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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Many of the myths we have about innovation need to be fed through the shredder. Read this month's newsletter to find out a surprising truth about how innovative companies and people innovate.

The Truth about Innovation

Innovation is most often misunderstood. A popular idea about innovation is that to innovate you need to start with a blank sheet of paper to invent totally new technologies and products that have never been invented before. The truth is quite different. Innovation results from the exploitation of existing technologies or ideas, rather than from exploration. Second, innovation seldom arises from the minds of brilliant and isolated thinkers, but rather from new combinations of people, ideas and objects.

In the real world, networks of people connected to each other and new ideas produce innovation. For example, Thomas Edison did not invent the light bulb, nor did he act alone in improving it. Edison relied very much on other people ideas, and objects to create the invention that he alone is usually credited for. Entrepreneurs and inventors like Edison are not smarter, more courageous or rebellious than the rest of us. *They are simply better connected.* Innovative people are able to continuously innovate by seeing and making connections between people, ideas, and objects from across a broader landscape.

Whether an innovation is accidental or calculated two key mechanisms are at work. First is *a moment when people, ideas, and objects from different worlds come in contact.* The second is *a mind prepared to exploit these moments.* Unfortunately, recombinant innovations happen less often because few people are in a position to see how the resources of one world might benefit another and fewer are prepared to act on what they see. Innovators are able to link otherwise disconnected ideas and make the connections; they have the ability to bridge distinct worlds.

Seven Methods to Bridge Distinct Worlds

- ✚ **Emphasize breadth over depth.** The key is to know a little about a lot of things rather than a lot about a little. The challenge is to understand how much depth is enough, and how much is too much. Learn about a lot of things versus sticking to what you know.
- ✚ **Get your hands dirty.** This involves actually working within different worlds, gaining hands-on experience with the problems and solutions at hand, and coming to understand that particular world's people know, and what its key ideas mean, and so forth. Move around, get yourself on

different projects, roll up your sleeves to learn about your client's business intimately, etc.

- ✦ **Inject new perspectives by bringing the outside in.** Many organizations will hire new people from other industries, or retain consultants with potentially valuable experience in industries the organization hasn't been exposed to. Another way to do this would be to bring in outside speakers to present different perspectives to your organization; schedule monthly or weekly presentations designed not to advance other people's expertise but to provoke new ways of thinking by showing staff different perspectives and different worlds.
- ✦ **Take the best and leave the rest.** An engineer at IDEO said that the advantage of moving among different worlds is to create a toolbox filled with great tools that have all the labels take off about how to use them. Why reinvent the wheel; look for tools from other worlds that can easily be adapted to yours.
- ✦ **Mix and match.** Many revolutionary innovation or discoveries resulted from "inventors" working closely with at least one other person, such as Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, and Bill Gates and Paul Allen. These partnerships were successful because they brought together complementary skills, personalities, and ideas. For example Job's charisma and Wozniak's technical prowess were a great combination. Partner with people and/or bring the right mix of individuals, skills, and experiences to innovate.
- ✦ **Build multiple networks.** Successful innovators and/or teams maintain the awareness that their best solutions will draw from and build on wide-ranging but already existing ideas, and will make efforts to exploit the experiences of others in the organization and elsewhere. Second, many innovative organizations utilize communities of practice - a group that forms across organizational boundaries because of shared interests - to build and maintain multiple networks in the organization to innovate.
- ✦ **Practice "equal but separate".** One management trend that does not seem to be working well is to bring all of an organization's elements into one big, happy family. This approach often makes such demands on people's time with constant meetings and other distractions. An alternative is to create equal but separate groups within the larger organization, fragmenting the larger network in order to spur smaller collectives into action.

What's the Bottom line

Push yourself and others to think "in other boxes," rather than "out of the box," by bridging distinct worlds to produce more successful innovations.

This month's newsletter is adapted from Andrew Hargadon's book titled *How Breakthroughs Happen: Surprising Truth About How Companies Innovate*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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