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Lessons from Brawn GP

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The 2009 F-1 season kicked off in Melbourne with a surprise double triumph for a new team, Brawn GP (formerly Honda). These victories shook the foundations of top-flight motor racing: a plain white single-seater (with almost no sponsorship) bested the proudest teams and the multi-coloured circus of the most demanding sponsors.

Speed and a knack of taking advantage of opportunities and adapting to changed circumstances, in this case the new F-1 rules on diffusers, humbled the big names, proving that intelligence, efficiency and merit cannot always simply be bought with money, or guaranteed by power.

The wizard Ross Brawn, one of the men behind the seven world championships notched up by Schumacher, has shaken up the status quo among the F-1 aristocracy. New ideas and solutions came up against old privileges and hierarchies. Flavio Briatore, the Renault boss, has been heard to wonder aloud, unashamedly but showing himself up pathetically, “The championship is going to be won by a driver who was unemployed or another who was about to retire. What about credibility?” Well yes, the fastest will win – isn’t that what racing is about? These are the ten business lessons to be learnt from Brawn GP:

1. The unexpected bursting onto the scene (an opportunity in the F-1 rules).
2. The triumph of creativity and simplicity (the old/new diffuser).
3. The winning strategy (ideas against power).
4. The combination of youth and experience (the winning formula).
5. Calculated ambition (a car without sponsors: they’ll come along soon enough).
6. Speed as a group attitude (a team was set up in three weeks).
7. Challenging the status quo (a new team in the empire of the classics).
8. Chaos represents an opportunity (the big names adapt badly to uncertainty).
9. The time for boldness (buying out Honda, starting afresh).
10. The triumph of a job well done (agile teams hungry for glory).

The keys to the best job lie in smart design, creative radicalism and distinctive execution

As none other than the three times world champion Niki Lauda said, “The truth is that Brawn have done the best job.” And Pedro de la Rosa confirmed this: “The car is very well designed, with highly radical, different solutions.” These are the keys to the best job: smart design, creative radicalism and distinctive execution.

Only clear thinking and agility can overcome uncertainty. Big corporations, on the other hand, cannot generate this kind of knowledge because they are based on slow, rigid templates where changes come about only after long gestation periods. The new reality in society, as on the internet for example, moves at a speed which is going to prove lethal to the giants who do not manage to adapt: “Competition will no longer be between big and small, but between fast and slow.” (Nikesh Arora, vice-president of Google). There’s no time to waste.