

Book Review

Ed Bernacki

30 Great Ideas: Building Innovation Skills and Capacity for the Public Service Professional
Ottawa, ON: The Idea Factory, 2016

Reviewed by Donald R. Officer

I've known Ed Bernacki for about 15 years. Over that time, he has moved between hemispheres several times always building on his special knowledge base as he pursued the cause of government service innovation with what seems like unflagging zeal. His writing in *30 Great Ideas: Building Innovation Skills and Capacity for the Public Service Professional* is proof he carries his passion to wherever he lands. Naturally, we have become used to his absences, and when we do see him, something resembling a relentless restlessness.

Ed has come to believe that work culture today is failing in its tasks for lack of innovation. This message is not always taken seriously. It should be; he's right. Nowhere is this indifference more of a problem than in the governmental organizations he observes and consults to. Not that other organizations or society in general are particularly innovative unless driven by economics, but that the risks to the social fabric are greater when imagination is not applied to the mounting challenges of public administration. This, in a time when the limited resources to deal with what we face have been stretched in ways that assail imagination itself.

The approach taken in *30 Great Ideas: Building Innovation Skills and Capacity for the Public Service Professional* is not one we associate with the free form process of imagination that customarily comes to mind when we think of big change. Bernacki is remarkably disciplined and firm in his fundamentals. What strikes me as paradoxical is the methodical way he asks public administrators to proceed towards transforming their much too constrictive environment.

Nonetheless, this path makes sense. We are, as the author repeats, laboring under several misapprehensions. To name a few: imagination is not innovation; innovation demands action be realized, a 180-degree pivot from unconstrained speculation. Innovation is a skill not a gift out of the blue; we are all sufficiently gifted to become skilled at it. The same applies to imagination put in service of innovation when we try to get bigger things done. We should also not confuse continuous improvement with innovation. Getting better gradually or incrementally is not a bad thing, not necessarily. But when big change is indicated it won't do.

This, of course, is where the status quo becomes a problem. Culture is notoriously stubborn; it is also invisible to the people in it. Bernacki's processes are disciplined for a basic existential and very practical reason, to give transformation a fighting chance. In *30 Great Ideas* the author repeats the most fundamental tenets of successful innovation at regular intervals. Trust is crucial. Without it no organization will move beyond the parameters of the status quo. Better the devil you know – and yet, too familiar organizations tend to stagnate, collapse or blow up.

Democracy as we know it has entered a difficult, perhaps fragile phase. The current media landscape is often unforgiving and hypocritical as it looks on. A confluence of trends has put leadership, especially elected leadership in a highly vulnerable position on every side even when there is little discretionary room to move. That's not fair, but leaders do have even more powerless people and groups to offer up as substitute sacrifices: Namely, members of the public service in their employ. "So, tell me something I don't know." you might say.

This is where the entrenched opposition to innovation comes to the fore. Yes, that's right, it's positive change that takes the hit. You probably know this too, but have you considered this process in context and in terms of consequence? Neo liberals like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman repeated the mantra of creative destruction ad nauseum as though the trail of damage that flowed from denying social responsibility was only so much CGI out of an action movie. So instead we get real world destructive creation when underfunded government efforts fail or produce disturbing cost overruns. For senior bureaucrats, these embarrassments may look like bad news, but they may also be effective lightning rods. The papers get their stories, the politicians get their stump speeches and the public servants get their escape route.

The public may be the ultimate losers although people are surprisingly ambivalent about losing something they never had. For certain, innovation lost and the future it might have offered are outright write-offs. Psychologists might accurately correct the old saw to read, "Nothing ventured, nothing lost." Multiple studies repeatedly show that most people privilege the present over the future almost every time. The best-known example of the consequences of immediate versus deferred gratification may be Walter Mischel's famous marshmallow test.

Habit is the best weapon we have against even worse habits like chronic short-termism. Hence Bernacki's insistence on internalizing procedures with a good track record. He recommends brainstorming for instance but would prefer we read Osborne who developed the technique rather than accept the simplified approach we think we know already. A fan of Edward de Bono, Ed Bernacki is impressed with the Six Hats exercise (as am I) because it methodically takes participants through all the main ways of looking at problems and solutions. There are other techniques his text suggests we import from other organizational cultures like TRIZ a Soviet era practice of comparing high level and low-level analogies. Classic or novel the exploration of thinking techniques exercises the innovation muscle. When teams practice together, they derive the bonus benefit of learning how to work together more effectively.

On the other hand, *30 Great Ideas* is about innovation skills building not team building. I don't recollect seeing the word groupthink in the book, but that condition would definitely be an innovation killer. Perhaps with that risk in mind, Bernacki suggests that teams recruit to build neurodiversity, or differences in thinking styles. The most striking contrast that comes to the author's mind is the divergence between innovators and adapters. He contends we need both on workplace teams if we are to avoid stagnation (too much adaptiveness) or chaos (unconstrained innovation). If they can just be kept from killing each other!

A self-confessed innovator or “innovationalist” Ed Bernacki seems to embody the definition. I’ve studied Michel Kirton’s Adaptor-Innovator theory and been tested for my position on his scale. I’ve yet to be convinced that everyone is either one or the other. Partly because of my defense department training in work study and partly because of natural laziness, I tend to size problems up before seeking to make things either better or different i.e. an adaptive or an innovative solution. I like to think I’m a systems thinker and start by questioning whether the problem chosen is the right one in the first place. Ed is not opposed to systems thinking and recommends design thinking, somewhat analogous to aspects of systems thinking practice, as an innovative tool with roots in earlier methodologies,

The problem with innovation tools and schemas is that most cultures favor neither innovation nor adaptation. Fast or slow, change is hard. Ed suggests contests, celebrations, challenges etc. practices that precede but are familiar to gamification practitioners. Stories and puzzles intrigue people; competition that doesn’t overwhelm spurs interest too, and with activity stale mindsets evolve as people become engaged in experimentation.

Ed Bernacki’s books and this one in particular are worth a good look. At this moment in world history, many people have had enough of change and are averse to joining the throngs demanding it. Innovation by the numbers so to speak as recommended in *30 Great Ideas* might be a better, safer way to proceed for all of us. Think about it. This way we start slow as we acquire skills mastery, then move quickly to innovate new and different ways forward.

Frankly, this may be a model for the future and a new way to put the spin on innovation that has so far been lacking except in a few model societies like Singapore where Ed Bernacki has found a receptive audience hungry for innovation. Of course, Singapore is a city state with few resources beyond its concentration of talent and drive. Context like stark necessity matters.

And context seems to be the hidden driver behind the self-reorganizing of work culture now happening all around us almost invisibly. The living core of today’s workforce is the knowledge worker. But her or his work processes are too complex to control. Management can, however, create context which becomes both motivator and monitor of output measurable in ways that matter. In this environment the individual must fashion the how and sometimes the what or why out of personal process. As long as it gets the job done. We have yet to find a valuation measure for this kind of uniqueness, but we will. As sure as we will learn to pull value out of the labyrinths of machine learning we will. Innovation will again come into its own.

About the Author:

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