



## Innovation

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## Create an Atmosphere of Innovation

There is something about being part of innovation that brings joy to our work. Whether it is discovering something new, solving the unsolvable problem, or capitalizing on the changing marketplace to create value for customers, the atmosphere surrounding innovation is charged with boundless creativity. In previous columns, we explored creating value through customer-centric innovation and creating agility through disciplined, collaborative business process management. This month we turn our attention to the human side of innovation.

The aim of our column this month is to share ideas in order to create an atmosphere of innovation. A key objective is to avoid hackneyed “innovation-speak” and discuss in very real terms what you can do today to foster and lead innovation in your organization. We will explore ways to create an atmosphere for innovation, while avoiding the monumental task of changing an organization’s culture. Your company’s culture is established over a long period of time through stated, shared, experienced, and reinforced attitudes, values, goals and practices – and it may or may not be a culture that encourages innovation. We hope you take away some ideas that you can put into practice today as an individual, as a team member, or as an organization leader that will help you create a haven for innovation in any culture.

However, be warned. Creating an atmosphere of innovation is not for the faint-of-heart or for the safe corporate politico. The challenge is for those willing to take risk, stretch, grow, learn, and leave a better world behind them. Read on...

### Stimulate creativity...

Let’s begin with an understanding that we are all wired to be creative. It is born into each of us as part of the fabric of our lives. We reduce our creative capacity over time as limits and constraints are imposed on us, or we impose our own limits. *Creativity gets driven out of us through learned experiences.* We lose our innocence and our willingness to challenge conventional thinking.

Much of our modern world is built on the creativity and innovation of previous generations. It is human nature – no, a human quest – to be creative, to improve life. Change, improvement, and innovation are constant parts of our lives. Controllable fires, refrigeration, automobiles, online auctions, democracy – all are the outcomes of the human quest to improve life.

Now, how do we capture that creative spirit in our organizations?

- Laugh and get people to laugh. Playfulness stimulates creativity. Be ludicrous in your ideas and thoughts. Live outside the realm of conventional wisdom.
- Provide and enjoy the freedom to experiment. Everything is an opportunity to learn –

there is no failing. Admit when you are wrong. It is OK to change your mind. Do more things that don't work, than do work (take risks). Do the opposite of what is expected.

- Keep things simple. Complexity is the enemy of execution.
- Provoke the senses. Move out of the dull beige and gray cubicles. Take a walk outside. Provoke your sense of smell with fragrant flowers
- Create positive conflict. Find things to break. Great ideas come from conflict. Don't take ideas personally. There is no bad news, only new data. Facts are our friends. When you are criticized, your criticizer reveals their passion.

In GarageWorks, Hewlett-Packard created such an environment (Figure 1). As part of HP's internal consulting organization, GarageWorks was an entire environment designed to facilitate strategy innovation:

"...one notices upon entering. Fresh flowers, posters and paintings, bean-bag chairs, colorful furniture, tables on wheels, curved portable walls and whiteboards help fill a bright airy space that can be configured for a variety of small and large group meetings. Children's toys, games, costumes, hats, puzzles, magazines and books on topics



from business to photography lie within easy reach for participants to employ at will. An eclectic mix of music ranging from soft jazz to heart-pounding rock is piped in depending on the desired mood and energy level. Clocks are noticeably missing from the walls to avoid time-watching. The goal, according to GarageWorks' managers, is to get

people in a state of flow and stimulate divergent and visionary thinking with a smorgasbord of sensory experiences." (Glassman, Alan, et al., 2007. Strategic Management in Turbulent Times: The Short and Glorious History of Accelerated Decision Making at Hewlett-Packard. *Organization Dynamics*, Volume 36, Issue 1: pg 93 – 104)



### Set hilarious goals...

Why do you exist? Why does your organization exist? Are you aiming to accomplish something meaningful? Bookshelves are full of excellent material on vision, mission, and strategy. The first of W. Edwards Deming's 14 Points is "create *constancy of purpose* toward improvement of a product and service with a plan to become competitive and stay in business..." A balanced scorecard is a framework to link mission and vision to objectives, measures, targets, and initiatives.

This is all agreeable and all good, but creating an atmosphere of innovation goes further. It is easy to line up behind the sensible goals, but to create an atmosphere of innovation you need to set hilarious goals.

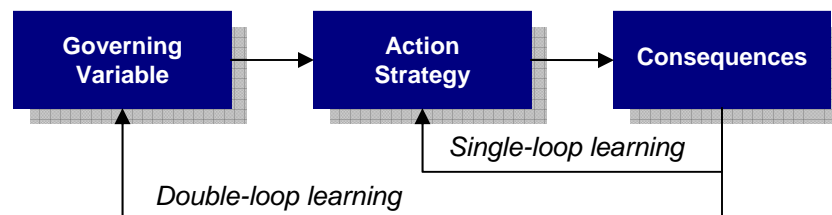
Is your vision too small? Do you need to add a 0 to your number? If you are adding 5 locations, why not add 25?

Think exponentially. The power of exponential thinking is setting goals so big that you are bound to fail. Exponential thinking forces you to think outside your normal boxes. It changes the question from “what are our constraints?” to “how do we accomplish the impossible?”

- ✓ Starbucks grew quickly due to Howard Shultz’s exponential thinking to accelerate store openings and new product offerings.
- ✓ Fred Smith believed packages could be delivered overnight (FedEx).
- ✓ Keats Boyd, 7, set a hilarious goal to be the youngest person to climb Mount Kilimanjaro ([www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/01/04/assignment\\_america/main3676518.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/01/04/assignment_america/main3676518.shtml)).
- ✓ With a slingshot, a stone, and no armor, a young boy named David set out to slay a 9 foot tall giant named Goliath who wore 125 pounds of bronze armor and carried a 65 pound spear.

Setting a sensible goal keeps us operating with linear thinking. Setting a hilarious goal makes us challenge habits and assumptions. A hilarious goal makes us uncover hidden thoughts and presuppositions. Linear thinking simply gets you to the next rest stop on the map. Exponential thinking may result in a new map.

Chris Argyris eloquently expressed this idea in his model of double-loop learning vs. single-loop learning:



Learning involves the detection and correction of error. When something goes wrong, the initial practice is to look for another strategy that will address and work within the governing variables. Given goals, values, plans, and rules are operationalized rather than questioned – this is single-loop learning. Alternatively, the governing variables can be questioned and subjected to scrutiny – this is double-loop learning. Such learning may then lead to an alteration in the governing variables and, thus, a shift away from the way in which strategies and consequences are framed. Single-loop learning focuses on making strategies more effective, reducing risks, executing routines, and affording greater control. Double-loop learning is more creative and reflective toward basic assumptions and beliefs (adapted from [www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm)).

Setting hilarious goals challenges our assumptions and beliefs and encourages creativity for breakthrough innovation.

### Make your box bigger...

We have all been there: The always hyped, sometimes glamorous workshop designed to create breakthrough ideas and solve an important business problem. A room full of flip-charts, Post-It notes, markers, and whiteboards. A witty facilitator kicks off the meeting with a few logistics for the day, and then turns it over to the sponsor who uses a variety of business clichés to rouse the participants into a frenzied froth of innovative energy:

"Today more than ever, we are at a critical juncture in the life of our company. We need to become a leading provider of {your product or service here}. Our competition...blah, blah, blah.... The future of our existence hangs in the balance. We need to have a paradigm shift, use best practices, and grab the low-hanging fruit...Let's gain some synergy, maximize our leverage, and, at the end of the day, be innovative to push the envelope for seamless integration across the enterprise. Going forward, think win-win. Focus on the 80% we can impact...." (Finish your own clichéd speech here)

Then comes the dreaded phrase, "Let's all think outside the box." Blank stares.

The problem with "thinking outside the box" is that everyone has a box, and each person has a box for a reason. Each individual's box is the cumulative effect of experiences over a lifetime. It is individual perspective. It is the lens through which each person views life, work, and the world. Thinking outside the box is an extremely difficult, daunting, and painful task for most people.

So, what do you do? Instead of thinking outside the box, work to "make boxes bigger."

How do you make a box bigger? In the long-term, it is straightforward – more and varied experiences. From reading different types of books, to work assignments in different cultures, to employee swaps among strategic partners, to taking up new hobbies – the more varied your experiences, the bigger your box will become. Be a student of the world, soak in the unusual, stimulate your curiosity, and search for new ideas off the beaten path.

In the near-term (e.g., for a workshop or meeting) it is more difficult, but not impossible to expand boxes. First, you will need to redirect minds away from solving the presenting problem and towards observing the world around them. Staring at the problem too long will blind people to creative alternatives. Next, get people to "overlap" their boxes through collective interaction and building on ideas. Collective action and building on ideas creates a much larger footprint for alternatives. The best answer is rarely a new idea created from scratch. More often, it is the maturity of an idea that has been built upon by many people and made relevant in ways that are truly valued by those we serve.

How big is your box? What are 3 things you can do today to start making your box bigger? What can you do to help others make their box bigger?

### **Execute faster...**

The latest crop of IBM commercials pokes fun at the whole notion of "ideation" and challenges us to "Stop Talking. Start Doing." These commercials underscore the need for innovative organizations to transition quickly to execution once the proverbial light bulb goes off over our heads. The gap of time between when an idea is hatched and when the idea becomes reality is a critical measure of success in the world of innovation. In most cases, this gap determines whether a new idea is delivered to the market ahead of similar competing ideas.

The most innovative organizations define steps to quickly transition from "Vision" to "Execution" when transformational ideas are born. This usually requires effective and collaborative working relationships between the line of business responsible for identifying potential innovations and the technicians tasked with delivering the actual innovation. Lately, the boundary between the innovators and technicians has begun to blur; with innovators being empowered with tools and skills to deliver the initial components of innovation and the technicians being empowered to help shape the innovation from the very beginning.

At a minimum, our organizations should outline the game plan for taking innovative ideas from conceptualization to realization.

## Final thoughts...

Ultimately, leading innovation requires fostering an environment that values change. Change is difficult for people and organizations. Innovative change may require people to abandon knowledge and competency in known techniques or abilities and “walk naked through the land of uncertainty.” Organizations may be required to find new markets, reinvent operations, or overcome societal changes.

Stimulating creativity, setting hilarious goals, making our boxes bigger, and starting to do things faster are four ways to prepare us and our organizations to identify and capitalize on innovation opportunities. Creating an atmosphere of innovation is paramount to creating a better tomorrow.

What action will you take today to sow seeds of creativity, cultivate new growth, and harvest value for your customers and stakeholders?

What will you do today to create an atmosphere of innovation where you live, work, and play?

## Resources and Additional Learning...

### Websites

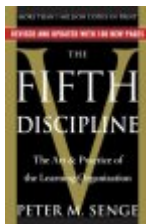
Glassman, Alan, et al. 2007. [Strategic Management in Turbulent Times: The Short and Glorious History of Accelerated Decision Making at Hewlett-Packard](#). *Organization Dynamics*, Volume 36, Issue 1: pg 93 – 104)

Chris Argyris: [www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/argyris.htm)

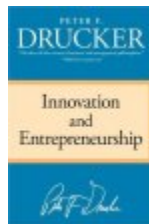
Peter Senge: <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>

W. Edwards Deming: <http://www.deming.org/theman/teachings02.html>

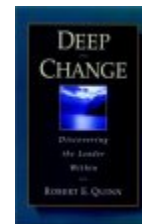
### Books



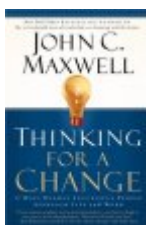
[The Fifth Discipline](#)  
by Peter Senge



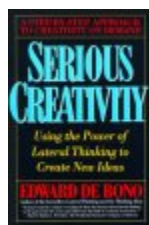
[Innovation and Entrepreneurship](#)  
by Peter Drucker



[Deep Change](#)  
by Robert E. Quinn



[Thinking for a Change](#)  
by John C. Maxwell



[Serious Creativity](#)  
by Edward de Bono