

Innovation is a Frame of Mind

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December 7, 2008

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Innovation is a complicated and multifaceted subject. You can view it from many angles, each with a body of knowledge and practice behind it. Some people approach innovation as a creativity and ideation process. Others view it as a new product or process development cycle. It certainly is applicable to everything in your business from innovating new business models to innovating the total customer experience.

Whatever your viewpoint, successful innovation stems from having an ***Innovation Frame of Mind***.

Having in Innovation Frame of Mind means you think differently about those things that come up in your business life such as problems and opportunities, situations and ideals. Instead of just “dealing with them”, getting them out of the way as fast as possible, you have an attitude. In this case, it’s a good attitude.

This attitude is “there’s a better way to do this. I’m not content to solve this problem once again for the 25th time. I’m going to find a clever and well developed scheme so this problem doesn’t happen any more. Or setting higher goals. Rather than seeking the low hanging fruit and taking the easy way, you say “we can come up with a way to access this market, even though it looks difficult for us today.” It is the attitude of saying “it’s possible” and then working like crazy to make it not only possible, but a major leap over what is done today.

Innovative minds are sensitive minds. They are detectors turned all the way up to 10. When they detect the slightest clue or get the faintest notion of an idea, they write it down, pursue it with determination and find the hidden value buried in the noise.

Innovative minds are insightful. They look for insights. They know that often there is brilliance right before your eyes, if you just take the time to interpret it right. Part of this is being able to think in similarities, rather than identities. People who are literalists make poor innovators. They can’t see the general concept behind the specific instance they are looking at. So they take everything literally and cannot transfer the idea behind something to a different situation. Innovative people look at a situation and see the general principle operating behind it. Then they flip that around and apply it to another situation.

Lenscrafters took the idea of Just in Time manufacturing and applied it to creating eyeglasses while you wait. They saw the concept and applied it to a new setting.

Being innovative starts with the way you think about things and particularly with the possibility of new ideas or new applications. An innovative frame of mind is courageous, and sometimes a bit crazy.

You can practice developing an innovative mind by doing the little things a bit differently. My son-in-law heats up tortillas by putting them right on the ceramic burner of his stove. No pan. Who needs a pan? The stovetop is essentially glass.

Recently I figured out you can buy 240 volt lamps with the same Edison base as 120 volt lamps. I have been irritated by garden lights that burn out leaving you stumbling in the dark as you walk up to your house. I replaced the 120 volt lamps with 240. Yes, they burn at $\frac{1}{4}$ of the wattage (just use Ohm's law and solve for power at reduced voltage) and they put out a dim orangish glow. But they burn for 14,000 hours and the light is good enough for navigating a path on a dark night and finding your key. They last far longer than fluorescents and use the same, low power. And they don't have the ugly fluorescent light color: instead, they have the yellow-orange glow of candles. The key is to think differently and look at the importance of each of your assumptions.

Being able to toss out unnecessary assumptions is a key to an innovative frame of mind. Most of life follows the 80/20 rule and getting rid of some unimportant assumptions often allows you to do something you wouldn't have considered.

Thomas Edison is undoubtedly history's best example of a person with an innovative frame of mind. He was willing to do thousands of experiments to find a solution. He read tens of thousands of books, mastering speed reading so he could do so – all so that he could find idea concepts from a wide variety of fields. He took ideas from one field and applied them to another. Having an innovative frame of mind means being flexible with ideas, being curious about how things work and being willing to apply those mechanisms to completely different subjects.

Some people do this naturally. But it is learnable and developable by anyone. Mostly you have to simultaneously think more loosely about ideas and be more disciplined about rigorous follow-through and experimentation.

Finally, although it is important to care about people, it is important not to let yourself be bound and gagged by a fear of what they might think of you. Restraining yourself from entertaining ideas because of fear of what others might think is a sure killer of innovation. Most innovative ideas are stupid ideas, in somebody's view. Why? Because they don't fit the patterns and maps that have been established heretofore.

This is so true, that you can almost evaluate the potential of an idea by how much it's initially resisted. In any case, if you believe it has possible merit, having an innovative frame of mind means it's more important to you that you search for a better way than that you are seen as a sensible thinker by others. To be innovative, you have to be independent to the degree that you can satisfy yourself, not others, that your idea either has merit or doesn't.

Innovations can be as large and far reaching as the transistor, or as mundane as cooking pancakes on one side only. (The Ethiopians make bread this way). Either way, innovation starts, develops and completes with an innovation frame of mind.

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