

Every business needs an *innovationalist*

By **Ed Bernacki**

Businesses were once organised with a simple model of manufacturing to service a market. Since then our business models have evolved to focus more expertise in hiring and retaining employees. A personnel function grew into today's strategic human resource function. Advertising followed a path starting with basic business announcements. As it grew more complex, a more strategic marketing perspective emerged.

All along companies talked of hiring people with the right skills and attitude to help them innovate. The problem is that this did not happen for most businesses.

I once watched David Suzuki, the scientist and environmentalist, talk about the challenges facing our society if we did not pay attention to the earth. He said what had to be said: Our current way of living is not sustainable. He said this knowing he would be criticised by those who have a vested interest in the status quo.

It occurred to me that in the world of ideas people need to do the same. We need people to become *innovationalists*. We need people to have the same conviction and courage to say what needs to be said knowing they will be criticised. What is long overdue is a specialist role that takes the key concepts of innovation and makes them meaningful to people. The innovationalist can learn a great deal from an environmentalist:

Communication is crucial – Attempts to innovate often fail due to a limited understanding of what it means at a personal

level. I recently interviewed a woman at a company whose lobby is filled with signs stating: "Innovation is our future." I asked: "What does that mean to you in your job?" She had no idea.

Be a role model – People learn by watching others in action. I worked for a law firm in which senior staff mentored new employees by having them sit in their offices to watch and listen. The same should apply to the pursuit of innovative leadership of our organisations.

Everyone is part of the solution – Every organisation has two functions to create a profitable business. Both need to be innovative:

1. The business of the business: Innovative solutions are needed for designing services or products that customers will want to buy at price that allows a sustainable future.
2. The business of managing people to effectively deliver services and products: Other people provide the support and infrastructure necessary for success.

What needs to be said in your organisation?

While the role of an innovationalist is not new, it is rare. A job description would include leading problem-solving sessions, coaching people to help generate more effective solutions, providing strategies to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the business and saying what needs to be said.

Here are five ideas that an innovationalist may adopt to decide what needs to be said in an organisation:

1. **Question everything to explore ideas:** Some people will judge you negatively for questioning everything.
2. **Notice mediocrity:** Be resistant to indifference, status quo and apathy. Some people will see little need to change.
3. **Encourage courageousness:** It takes courage to solve problems in new ways. Encourage staff at all levels to focus on both the alarm bells of problems and new initiatives to make systems, processes and services more effective.
4. **Highlight myths:** Do not accept excuses for the status quo from government, from suppliers or from your business. Managing to maintain the status quo fails to fulfil the potential of people and the resources of an organisation.
5. **Focus on ideas, not stereotypes:** No sector, organisation or job has a monopoly on creativity. Any thought that a traditional job, like accounting, can not be creative is wrong. Accountants do not need to be artists, but they do need to solve problems effectively and make good decisions. This is idea creativity. The same applies to executives and the mailroom staff.

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Creating OPPORTUNITIES TO INNOVATE

by **Ed Bernacki**



Companies that are successful innovators do something that others do not. They create opportunities to innovate. Despite the vast amount of management writing that focuses on the need to create a climate open to new ideas, some initiative must happen to get results. Consider how artists create great works of art.

When Nobel Prize-winning author Ernest Hemingway started work on a book, he did not wait for divine inspiration – he started writing every day at 11:00 am. His goal was 1,000 words per day regardless of the time it took. He built a special pedestal as he preferred to stand when writing. Interestingly, he stopped writing in the middle of the last sentence. He found it easier to continue the next day by starting in the middle of the last sentence.

Artists create the opportunity to create; they don't wait for inspiration. They act. Businesses must also act. And management must address this key question: where does our organisation need new ideas and how can we get them? Here are some ways to shape this initiative:

Developing new ideas

My first job involved a large sports association. To stop me from continually running into my boss's office to raise ideas, he suggested we meet weekly to talk about new ideas. He asked that I write them down prior to the meeting. An odd thing happened when I wrote them down – often within a day I thought of ways to advance the idea beyond my initial concept. Often, during these meetings, we would

narrow down the range of ideas to advance some further. I later learned that this is a very good process for managing ideas.

A monthly suggestion box challenge

Most suggestion boxes are not effective. You can enhance a monthly programme by defining specific problems or challenges in need of ideas. Pick one challenge each month and prompt staff conversations about it to encourage participation. Ensure you recognise people for their ideas and their initiative.

12 months – 12 challenges

Define an agenda for change and innovation by identifying 12 challenges, one for each

month, as I detailed in my column last issue. Some may be dealt with by management, others by staff or outside advisers. This becomes your agenda for change. Focus on two specific types of challenges:

- new revenue-building challenges, such as new products or services
- challenges to prompt more staff to work together more effectively.

Service Sector R&D specialists

If manufacturers invest in R&D for new ideas and processes, what does the service sector invest in to seek new ideas and processes? Most

invest very little. The answer is to hire or train a specialist who can act like an internal facilitator to lead initiatives like your 12 challenges.

Funding for new opportunities

New ideas will arise throughout the year which are not in line with a budgeting process. Add some funding for ideas that have yet to be conceived. This has been a major issue for some large corporations as it seems illogical. Can you afford to stifle ideas for months?

Open a space for creativity

Some businesses create special rooms or spaces to prompt new thinking. MacPac used a corner of an office for people to sit and brainstorm.

“The goal is to start the creative process. Innovation can not happen without initiative.”

I also saw big budget creativity rooms at the Polaroid Creativity Lab and at IdeaVerse at Lucent Technologies.

The goal is to start the creative process. Innovation cannot happen without initiative. Follow the example of artists like Hemingway. Make it happen. They know that to earn the title 'creative' means you must create something...not talk about creating something.

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Making time to think

by Ed Bernacki

Thinking is crucial in business to solve problems, develop new strategies, deal with customers and manage staff issues. Thinking is important. It fuels creativity. It improves decision-making. It creates value. So when do you think?

According to a recent US study, more than half of the senior executives questioned said that they are most effective in personal thinking in these places:

- 58 percent say at home
- 50 percent say commuting to work
- 45 percent say at the office and
- 38 percent say during brainstorming sessions.

“It’s staggering to consider that so many executives believe their businesses are unsuitable places for thinking.”

Would the results differ for Canadian executives? I doubt it. It’s staggering to consider that so many executives believe their businesses are unsuitable places for thinking. If this reflects your reality, consider how you can harness your thinking when you actually do it. You won’t be sitting in front of a computer. Therefore, what tool can capture your thinking to create value for your organisation?

Forget the electronic toys and invest in a quality notebook. Turn it into your ideas journal with two sections.

In the first section, use the first two or three pages to answer this

question: where do I need innovative thinking? Write down a version of this question in big letters on the first page to prompt you to pick the problems in need of solutions, the products waiting to be created, the staff issues needing to be resolved and so on. Think of this as your contents pages. Number each challenge.

In the second section, take each challenge and write it across the top of a new page. If you start with four challenges, then use four separate pages.

Whether you are sitting at home or driving, pick one of your challenges and think about it. Don’t be worried if the big idea does not come right away.

Start by asking:

- Why does this problem exist?
- What assumptions have we made about this situation? Are they still valid?
- Have we tried to solve this in the past? Why did the solution fail?
- Do we need a better solution or a totally different solution?

The goal is to capture your observations, insights and conclusions. Sometimes nothing comes to mind. Don’t fret, as it takes time to develop ideas. The key is keep advancing toward a solution.

This final aspect is the hardest.

It takes discipline to invest small amounts of time each day. Our productive time is too valuable to waste. I look for opportunities to steal time for my ideas when I am forced to waste it. Waiting for a doctor’s appointment or at the airport are perfect opportunities to invest 10 minutes of thinking into your challenges.

I confess that I have used my ideas journal during dull meetings. I focus one eye on my challenge while keeping the other on the meeting. People may

think I am making meeting notes when I am actually developing my ideas.

The research does raise some interesting questions: why do we manage our business without building in time to think? Perhaps you can think about that when you drive home tonight.

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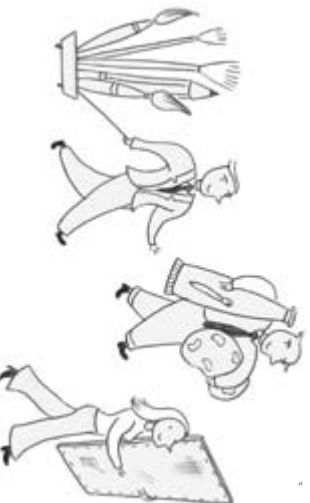


your raw materials

The quality of your raw material dictates the quality of your result. **Plan and prepare well!**

- 1 **Your Challenge**
Define your challenge – the reason for the session – in a clear, concise and compelling way.
Define the problem or opportunity in a sentence or two that makes sense to your team. Add some detail – who, when, why, and what's possible.
 - ❖ Define the problem
 - ❖ Review the assumptions
 - ❖ Re-define the problem in the form of a challengeDefine what a good result would look like – such as a “to-do” list of actions, a few good concepts, or a new product idea.

- 2 **People** – what type of thinking do you need to get a result? Get a breadth of diverse expertise as necessary to get some new thinking.
- 3 **Time** – pick a convenient time when people will have a high level of energy.
- 4 **Location** – a room with a view helps. Keep it relaxing, comfortable and convenient.



* You can't solve a problem with the same thinking that created it! * PARAPHRASE OF ALBERT EINSTEIN

inside the factory

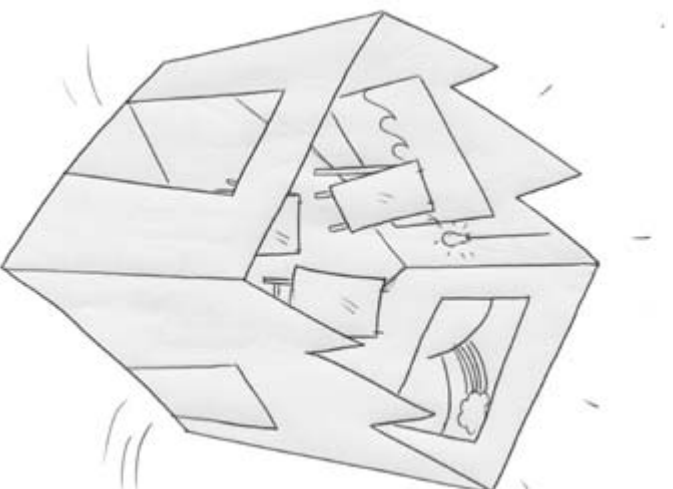
We have to convert the raw materials into a result through **creative thinking.**

What will prompt new thinking? Start with an overview of the challenge to warm up.

You can brainstorm informally by asking everyone to contribute their initial ideas and develop these or use a more structured tool or process.

Work diligently toward achieving a result. Keep everyone focused on the challenge and the need to conclude with a result.

What process will you use?



* An important idea not communicated persuasively is like having no idea at all. * BILL BERNBACH

delivering your results

As with any factory, you must ship a result.

Your challenge should have defined what a useful result would be.

Work with your ideas to define them clearly. Create a vivid work picture of the idea or solution in action.

Consider your stakeholders – who will need to buy into this idea or solution? If necessary, redefine your solution or idea to match each stakeholder group.

The first step for action is getting resources or support which take some selling.

A well defined idea has a sense of energy and conviction to it.

