

Innovating Every Day

By Holly G. Green

Posted on: June 23, 2009

Who doesn't recognize the need to constantly innovate today? After all, just look around at all that is new in our world in the past few years. Are you twittering? More than 1 million others are. Do you have a product or service video up on YouTube? More than 25 million people do. And are you LinkedIn or participating in SecondLife? These are just a few of the new social media innovations that are dramatically changing how people connect and get work done. Now, think about other areas that are changing just as rapidly: technology, diversity, competition, products, etc. It can be a bit mind-boggling and certainly intimidating to ponder how to keep up these days.

What does innovation look like at work today, and do you need to spend millions for a research and development department to come up with the next great product or service? How can you more actively incorporate new thinking, new products and new options, including getting more done with less into your day-to-day activities?

Today, innovation needs to be about:

- Challenging the ways we do things, even when they have always worked well;
- Continually creating new products, services and ideas that have value for stakeholders;
- Trying different and novel ways to deal with ongoing challenges; and
- Constantly seeking and implementing new and better ways to achieve results.

Innovation is more than brainstorming or idea generation. To be truly innovative, you have to DO something different. And for businesses, whatever it is you do must have value for at least one of your stakeholder groups (employees, customers, suppliers, partners, etc.). Listed below are five key actions you can take to be more innovative.

Stop assuming.

Develop awareness and understanding of your own assumptions, beliefs and biases. We all have a lot of them. They are the thoughts that pop up as soon as we see someone, hear something or even smell a particular scent.

Making assumptions about possible solutions to a problem can limit creativity, causing difficulty. At the beginning of any project or when faced with a tough situation, pause for a moment and note your assumptions. What do you believe to be so? Could it be different? Learn to recognize when the strongest thoughts appear in your head and then stop for a moment. Ask yourself, "What if. I am wrong. There is something else. It could be interpreted another way. There is more I know/do not know about this?"

Ask the right questions.

Focus on where you want to go (versus where you are or what is in the way). Give yourself a clear target by describing, as clearly as possible, what it looks like when you achieve success. Think about which beliefs you need to move out of the way or suspend, such as "that's not the way we do things here" or "our customers will never accept X"). Jot down the most interesting questions you can come up with to encourage thinking differently and make your questions open-ended and future-focused.

Consider different angles.

Pose questions to prompt your brain to look at the same data in a new way, such as "What would our competitor invest in if they were us?" "What one thing do our customers really want us to change?" "What do our employees think would provide the most fuel for our success?"

Questions help you look at challenges from different perspectives. They help change our perception so that the same data has different meaning.

Stage your field of vision.

Get the right things in front of you. Adult humans are very visually-driven creatures, but today there are more distractions than ever competing for our time and attention.

Make sure your targets are visible to you as much of the time as possible. Get them on the wall in your office; have them pop up on your task list on your computer and PDA. Make sure they are visible to everyone involved as well. If it is not in front of you visually, you probably won't do it, so take the time to fill your working area with the visuals that help keep you focused on success.

Connect the dots in new ways.

Figuring out patterns forms a large part of our intelligence. Your subconscious mind likes closure. When faced with an incomplete picture, it works to complete the mental image by inferring the missing information.

Your mind works the same way on an unsolved problem or challenge; it loves to dive right in and get the job done by using what you already know or expect. So, look for successful approaches that can be applied to your situation. What products, services and/or companies are incredibly successful right now? What can you adapt from what they are doing?

Original ideas can come from recognizing new connections between familiar things and transforming them into something new.

In many ways, our own brains get in our way the most and minimize our innovation. We can learn to leverage the power of our brains by pausing every now and then to define excellence up front (don't do it over, spend the time to do it right the first time), consider different perspectives and angles, ask simple questions to trigger a new way of perceiving, and ponder the impossible.

Holly Green is author of "More Than A Minute," and the CEO and managing director of The Human Factor Inc. She has more than 20 years of executive level and operations experience in FORTUNE 100, entrepreneurial and management consulting organizations. She was previously president of The Ken Blanchard Companies, a global consulting and training organization as well as LumMed Inc., a biotech start up. For more information: www.morethanaminute.com.