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The Enemy of Innovation

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Mindless habitual behavior is the enemy of innovation. —Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Have you noticed that every time the economy goes through its correctional dip the business press hops on the innovation stump? So do most business leaders, and more and more they inappropriately cry “be innovative” when what they really mean is “be resourceful” (probably because it sounds more inspiring): “Times are tough people. We have to look for ways to do more with less. Let’s innovate!” It certainly sounds more scholarly than, “Let’s make do!” or “Buckle down!” But it’s still wrong. Innovation is not a mandated, disjointed course of action for optimizing daily activities. It’s a collaborative, strategic endeavor designed to add value to marketplace offerings, while increasing the value of ones brand over time. And there’s the rub: “over time.”

I remember reading something prophetic in an entertaining tome by Mike Daisey called *21 Dog Years*. In the book, Mike recounted his short-lived time working in a call center at Amazon.com. If memory serves me right, he was routinely reprimanded for poor stats, i.e. average number of calls handled per hour, average minutes per call, etc., and at one point was told, in no uncertain terms, to improve his numbers—to become more productive—or else. So how did Mike respond to that request? He did what any misdirected, time-starved and pressured employee would do. He innovated! From that point forward, on every fifth call that Mike answered he immediately hung up in the customer’s ear. His numbers soared!

What is Innovation?

Ask ten people to define innovation and you’ll get eleven answers. It’s a lot like asking people to define the word *branding*. The origin of the word innovate is simply, “to alter or renew.” But that’s about as useful as defining branding as, “to mark with, or as if with, a hot iron.” It doesn’t help inform decisions in an increasingly complex workplace and highly competitive marketplace. Think about the inventive Mike Daisy: He *altered* his call handling routine to improve his measured performance, but we all know that what he did should certainly not be called “innovation.” But what if Mike had invented a way to quickly get customers off of the phone, while also making them very happy? Would we call that innovative? Perhaps. It depends, right? What did he do? Did he make hollow promises? Did he add cost to each customer interaction? We need some clarity.

So here’s my clear-eyed view, which is intended to stimulate new and valuable ways of thinking and acting throughout an organization: *Innovation is the successful introduction of a new idea that results in a more*

desirable customer experience, and which is believed will make the brand more valuable to everyone over time. Innovation, in this context, can range from business model and supply chain innovation to designing new products and processes, creative pricing and financing, even to the way people answer the telephone and respond to emails. The new idea can be breakthrough or incremental. It can be a significant game changer, or a simple smile inducer. The one thing that it should *not* be is haphazard.

Idea generation may be chaotic and messy, but innovation needs to be strategically designed and carefully orchestrated to inspire and align people, and to increase the value of the brand *over time*. What ever changes you make—from improvements in productivity to innovations in marketing communication—must ultimately be made around things that matter to *everyone*. That's right; they have to be things that you and your people, as well as customers, care deeply about. Why? Because in today's increasingly transparent world, the marketplace will call out phonies and sycophants. More importantly, your people will only become engaged and creative when their activities have significant personal meaning; meaning beyond money. When it comes to something as challenging as innovation, passionate intent and total engagement is paramount.

What About the Fear of Change?

Despite what conventional wisdom continues to whisper in your ear, people are not afraid of change. What they're afraid of is the unknown. The most typical employee reaction to, "Let's innovate!" is fear and confusion, because they don't know what the hell that means. It's like a coach yelling, "Let's win!" without ever going over the strategy and tactics necessary to win (and with a bigger, more skilled opponent staring you in the face). Why in the world will people change what they are doing without a clear vision of what that change will produce in the future? They won't, especially not during tough economic times when every activity and dollar spent is routinely scrutinized.

It is the duty of today's leaders to eliminate that fear; to communicate a vivid and inspiring vision of the future, as well as to articulate a plan to get there. It's their job to shake things up, to coach and encourage people to innovate; especially the malcontents who have seen ways to do things differently, but who have been stifled over the years. Don't let the press confuse you more than they already have. Innovation has nothing to do with the ebb and flow of the economy, and its enemy is not simply mindless habitual behavior. It is also the reactionary rhetoric and disjointed activities that infect every organization that has taken its eyes off of the brand ball, and has lost the passion and resolve required to innovate and add value to people's lives.