

Thinking outside the box

by Ed Bernacki

A REASON I'M often given for the need for innovation training is “to get our company to think outside the box”.

This may come from the person at the top who feels that the quality of solutions or ideas is not great. This stems from a sense of frustration. It also comes from people working in teams who feel that the contribution of others is not helping to find new and original solutions to the challenges they face.

If you have ever been in this situation, you will know how hard it is to deal with. Perhaps it is best to start with what this term actually means. I don't know of an official definition of “out of the box” thinking but here is my perspective starting with “in the box” thinking.

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

Thinking inside the box accepts the status quo. For example, Charles H. Duell, director of the US Patent Office said, “Everything that can be invented has been invented”. That was in 1899; clearly, he was in the box!

In-the-box thinkers find it hard to recognise the quality of an idea. An idea is an idea. A solution is a solution. In fact, they can be quite pig-headed when it comes to valuing an idea. They rarely invest time to turn a mediocre solution into a great solution.

More dangerously, in-the-box thinkers are skilful in killing ideas. They are masters of the creativity killer attitude such as “that'll never work” or “it's too risky”. The best in-the-box thinkers are naïve to the fact that they drain the enthusiasm and passion of innovative thinkers when they kill their innovative ideas.

They also believe that every problem needs only one solution. Therefore, finding more than one possible solution is a waste. They often say, “There is no time for creative solutions. We just need *the* solution.”

There is a tragedy here. Great creative people can become in-the-box thinkers when they stop trying. Apathy and indifference can turn an innovator into an in-the-box thinker.

There is only one case where in-the-box thinking is key. This comes from a cartoon: a man talks to his cat and points to the kitty litter box. He says, “Never ever think outside the box!”



THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

Thinking outside the box takes different attributes that include:

- willingness to take new perspectives to day-to-day work
- openness to do different things and to do things differently
- focusing on the value of finding new ideas and acting on them
- striving to create value in new ways
- listening to others
- supporting and respecting others when they come up with new ideas.

Out-of-the box thinking requires being open to new ways of seeing the world and a willingness to explore. Out-of-the box thinkers know that new ideas need nurturing and support. They also know that having an idea is good but acting on it is more important. Results are what count.

Ed Bernacki is an ideas champion. He started The Idea Factory to work with people to find and action new ideas. His latest book, “Wow! That's a Great idea!” is available at book shops or by downloading an order form at www.ideafactory.com.au

The risk of not trying something new

BY ED BERNACKI

FOR READERS WHO have used typewriters, you know the IBM Selecta was a model of innovation. You could use correctable tape. You could change the font. What power the machine gave you.

Part of my first job was to produce newsletters. I typed a draft version. It was corrected. I then retyped a final version. A typesetter then retyped the article for layout. This was my story until 1984 – when we bought computers.

The PC meant I had to unlearn how I created stories on a typewriter and relearn how to do it on a computer.

This involved two aspects:

- learning how to use the technology
- learning to see what was possible with the technology.

In the end, I realised the second type of learning was more challenging and powerful. The computer was much more than a typewriter on steroids!

The need to unlearn what we hold as “fact” and relearn how we do things is the essence of business innovation. What are you resisting to unlearn and relearn?

I hear two stories to excuse why people claim that innovation is not important. I want to address them.

“Being innovative is too risky”

To deal with this issue, I will use a technique for prompting new thinking – do the reverse.

For example, to plan an event, you develop a “to do” list to be successful. To enhance your thinking, also produce a “to fail” list. If you identify the top issues that could cause you to fail, and you avoid them, you succeed. This is a powerful tool.

Let’s look at the notion of risk. In its most basic terms, if the risk of trying something new is too high, what is the risk of not trying something new?

From the research on decision making in organisations, there are common results regardless of the country or the industry.

People in organisations are:

- slower to react to opportunities than the alarm bells of problems
- often pick the first alternative that minimally meets the standards of acceptability.

Let’s ask the question again. If being innovative is too risky, what is the risk of picking the first minimally acceptable solution that is a reaction to a problem? As a decision-maker, which is a bigger risk to long-term

profitability: one in which you or your staff look for new options or one in which you accept the first minimally acceptable option?

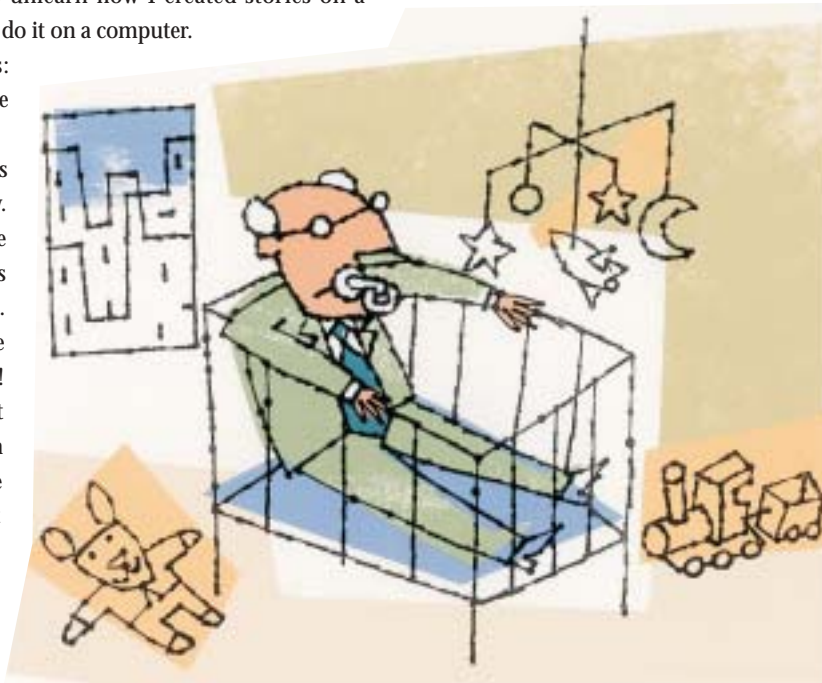
“There’s no need for innovation in our industry”

People continue to think like this until a competitor does something no one else thought of. They break the industry rules and do something new. Every business presents customers with products or services that represent the best solution of the day. If something better

comes along, customers tend to move to the new product.

If your business does not need innovation, what does this say about the solutions you offer customers? What’s the opposite of an innovative solution? You may not like the answer. The opposite of an innovative solution is what I call “acceptable mediocrity”. It may not be bad, but how good is it? The biggest risk to a company, industry or country that thinks innovation is not important is becoming complacent.

Every organisation can profit from being more innovative in its products or services, marketing, or leadership. So take away the perception of risk and replace it with the perception that new ideas are important. On the other hand, you can continue to use the IBM Selectra. It was a good idea in its day.



ALLOWING YOUR STARS TO SHINE

by Ed Bernacki

NOT LONG AGO, I read that brainstorming is a good team building activity. In a business world that is shifting toward a greater focus on teamwork, this sounds great. But there is a problem: brainstorming is not a team building activity.

Alex Osborn, who first defined this approach for “harnessing people’s brains to storm through problems”, made his intent clear. He wrote, “Despite the advances in organised research, the creative power of the individual still counts most”. He viewed teamwork as a way to enhance the creativity of individuals. To prove his point, his insightful 1953 book, *Applied Imagination** spent 287 pages talking about processes to find powerful ideas as individuals and only 18 pages on doing this in groups.

Having worked with numerous organisations, I always find some people seem to find powerful ideas. These are people who like to think about the way things work and how they could work. Without considering themselves as innovative, they solve problems and find new ways to make things happen. They love the challenge to think, solve problems, create opportunities and take on challenges. These people are worth gold. They can be assistants to managers, PAs or senior managers. What many lack is the opportunity to have their ideas heard and understood. As a result, many great ideas are lost.

You need to recognise that the strength of these people is the power of their initiative. They should be nurtured and protected. Your job is to provide a forum for their ideas.

Alex Osborn defined brainstorming to improve the quality of decisions being made by groups working on a common challenge. We all recognise the scenario he saw – a group has a major challenge to tackle and calls together a meeting. Instead of “harnessing the brains to storm through the

problem” they end with discussions that go in circles. Solutions are not found. Decisions are postponed. To change this, focus on two perspectives:

1. PLANNING FOR RESULTS

Prior to the event, define the challenge at hand in writing. The discipline of writing it down clarifies your thinking. Give this challenge to each participant prior to the meeting. Tell each to prepare a two-minute response from his or her perspective (to ensure everyone prepares).

2. AVOID “DUMBING” DOWN A TEAM

Keep in mind that sport teams combine individual expertise to form a single powerful unit. Likewise, your brainstorming team should combine individual experts.

Some people are experts at finding ideas, while others are uncomfortable with untried ideas. Their skill will likely be on enhancing the original idea or helping to shape an action plan. All three skills of finding ideas, nurturing them and acting on them are necessary.

Your job is to find all three types and allow each a voice to use their expertise. Not everyone will have an equal voice – that’s OK.

Remember that brainstorming is designed to find better ideas to solve your problems and achieve results. Often when this happens, your team builds in strength. But that’s the by-product, not the goal!

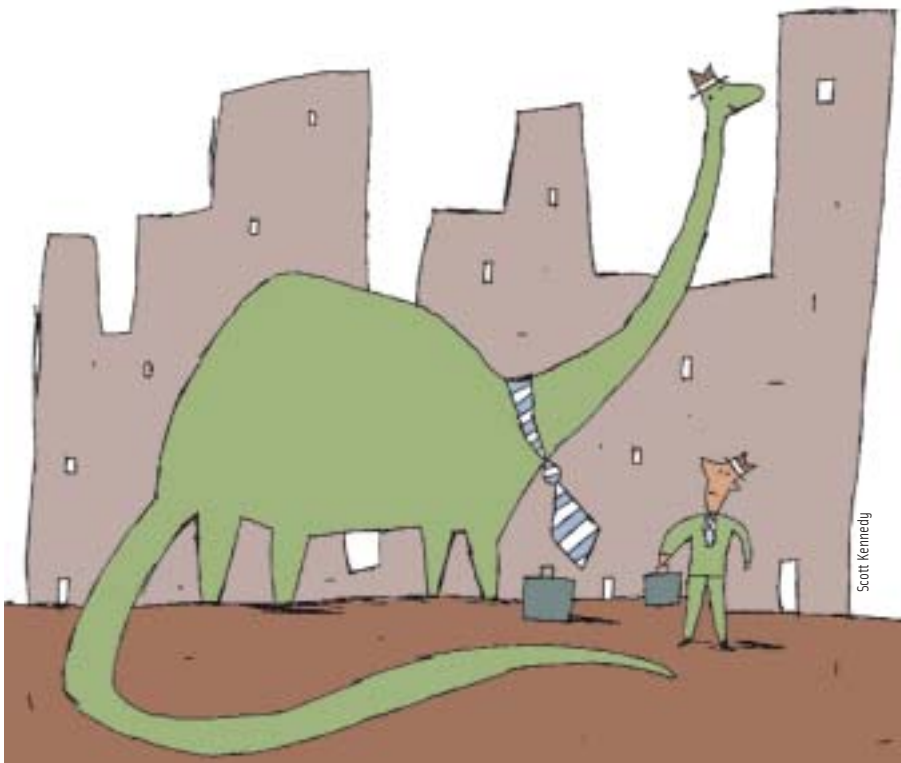
* *Applied Imagination* is available from Amazon.com



Scott Kennedy

Understanding failure and success

by Ed Bernacki



WHAT MAKES ORGANISATIONS successful and profitable in the long run? This is the most looked at question in all of management literature.

Millions of dollars have been spent to research this question. Is the answer the Holy Grail of business or is it possible to solve this enigma?

There seems to be two different approaches to answer this question. One reflects the traditional management approach of looking for the secrets by studying what successful companies do and don't do. We are told, "Follow the key successful factors for other organisations and you too will succeed". Perhaps the first super book in this category was Tom Peter's *In Search of Excellence*.

The other approach starts at a more philosophical basis. This was outlined very well recently in a speech I read by the head of Singapore's civil service, Lim Siong Guan, at the launch of a new innovation programme. He outlined three main reasons for the failure of institutions and even societies:

- failure to learn from the past
- failure to adapt to the present
- failure to anticipate the future.

He says the worst failure is the failure to anticipate the future. If we need a road map to find the direction we should head, every retreat and planning session should start with these three simple questions.

How can we learn from the past?

How does your organisation learn from its mistakes, and even better, the mistakes of others? What is put in place to ensure that the lessons learned in investing time and money into projects, strategies and ideas that did not work are not lost? There is value in the insights gained from errors. How do you learn from customer mistakes and success? The simple solution is to ensure that we stop, reflect, and look at what worked and what didn't.

How should we adapt to the present?

How does your organisation tackle today's challenges? Does the organisation create the time to take the lessons from the past to recognise today's challenges. If so, does it actively and deliberately tackle them? I believe

a significant issue for many companies is that they do not adapt well to present conditions because they lack the discipline and insights to recognise the necessary changes.

How do we anticipate the future?

Those organisations and individuals that lead the way have a strong sense of the future. While no one is a fortune-teller, some people seem to be in front of the market. Many companies are investing the time and resources to look for new directions, ideas and innovations.

It takes new skills to review our successes and failures, to adapt to today's challenges, and to look to the horizon to see what's possible. This is the essence of an innovative organisation. It anticipates and responds to change rather than waiting to react when change has already happened.

One of the strongest solutions I have seen comes from the Singapore Civil Service. Its goal is to help people become innovative thinkers. To support people, it developed a major training programme made up of five important aspects of innovative thinking. These are:

- generating ideas
- harvesting and developing ideas
- evaluating and judging ideas
- marketing and communicating new ideas
- implementing ideas.

Take the time to reflect on the three challenges set out earlier. Prior to your next planning session, give your team a one-page overview of them and tell people to come prepared to discuss the big issues for their area of responsibility. You may discover that you have a wealth of insights already. Alternatively, you may discover how little knowledge your organisation actually has about the future. Both results are valuable but your actions will be different.

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Is doing nothing an option in your business?

by Ed Bernacki

ONE OF THE benefits of working in different countries is that you begin to notice differences in the ways that people in organisations think. I discovered an insight that arose from working on a project that involved government departments in Canada and Singapore. This can offer Kiwi readers a useful barometer for the issue of change.

Singapore has totally reinvented itself over the past 40 years. Although its strength in IT is waning, it is now focusing on biotechnology. The theme that permeates all levels of government policy is that the country must up-skill at all levels to meet future challenges. In other words, doing nothing is not an option. It has created an array of skills training programmes and subsidises the use of these.

To contrast this sense of urgency to change, I reviewed a programme in Canada. Here is the key difference. The Singaporean approach was to start the programme, noting benefits could not be easily measured but they would be obvious in time. The Canadian programme was stuck in a mode of inaction. Why? Because of the need to define "measurable outcomes" which are extremely difficult to forecast. As a result, nothing has happened for several years.

The moral of the story: though prevailing management cliché suggests that, "what gets measured gets done", the lack of easy measures can kill action and results. The Singaporean programme is running while the other waits for funding. In the Canadian case, doing nothing is an option.

Key questions for business managers making a decision should include:

- every decision in every organisation always includes a "do nothing" option. The difference between those that move forward and those that don't is that they recognise this option. Doing nothing may be the right decision. It may also be the result of apathy and a lack of conviction. Review key challenges in your organisation. Was the "do nothing" option taken? Why? Was it for the right reasons?
- in a previous column (*Venture*, March 2001) I wrote about the risk of innovative ideas (which many are quick to recognise) and the need to also assess the risk of not taking the innovative idea (that is, the risk of continuing with the status quo). Look at your key decisions in your organisation – which is the greater risk?

New Zealand companies must continue to think globally about the opportunities for sales. Many already do. I personally

experience the results of two highly innovative companies on a regular basis in Canada.

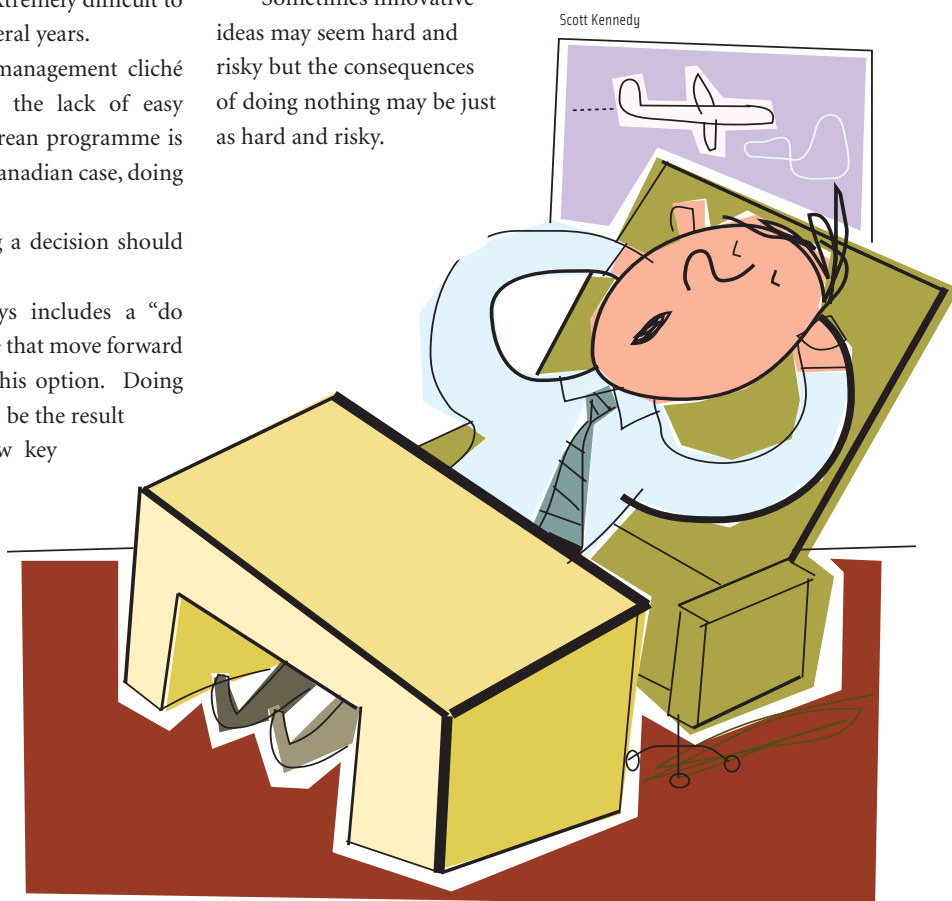
Les Mills World of Fitness successfully markets fitness programmes globally. I take the Les Mills Pump classes in my gym in Ottawa. Most people think anything this good must be North American but I correct their naivety!

Jasons Design, the makers of high quality souvenir coasters and placemats are found in many Canadian tourist venues. How a Kiwi company is able to market its products with souvenir pictures of Banff and Ottawa is beyond me. But it is clear that the risks the company had to take to go overseas have paid off.

Both cases are excellent case studies for the notion that doing nothing is not an option.

Kiwi managers facing tough decisions should carefully assess the impact of their decisions. They should also take another 10 minutes to define the implications of not taking an action, when the tangible benefits are hard to measure.

Sometimes innovative ideas may seem hard and risky but the consequences of doing nothing may be just as hard and risky.



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