

Are You An Innovation Guru?

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The Building Blocks of Innovation:

Through our work in organizations, with clients, as well as with students in both public administration and business administration courses, we have witnessed a wide range of definitions of "innovation". These definitions typically include references to "creative thinking", "brainstorming", "new products and services", "breakthrough technologies", and/or "radical business models". It is very important to take the time to discuss and clarify what the concept of innovation means to you and your colleagues so that everyone has a *common* platform or foundation upon which to work!

We offer a simple definition of Innovation that consists of four key building blocks: (1) *Creativity* (a new idea); (2) *Strategy* (a new and useful idea); (3) *Implementation* (taking action with a new and useful idea); and (4) *Profitability* (bringing *added value*, not necessarily in monetary terms, to the team or organization through the implementation of a new and useful idea). Creativity without consideration of strategic needs/intent and implementation effects, including the operational, financial, and psychological or human elements, has limited value in organizational life. You can see from our holistic definition of Innovation--which can be summarized as the "profitable implementation of strategic creativity"--that we consider the concept of innovation to extend beyond the new products, technology, or business model views. As such, *everyone* in the organization should be encouraged to participate in finding and implementing new and useful ideas!

Have you, as an Innovation Guru®, taken the time to *define* and build a *common understanding* of what you mean by the term "innovation", instead of simply stating it as an objective or corporate mantra?

Focus:

The most innovative organizations are focused on high impact projects that strengthen their competitive advantage. They say yes to projects that support their unique strategic direction and say no to "low impact" projects that waste valuable resources, which could otherwise be applied to more important projects. Strategically-speaking, they know that it is better to focus their resources on the completion of 5 high impact initiatives rather than on 15 medium or low impact projects.

As Sun Tzu once advised, "You need to narrow your focus in order to be strong". In this connection, has your team determined which projects to fund and, importantly, which to discontinue? Has your team determined which products and services should receive maximum support and which to eliminate; which customer groups to support and which to ignore; and which regions to support and which to ignore? Or, is your team trying to do too much and, in doing so, diluting the effect(s) of its efforts?

Are you, as an Innovation Guru®, focusing on the *high impact* activities that truly will make a difference for your customers and other stakeholders, as well as will help you to stand out in the marketplace?

Everyone Participates!:

We often hear comments like: "My ideas don't count. I'm not senior enough"; "They don't ask for my ideas so I don't bother sharing them"; and "I'm new here so they don't think I know anything!" What a waste of resources! What a shame to miss out on potentially creative and useful ideas just because the person wasn't in the "right position" within the organization or whose length of service or tenure within the organization was not considered "long enough."

Many people ask us for guidance regarding how best to integrate innovation into the mainstream of the organization. One sure way is to encourage everyone to take an active part in offering new ideas. The power of this simple sounding notion is underscored by the following observation, made by the CEO of the Midwest Energy Company (State of Iowa, USA): "*We have 1800 employees and what a powerful thing it would be if all 1800 were creating ideas and providing their input into how best to get results for the company, and how best to serve our customers. It is so much more powerful a way to run an organization.*"

Why not include as many people as possible in your strategic planning processes? In addition to gaining a better understanding of the organization, they will be in a better position to contribute ideas based on understanding "The Big Picture", as well as on their unique backgrounds and experiences. Are you, as an Innovation Guru®, demonstrating that you truly value the ideas of *all* employees at *all* levels in your organization, including new employees?

Are You Innovative?:

When we ask participants in our workshops if they believe they are creative or innovative, many reply that either they are not or that they were but somehow through the process of schooling, work, "aging", etc., lost their natural creative talents. Many cite the characteristics typically associated with creative thinkers (explorer, dreamer, inventor, unpredictable, impractical, and so on) and either do not want to be associated with these attributes or feel genuinely that they have lost the ability to access their creative powers.

Although there are many "models" and methods for assessing creative and innovative potential, we have found that one, in particular, is most effective for building awareness and capacity in innovative thinking and, therefore, we use it extensively in our work. The Innovation Styles® Profile was developed by one of our colleagues, William Miller, a former researcher and lecturer at Stanford University and author of the books, *The Creative Edge* and *A Flash of Brilliance*. Miller believes, as we do, that everyone has the ability to be creative and innovative. In this regard, his approach chooses not to measure whether a person is innovative or not, but instead, seeks to understand or discover the unique way in which a person is innovative. The key question, therefore, is not "Am I innovative?" or "How innovative am I?", but "*How am I innovative?*" We all approach innovation with our own unique blend of four Innovation Styles that tap into our individual thinking and decision-making preferences. Miller believes that if we can learn how an individual is innovative, we can leverage this unique talent both for the individual's benefit and for building a stronger team.

Have you, as an Innovation Guru®, considered profiling *how* you and each member of your team are uniquely innovative in order to leverage this capacity to your competitive and collaborative advantage?

Measuring Innovation:

Many people have asked us, "How can we measure innovation?" Our response has been to describe the pursuit of innovation in two areas: the "output" and the "throughput"! Organizations or teams often measure their "innovation output" in terms of new product success, such as the number of patents granted or the percentage of revenue, profit and/or market share that can be attributed to new products launched in the last year or some other period of time. Others tend to quantify their "innovation output" in terms of overall improvements in profit margins, bottomline profit, cost reductions, and/or reductions in cycle time to launch new initiatives. Still other methods include gauging the improvement in ratings in customer satisfaction, ratings of organizational image by independent reviewers, and ranking in terms of attractiveness of the organization for new hires or employee retention.

Measuring "throughput" is a more difficult task. Instead of focusing on the outputs of innovation, we need to focus on how well the team or organization has established the *conditions* or *infrastructure* to support innovation on a continuous basis. Here, we need to look at such elements as having an Innovation Vision, Innovation Climate or Culture, Innovation Processes, and Innovation Skills Development, all of which will contribute to developing the environment or "capacity" for encouraging a higher level of innovation. We also recommend the use of a particular tool, *The Innovative Organization Assessment: A Holistic Approach*, distributed worldwide by HRDQ (hrdq.com), to help frame and measure this kind of throughput capacity. Without an environment or infrastructure to support innovation on a holistic basis, the probability of achieving superior innovation *output* is significantly diminished.

Are you, as an Innovation Guru®, making the effort to measure both innovation "output" and "throughput"?

Killing The Innovation Spirit:

Your reaction to new ideas may be supporting or may be hindering innovation within your team or organization. Examples of Innovation Killers are: "the boss won't go for it", "we tried that before", "we've never tried that before", "it will never work in our industry", "it's too radical", and "let's (take a few years to) study it". Often we react to new ideas with such Innovation Killers without realizing it, almost like when we drive a car using cruise control. Importantly, NBA coach Phil Jackson advises us that "it is more important to be aware than it is to be smart."

Are you, as an Innovation Guru®, inadvertently "killing the innovation spirit" in your team or organization? Are you aware of how you are reacting to new ideas?

Challenging "The Facts":

Innovation breakthroughs come from people who are not afraid to challenge "the facts" and "the way it's done around here". What if Columbus would have never challenged "the fact" that the world was flat? What if Ted Turner would have never challenged "the fact" that people only want to watch the television news at 6 p.m. and 11 p.m.? What if Howard Schultz (Starbucks) had never challenged "the fact" that people will only pay \$1 or less for a coffee?

Are you, as an Innovation Guru®, taking enough time to challenge "the facts"? Do you encourage your colleagues at work to do the same?

Selling New Ideas:

In order to sell your ideas, you must look at the idea in terms of your "buyer's" (customer's, manager's, or citizen's) needs, instead of your own. In my new book, *The Seeds of Innovation*, I highlight 6 BIG Picture Criteria for selling new ideas. Here are two of the six:

1) Start with understanding and addressing your buyer's need for low risk. Unfortunately, many people do not believe in the potential of a new idea unless someone else, especially someone they admire, has already experienced or accepted it. Every manager or customer wants to balance or manage the risks associated with a new idea, so show them that your idea is *already proven* in the marketplace. Find another organization, either in your industry or in another sector, that has succeeded with a similar idea, or find parts of your idea that have been successful elsewhere. Showing the buyer that your idea will work serves to lower the perception of risk and helps them switch from "the way we've always done it" to your new way. 2) Understand and address your buyer's need for something "distinctly better". In order to encourage your buyer to switch from what they are currently using or doing, you need to show them how your idea is *distinctly better*. Why should they bother switching? What new value are you bringing to them? Remember, your buyer thinks it's easier to just keep doing what they have always done.

Are you, as an Innovation Guru®, *selling* your new ideas in terms of your buyer's needs?

Innovation Guru Insights is a regular column of The Innovation Journal. Insights are also offered as a free service via www.innovationguru.com. For more information, please contact [Elaine Dundon](#) or [Alex Pattakos](#). Many of these insights highlight key examples, and tools included in Elaine Dundon's new book, *The Seeds of Innovation*, published by the American Management Association (ISBN 0814471463).