Why Innovation Doesn't Work:
And What To Do About It

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Why Innovation Doesn't Work

Of course technical innovation works, not always as we expected it to but it occurs not just constantly but at what seems to be an ever increasing rate. So, I am not referring to technical innovation per se. The speed of technical innovation, the unpredictability of all of its effects, however, and its allure to our ever curious and inventive nature drives both the need and call for social and behavioral innovation by individuals and organizations. Technical innovation will therefore, creep into the following examination of why individual and organizational social innovation does not work in either the private or public sector.

There are many reasons why innovation doesn't work, doesn't happen on time, or doesn't stick -- enough to fill many books, as they have. Here, I'll cover three explanations of why most individual and organizational social innovation does not work in either the private or public sector. After a brief look at each of the three, I'll move to some strategies and methods that have been used to "work-around" these innovation stoppers. The three innovation stoppers are summarized briefly below:

1. *Behavioral Rivers Run Deep*
  1.1. The channels, patterns, and paths established as we perfect ways of dealing with challenges, or acquire skill at applying knowledge and technique to produce predictable results take on a "life" of their own that resist change as much as many rivers bore down the same course for generations.
2. *Leadership Turnover*
  2.1. Those with leadership authority are not "in place" long enough to assure that changes and innovations become the new standard operating procedure (SOP).
3. *Getting Out of the Box and Pulling Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps*
  3.1. Being able to see what you cannot now see or anticipate is by definition difficult. When added to the persistence of pattern maintenance behavior, it is not difficult to see why innovation can be daunting.

Behavioral Rivers Run Deep

There are more channels, patterns, and paths in our individual and organizational lives than most of us can even imagine. And all of them are the result of conscious, as well as unconscious "burning in" so they become automatics or definitional walls of the variety of boxes we place around things,

people, ideas, and processes. The conscious ones, we choose or erect, the unconscious walls are the ones we inherit or that others place us in.

Let's look at a few extreme examples of patterns which have a life of their own whether it serves a useful purpose any longer or not.

East is East and West is West – Right? If you live in North America (Canada, US, or Mexico) and someone asks: "Do you think we are on the right track in solving the Middle East problem?" or "Have you heard? Our department head is going on a trade mission to the Far East?" The Middle East refers to Egypt, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Syria, etc. – correct? And the Far East refers to Japan, China, and the Koreas – correct? What silly questions? Really? If you are from the West Coast of Canada or the US, wouldn't it make just as much sense to refer to Japan and China as the Middle West and Syria and Iraq as the Far West? East in the global terms in the US and Canadian frames of reference are still in part based upon the fact that we were once colonies of England. And the English refer to those areas as East, because that was the only known route there for some 300-400 years.

Too trivial; they are just quick orienting terms we use so we do not have to enumerate all the places we are referring to all of the time. True and not true. We also take in a bit of all of England's experience and attitudes toward those areas. Think on all that you might associate with those patterns for a bit and you won't feel quite so bad about the slowness of innovation in your organization – for about ten minutes.

- Importing Chinese as laborers
- The Boxer Rebellion
- The Opium Wars
- Anti-Chinese immigration, citizenship and property laws
- Cheap Chinese imports
- Everyone in Middle East is a Muslim or an Arab
- Pearl Harbor
- Shoddy Japanese toys and tools
- Quality Japanese electronic toys and tools
- Chinese are principal high quality/low cost suppliers to US auto industry

The next pattern takes a bit of a set up. At one time, Hindustan Unilever did not think they had a significant market opportunity for their hair shampoo among poor rural women in India. Then, someone realized that these women wanted just as good a product for their hair as did more prosperous urban Indian women, they just could not buy as much or as often. But two or three units each a year to some 200 million women represented more sales than to the urban women – they just had to figure out what they wanted and how to get it to them. After I wrote this up for my 2002 book, *Global Innovation,* I realized that worldwide, the rural poor was a vast untapped market for a number of products. And I also realized that the people best fitted "culturally" to be involved in market research, marketing and sales to these markets from nations such as Canada and the US were not "defined" as those who would fit into the usual pattern for corporate recruitment or human resource position criteria.

What people don't fit the pattern in the US or Canada of being outstanding candidates for market research, marketing and sales, and perhaps public relations? Those who had been most marginalized and/or excluded from consideration came from cultures that shared important characteristics with the rural poor market that would not only make them more acceptable and sensitive as sales and marketing people but would also give them significant insights into the consumer mind of the rural poor. Their oral or story culture orientation, their ability to adapt to harsh physical and social environments, as well as their "community" and social entrepreneurial orientations did not make them candidates of the first water in New York or Toronto but might be, no, is made to order for success in Namibia or Nepal.

First Nation people, Native Americans, Black Americans, Mexican-Americans, as well as former rural tenant farmers, now "trailer trash" could be, should be first in line for market research, marketing and sales leadership instead of last in line.

But how long will it take corporate and government recruiters to see this? And how long will it take people who thought they had to become "white and citified" to see it? And how long for those responsible for educating them? I expect some readers here are struggling with abandoning their thought patterns about these matters as well.

So, you see, as with that pattern, all sorts of patterns are hard to get past. We don't even need to talk about people's patterns as they apply to taxes, unions, smoking tobacco, overeating and not getting enough exercise – right? Now let's consider the second innovation stopper, leadership turnover.

Leadership Turnover

This one is simple, really. It's simple as it applies to leaders in medium to large organizations, at least. Leaders, executives of all different types no longer hang around long enough to see many innovations through or to make them stick.

In the US, City Managers serve for less than five years, on average, in their post in any particular city. CEOs in publicly-traded companies now serve for a similar time period. Military leaders shift posts every two years or so. Most organizational consultants would agree that an organizational innovation or change that requires a "culture" change may take as much as ten years to implant and succeed.

At the state and federal leadership level, the CEO's (elected officials) may change with every election and many of the leaders below them will change as well. In short, in these types of organizations, no one is staying around long enough to see change through or to make an innovation stick. In small firms and organizations, the problem may not be leadership turnover but leadership's "too many hats" syndrome. The "tradition" of giving the new leader room to do things his or her way means that yesterday's innovations are either: redirected, replaced, or even forgotten.

The third innovation obstacle is our typical pattern of response to new ideas.

Getting Out of the Box and Pulling Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps

Getting out of the box has been and will continue to be the subject of many books and articles to come because it can be so difficult; it goes against our desire to predict outcomes, our environment, what's safe/what isn't. Our innate curiosity, desire for the new, the exotic does not go away. But that's for other people to do or invent first, "not me" most people say. The box and its walls are similar to the walls of a canyon, deep ravine, gorge, or rutted road that started out as your or someone else's leading edge. The path, the pattern has been followed for such a long period of time that it may not even rise to the level of consciousness. And then even when the pattern is pointed out and redefined as a negative, we are very, very good at self-delusion and denying the truth is the truth.

You have already seen how it is related to pattern maintenance in the example about who would make a good candidate for market research on the Rural Indonesian market.

You may not have thought about it for some time but – believe it or not – there was a time when men thought that women should not, could not do many tasks that prior to the modern era, had been exclusively male. Oh, I was not talking about jobs, I was referring to voting and owning property – grin.

But we are good at recognizing when someone else has gotten out of the box, so most advice is. "Do what they did!" That's not my advice.

Now; let's turn to what to do about innovation not working.

The Aikido Approach to Making Innovation Work
Despite the popular view that since we live in complex, high-technology urban societies we are thoroughly modern, the way we humans think about and carry out work in groups and organizations is still as much based on 50,000 year old agrarian patterns as they are on the industrial patterns with which have a bit more than 150 years of experience.

So rather than continue to struggle to make innovations stand up against 50,000 years of experience, we might be better advised to use an Aikido metaphor: use or redirect the force or energy which opposes you.

With this approach in mind, let's look at how we can use or redirect the force or energy contains in three common blockades or pit falls that hinder or ruin most innovation efforts:

1. "I already have a job, you want me to sign up for life to work on quality improvement, customer service, Six Sigma? No way, mate! "I don't want to sign up for life to a new program, or flavor of the month."

2. "If we do go with that, who's got our back?

3. "You want to do what? Not in My Back Yard!

"I don't want to sign up for life to a new program, or flavor of the month."
Instead of trying to deny that your innovation process has been designed as a "sign up for life", new way of doing work and that changes in leadership, society, or organizational goals may well turn it into a management fad or flavor of the month – give in and say:

> *"I know you have a job, mate; this is a one time, internal change or improvement project focused on making our work easier with achievable goals, a set budget and time limit. The select people who serve on the project team will go back to their regular work after they have assisted their group and the organization with this needed change/innovation/improvement."*

Approaching change, innovation, and improvement as a project fits within our 50,000 years of human work experience. It not only fits, quite often those who work on projects are looked to as future leaders, or look upon their project work as a major learning and exhilarating part of their work life.

And even if you know deep in your bones that ongoing innovation, continuous improvement or attention to client or constituent service is absolutely necessary, if you string together a number of separate projects, you can also characterize it as a pilot or experimental program and embed the PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) approach as the project's work plan.

Think about this approach for a bit and I am sure that you will find a number of reasons of your own as to how and why this will make it easier to foster and implement organizational innovations.

"We have to be sure our collective backsides are protected."
Organizational, agency, or bureau innovations, or changes are both loved and hated by the "bosses" of public servants. Constituent "bosses" or voters, as well as senior civil servants and political heads of agencies or elected officials can love innovation or change as much as they can hate it and bring out the budget axe for sharpening when the innovation does not or no longer suits them – right? That's why "cover your behind" is such a strong force to overcome. And despite all advice or suggestions that you should run your organization as if it were a private or for profit business, remember that you are working within a democratic political process, whose macro goals are to serve the needs and desires of society.

Fine, then tailor some of your innovation effort(s) to meet their specific needs. Begin your innovation efforts by:

- seeking the advice of senior administrators, political appointee or the legislative budget committee chair on what are the chief current (within the last year) constituent complaints,
- asking how might you change your processes to satisfy them.

Then, appoint and recruit your project team and make your senior administrator, political head, and the legislative budget committee chair that oversees your budget all heroes.

"NIMBY! Not In My Back Yard!"

Another version of NIMBY may sound like the following:

> *"Change or innovate if you must but please, not in my back yard or not on my watch or in my work! What about Charlie's shop, that's where they really need change. No one would complain, if his group didn't drop the package after we pass it to them in fine shape."*

This is indeed one of the most difficult roadblocks to overcome. You probably put it up yourself from time to time because you simply do not want to change or you do not want change "imposed" on you. Admit it, you have also resisted innovation with NIMBY, haven't you? And while resisting, you found it quite easy to suggest that someone else needed changing more than you did – most often a function or department from which you received your input or a function, or a department to whom you shipped your service product. Or if you are a frontline duties put you indirect contact with constituents, then a department to whom you report.

To convert this resistant energy to positive innovation efforts, you might use a bit of first course psychology; if you want someone with a strong bent for action or a strong ego to do something, you suggest either that they are unable to do it, or that they may not do it. Your "reverse" psychology gets the behavior that you could not achieve directly.

In plainer language, you recruit two special project teams and ask them each to "live in" and work on fixing the "mess" in the other department's back yard that has been ruining your efforts.

Two outcomes, no perhaps three, might result:

- Each department which is being invaded makes ad hoc improvements that make those suggested un-necessary.
- Surprise, surprise… Both departments work with the visiting team and adopt the suggested changes which they were unable to see needed changing.
- Both departments "reject" the suggested changes but end up applying or adapting the changes themselves and thus improve operations.

To everything, there is a season

An additional level of strategy might take into account the seasonal patterns of society and politics.

1. Launch the "Cover your backsides" innovation of making "bosses" heroes and constituents happier in January with an April roll out. It is your version of spring cleaning and it gives bosses and constituents something to feel good about after a gloomy winter. And if elections and/or budgeting are coming up, then it give them the summer and early fall to crow about how effective they are in keeping the bureaucracy responsive and innovative.

2. Launch the special project to improve or facilitate internal processes in March or April for a June roll out. The improvement should enable people to not feel guilty about easing back a bit or making up for vacationing mates during the summer. And if budgeting is coming up, the resulting improvements may give you the extra time needed for the budget crunch.

3. Launch the Anti-NIMBY project in September or October for a November/December roll out. This type of improvement project will usually focus on processes that cross boundaries and are akin to taking time to clean up the commons. In traditional communities, the time after the harvest is a time reserved for just such projects. Working on structures or problems that effect all and sharing talent and expertise keeps the organization's "commons" in good working order and when done is a good time for thanksgiving.

In number one, you convert internal resistance to meet the innovation needs of internal staff and groups – the first internal customer.

In strategy number two, you convert resistance to change and innovation to serve the innovation needs of external customers and the owners of the system.

In strategy number three, you address cross-functional problems and process problems that serve the whole system's need for innovation, as well as another type of internal customer.

Does that start to look like an ongoing whole system approach to innovation and continuous improvement? And what should you do if your "boss" accuses you directly of secretly implementing continuous improvement and creating an ongoing innovation process? Admit everything. Admit that you have helped everyone "look good," make their jobs easier and their future more secure? And then ask her or him if you should stop making him or her a hero?

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