading, thinking and analysis work done during daytime at Stanford. But even while watching Sopranos, innovation (the focus of my Ph.D.) never completely leaves my mind. And so I started wondering how on earth the Sopranos and other successful TV series manage to keep innovating - to capture their audience show after show, year after year?

### **"How do the successful TV series crew and cast manage this? How do they manage what one might appropriately call 'serial innovation?'"**

I realize that I do not have the answer to this question, but yet I started wondering - and began looking at the team behind the success of Sopranos - the cast, the crew - and I was soon to discover one interesting thing; namely that the managerial team (producer and co-producers, screenwriter and director) is NEVER the same from one episode to the next. NEVER! Is that not interesting?

For every episode of the Sopranos, either a new director or a new screenwriter will be added to the managerial team and someone else will exit; only the chief producer (Sopranos creator David Chase) has been constant over the six year production period. Everyone else is in and out - constantly. To illustrate this ever changing managerial team, I have made a list of the writers and directors for each of the 13 episodes of the first season, sourced from Wikipedia (click image to enlarge).

FIRST SEASON MANAGERIAL CREW: THE SOPRANOS			
NUMBER	TITLE:	SCREENWRITER	DIRECTOR
1	The Sopranos	David Chase	David Chase
2	46 Long	David Chase	Dan Attias
3	Denial, Anger, Acceptance	Mark Saraceni	Nick Gomez
4	Meadowlands	Jason Cahill	John Patterson
5	College	Jim Manos + Chase	Allen Coulter
6	Pax Soprana	Frank Renzulli	Alan Taylor
7	Down NEck	R. Green + M. Burgess	Lorraine Senna Ferrara
8	Legend of Tennessee Moltisanti	F. Renzulli + Chase	Tim Van Patten
9	Boca	J. Cahil, Green + Burgess	Andy Wolk
10	A hit is a hit	Bosso + Renzulli	Mathew Penn
11	Nobody knows anything	Frank Renzulli	Henry J. Bronchtein
12	Isabella	R. Green + Burgess	Allen Coulter
13	Dream of Jeannie Cusomano	David Chase	John Patterson

Could one of the explaining factors behind the 'art of serial innovation' be this constant constant mix and re-mix (many of the names appear several times) of the managerial team? It does most certainly make sense in that it would provide for the continuous re-creation and re-negotiation of the set, the series itself, the story-lines, the cast etc. Different people constantly not only 'manage' the story, the crew, the cast and the series, but also prevent 'the way things are done around here' from being introduced to the set.

Such managerial flux forces the crew to continuously negotiate and re-negotiate their individual part, both with the newcomers, and with the existing cast and crew - which maintains a sort of permeable boundary around the 'innovation group', preventing them from becoming too settled in their roles too quickly, one of the primary barriers to successful innovation. Imagine if organizational innovation was managed in the same way? Imagine if you brought in a new 'screenwriter' (content manager) for every innovation project? Or a new director (process manager) for every new episode (innovation project)?

### **INNOVATIVE INNOVATION PROCESSES AT SOPRANOS**

I wanted to here take a closer look at the processes employed by the Sopranos crew, and how they benefit from the differences in the group in their serial innovation. I have been watching a few of the behind the scenes featurettes, as

well as looking into interviews with both the executive producer David Chase, as well as audio commentaries by both producers, directors and screenwriters, in order to better understand the process they go through in the development of each of the Sopranos episodes. And it actually is quite an interesting picture emerging from these leisure-time studies of mine (some would call it procrastination, but since I do it for the blog, it most certainly is not ;.D)-

In the development of each of the episodes, the overall story-line, it seems that the team of writers, producers and directors meet on a regular basis, where they use collective 'sit-downs' (as Tony Soprano would call them), where they will discuss and develop on the stories and episodes, and what they want to happen to whom, as a group.

After this initial brainstorming, they will decide who of the writers should then continue working on the storyboard, and then one of the staff writers will go off and write up a first draft of the episode and then come back and present it to the team. Based on what the team then decides, changes will then be made by the whole team, and sometimes another writer will be asked to re-do it or alter the whole episode script.

Once the script then has been approved, it will be given to a director. The directors of the show cannot pick and choose the episodes they would like to direct, but are given an episode based on whom the group finds to be the best director of that particular episode, and then they take over from there.

Often the director is someone from the outside, not part of the staff, who will then be working with the cast in creating each episode. Some of the directors have directed more than one episode, but many of them are newcomers. I have not yet been able to find out very much about how this use of director-as-newcomer is perceived by the cast. I have heard several of the directors mention that it feels quite strange to be 'in charge' at the set, whilst at the same time being the newcomer. But it most certainly provides for a continuous addition of new perspectives, and the director has to build on the talent working with him, he/she will never get away with a "my way only-approach".

I would however like to find out what the cast thinks of the fact that they are continually confronted with a new director. They will usually spend between 8-12 days shooting each episode, and with each season consisting of app. 10 episodes, they are likely to be instructed by a new director every other week or so.

Imagine working on an innovation project where the project manager is replaced every two weeks?