

A Ship Doesn't Sail With Yesterday's Wind

By Larry Kryske



With today's ceaseless changes in technology, regulations, and the economy, successful businesses are those who are best able to adapt. Through innovation, they can respond and meet customers' needs more fully.

Innovation is the introduction of a new idea, method, or device often derived from an epiphany or "aha" moment of clarity. Like continuous self-improvement, it is an attitude for success. While the customer defines quality, the supplier of the products and services brings innovation to the marketplace.

The following baker's dozen of strategies will give some practical ways to be innovative, thereby helping your business to survive and thrive in a world of change.

Overcoming Sacred Cows and Other Business-Limiting Beliefs

Innovation is closely related to creativity, the ability to produce something using one's imaginative talents. All too often we think of innovation as the creation of something that has never before existed, such as Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph or John Pemberton's formula for Coca-Cola. Innovation, however, can be as simple as devising a new seven-step process that takes the place of an older twenty-step methodology.

The biggest obstacles to innovation lie not in a lack of knowledge or imagination but rather a lack of will. Instead of using our brains as a conduit to creating a richer, fuller, more productive life and world, we let them become barriers that stifle new ideas and actions.

Here are some oldies-but-goodies that can be heard in almost every business:

- ◆ **We've never done it that way before!**
- ◆ **It will never work!**
- ◆ **We don't have enough expertise!**
- ◆ **We already tried it!**
- ◆ **What we have is good enough as is!**
- ◆ **It is a waste of time, money, and effort!**
- ◆ **It can't be done!**
- ◆ **It will never fly here!**
- ◆ **It's not my job!**

Innovators will challenge the status quo in their quest for better ways to get the job done. When a business suffers from a "hardening of the attitudes," it is time to step back and recommit to the spirit that originally created the business's mission and vision.

There's Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself

Does your business have the courage to innovate? Humans are fearful creatures. This fear appears in many forms such as the fear of failure, fear of embarrassment, fear of ridicule, fear of rejection, fear of making a mistake, fear of responsibility, fear of being fired, and fear of change. Fear influences how we think, feel, and act.

Fear of failure plagues innovation. Leaders often do not understand that failure is a necessary part of the improvement process. Failure is the fountainhead of innovation.

It takes courage to act in the presence of fear. In Naomi Kryske's novel *The Witness*, the protagonist is told, "Fear is what you feel. Courage is what you do." The good news is that people can cultivate courage by using courage-building (that is, fear-management) techniques such as developing a tolerance to fear, using teams and team rituals, training, and discipline.

Creating an Innovative Environment

A business leader cannot demand that his or her people become innovative. The business cannot legislate that they be innovative. And innovation does not punch a time card. Rather, decision makers must create an open, trusting environment where people feel safe and have adequate time to come up with new or improved ideas, products, services, and processes.

Such an environment might be one where there is a light, playful atmosphere. The environment might be blessed with silence where people can reflect thoughtfully on the problems at hand. Each

environment must suit the personality of the particular business. What works for an advertising agency might not work for a professional sports team, credit union, or medical research facility.

An environment suitable to innovation might have soft music, classical music, or rap music as appropriate. The physical arrangement might be light and airy, a well-lit conference room, the outdoors, or the corner of a cluttered office. The principal rule for creating an innovative environment is that there are no rules! Whatever works, works.

The Four Flavors of Innovation

Innovation is as much a process as it is an attitude. Many people think innovation has a binary quality, that is, a person is either innovative or he is not. Allen Fahden suggested that innovation comes in four different flavors according to a person's behavioral preference concerning innovation. Some people prefer to come up with new ideas. CREATORS like to think outside the usual patterns and paradigms. These people are original thinkers and are excited about creating new possibilities.

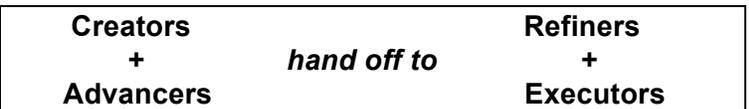
There is a second group of innovators who don't like to create new ideas but rather would prefer to advance or promote new ideas. These people are called ADVANCERS. Advancers are cheerleaders who move ideas past barriers of opposition by enthusiastically selling the new ideas to others. A third group of innovators does not want to create or advance new ideas but rather prefers to evaluate the new idea's feasibility. REFINERS can be thought of as "honest brokers" or "devil's advocates" in their desire to see if the new idea can actually be performed given real world constraints of time, money, people, and other performance measures.

Finally, there is a fourth group who doesn't want to create, advance, or refine new ideas but prefers to implement these ideas. EXECUTORS want to put new ideas into practice.

Brainstorming for Possibility

Think back to occasions when you participated in a brainstorming session. As some people came up with new or improved ways to work more effectively, others took joy from shooting them down. Many of their negative comments may have echoed the sacred cows mentioned earlier. The outcome of such a free-for-all was a feeling of conflict, competition, aggression, and frustration, as potentially good ideas were cast aside like rotten fruit.

Brainstorming, as a tool, needs to be properly used or it can be divisive and destructive to a business. One way to do this is to separate the team into two groups. The first group consists of creators and advancers, and the second consists of refiners and executors. The first group attempts to come up with an unconstrained list of possible ways to solve the problem. (The second group is not present while the first group works.) No consideration is given as to whether the ideas could actually work or not.



After the creators and advancers come up with a master list of possibilities, they hand the list to the second group. (The first group does not attend the second group's deliberations.) The refiners and executors now evaluate the list of possible solutions and cull out those that cannot actually be implemented. This methodology replaces the confrontational nature of brainstorming with one characterized by cooperation.

Surviving Change: Innovate or Perish

Businesses can either be proactive or reactive when it comes to dealing with change. Being proactive results in having more flexibility. A business that recognizes that changes must occur will find ways of leveraging those changes in ways that are advantageous to them. For others, innovation, like courage, may grow out of necessity.

Innovation is not something a business can master in a day, week, or perhaps even a quarter. Leaders must be willing to commit to the investment in time that is required. They must adopt a change in the old mindset, "I'll believe it when I see it" to a new mindset, "I'll see it when I believe it."

The Innovator's Heart and Mind

Innovation is a tool, a means to an end, not an end product. Innovators are driven by a pursuit of truth fueled by a curiosity to know, to understand, and to improve. Their enthusiasm and exuberance reflect their passion in solving the puzzle that confronts them. They are motivated by an obsession to provide service with a surprise.

Innovators see themselves more like customer satisfaction experts than as inventors or artists. They seek to develop new or refined services that will

anticipate, if not exceed, the needs of their customers. They are business people first and innovators second.

Innovators must be practical and pragmatic. They must have a superior understanding of their customers as well as the amenities they offer. They must be exceptional listeners and uncanny observers.

One of an innovator's favorite phrases is, "What if?" What if we offer laptop computers in different colors? What if we offer in America small cars designed to navigate narrow European streets? What if we reintroduce ancient Egyptian cooking implements like those on display in the British Museum?

Total Quality Thinking

One of the key lessons learned from the quality movement is that the top people in an organization may not understand the nature of a product or service as well as the production workers at the bottom. However, when innovation teams have representatives from various echelons in the organization, the group is covering all the bases. Innovation can be either a team or a solo sport, although a team may yield a wider, more diversified menu of solutions to problems.

Collaboration and cooperation must focus on the desired outcomes. A new form of networked leadership that encompasses the entire community of a business (customers, shareholders, management, employees) is needed to identify as well as implement innovative improvements.

The da Vinci Effect

Leonardo da Vinci serves as a role model for an innovator. From his artistic works like the *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper* to flying machines, musical instruments, and bridges, he was clearly ahead of his time. So what made da Vinci such an innovator? His senses and mind were continuously open to new possibilities.

Da Vinci was "present" in his environment and possessed a keen sensitivity to the world around him. His natural curiosity reinforced his belief in continuous self-improvement. If he saw or perceived more than others, it was because that was his focus. And people tend to experience that which they think about most.

Da Vinci used all his senses to observe, experiment, hypothesize, and learn. He noted connectivity among the sciences, engineering, and art. He fused the analytical with the aesthetic. Most important, he was not afraid to make mistakes. Like Thomas Edison, he persisted until he achieved his desired outcomes.

Countering the Intuitive

A fertile domain for innovation is to consider the opposite of some condition, situation, or approach. If a process seems to be running sluggishly because too many fingers are in the pie, perhaps it might be worth investigating whether doing the opposite, that is, minimizing unnecessary human contact, might improve the flow. Counterintuitive relationships among multivariable functions often produce new insights and solutions to problems.

The opposite, converse, inverse, contrapositive, or outrageous situation or condition may give some clues how to solve a problem. Remember not to cull your brainstorming lists before all possible solutions or options have been identified. History is replete with examples when a lack of imagination limited the development of inventions that have subsequently changed the lives of billions. "Manned flight is impossible." "There is little interest in developing personal computers." "The automobile will never replace the horse..."

Identifying the opposites implies that the innovator has a substantial understanding of the product, service, process, or procedure that needs to be improved. Revisit your basic assumptions, premises, and hypotheses when investigating new possibilities. Your innovation team needs to be diverse in expertise, backgrounds, experiences, interests, demographics (ages, gender, etc.), behavioral styles, and innovative preferences. If everyone thinks alike, then most of them are redundant!

Different Strokes for Different Folks

Most of the companies within a given industry go about their business in the same fashion. Southwest Airlines decided to be more innovative in the way their flight attendants related to their passengers. They created a playful, interesting environment that made flights a more enjoyable experience. Break away from the pack, and you will set your business apart in the customers' eyes.

A powerful tool for innovators is to consider how a different profession, field, or industry would perform a given task. A bookstore might consider how a supermarket, doctor, accountant, zoo, gardener, telephone company, car dealer, scientist, teacher, etc., would sell books. In a similar vein, benchmark the best practices of a different but analogous industry. You might discover new insights that could be most applicable and profitable to your business.

Differences abound everywhere: different colors, shapes, lighting, materials, smells, sounds,

speeds, tastes, games, characters, themes, climates, textures, cities, timing, motivations, terrains, emotions, occasions, packaging, shapes, and the like. What would be the impact of your innovation surpassing the needs of your customers by simply changing some parameter? Innovative thinking knows no limits!

Listen! Learn!! Lead!!!

Admiral Mike Mullen, who recently retired as Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, understood the power of innovation. Even though he presided over one of the most innovative organizations in the world, he worked to reinvigorate the armed services in incorporating innovation in its strategies, doctrines, policies, practices, and procedures. He set the example by his innovative use of social media to communicate with his 1.5 million active duty men and women as well as to take the pulse of those he led.

Admiral Mullen's philosophy can be best summed up by one of his signature best practices: "listen, learn, and lead." Leaders need to be committed to creating an environment that is safe for innovation to thrive. And leaders need to model the openness and trust implicit in listening, learning, and then leading.

A Place Called Eureka

Humans are a resilient species. We have survived ice ages, world wars, Cold Wars, famines, hurricanes, and iPods. Man's greatest invention, language, has enabled us to share with future generations our struggles, fears, hopes, and aspirations. Great innovators have pushed the envelope of possibility across time and space. Benjamin Franklin, Henry Ford, Sam Walton, Stephen Jobs, and hundreds of thousands of others have made a difference in the lives of people worldwide. And every day in organizations large and small, innovators create, advance, refine, and execute novel ways of doing things.

The sources of inspiration for innovating are unlimited. One business encourages its managers to read trade journals from different industries to glean ideas that can be applied to its field. Another throws pizza parties with loud music as its employees brainstorm new ways to dazzle their customers. Still another runs innovation contests that pay hefty bonuses for the best ways to market to new customers. Another creative organization sends its employees to the zoo, art exhibits, science museums, and even ball games to provide stimulation that might result in new ways of doing business. Is this something a business might choose to benchmark?

Innovation is as much the creation of new, improved, or revised ideas as it is of material things. Winston Churchill astutely observed, "The empires of the future are the empires of the mind." Every person in an organization has the potential for leadership, courage, and innovation. Each person is only limited by his or her imagination and will. The opportunity for innovation in our world has never been greater nor has it ever been more badly needed. Serious problems and challenges confront businesses and nations alike. We all await the echo of Archimedes' exultant words, "Eureka!" (I have found it!)

In life as in business, there are no time outs, and the clock keeps running. Innovators need to seize the moment because as Louis L'Amour observed, "A ship doesn't sail with yesterday's wind!"

Larry Kryske, Commander, U.S. Navy (Ret.) is a proven leader who speaks professionally and also paints! He is President of Your Finest Hour Leadership Programs. His latest painting keynote presentation is: *As Ship Doesn't Sail With Yesterday's Wind—The Art of Innovation*. Larry is the author of the leadership books, *Ready, Begin: Practical Strategies for Cultivating Courage*; *The Greatest Board in the World*; and *The Churchill Factors: Creating Your Finest Hour*. He speaks worldwide on leadership. For more information see <http://www.yourfinesthour.com>. In addition, his wife Naomi's new crime/suspense novel, *The Witness*, the pioneer self-help novel, was recently published. For more see: <http://www.naomikryske.com>.



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