



THE BRIGHT SIDE® OF CHANGE

Written by Donna Rae Smith

THE TENETS OF INNOVATIVE COMPANIES

“Innovation is not a one-time job—innovation is a journey.” Peter Chou, CEO, HTC

In a recent Harvard Business Review [blog](#), the authors of *The Innovator’s DNA* cite a key characteristic of innovative companies: innovation is modeled and led by senior executives. In innovative companies, the senior leaders engage in the creative work themselves. Unlike other companies, where executives think the creative work can be delegated, true innovators—Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, A.G. Lafley—take a hands on approach. That doesn’t mean of course that they don’t look for or cultivate innovation among their employees. They do. But they recognize and embrace the need to be innovative themselves.

The HBR blog got me thinking about other “truths” of innovative companies. Here are three more tenets that innovative companies understand:

1. **The customer is king.** In a recent VentureBeat [article](#), Napkin Labs CEO Riley Gibson talks about the necessity for remembering that the customer’s experience is paramount. Of course idea-generation is critical, but it’s only part of the equation. Innovative ideas need to respond to customers’ wants and needs, and products need to get to market while those wants and needs are still salient.



2. **It’s a wide, wide world.** Jobs’ departure from Apple in the mid 90s is often cited as a contributing factor to Apple’s later success. Why? Because his interim experiences leading NeXT and Pixar influenced and shaped his work at Apple when he returned. It doesn’t mean you have to leave your current position to gain new experiences, but you do need to reach out and learn from others across a spectrum of industries and sectors. The more you do, the better you can make connections and draw linkages in creating new and innovative possibilities.

3. **Don't rest on market share.** Ohio-based Bettcher Industries is a terrific example of a company that's innovatively expanding its core business. In the meat processing and food service equipment industry since the 1940s, Bettcher [recognized the applications](#) of its equipment for the medical industry. The company is now in the process of commercializing a product line with financial support from Ohio Third Frontier. Amazon is another great example—within several years of its founding, this behemoth online bookseller realized that it didn't need to limit itself to books, and that it could offer its platform to other retailers, thereby sell everything under the sun.

Bottom line, the underpinnings of innovation do not rely on one set of processes or behaviors but the results are greater when senior leaders are directly involved. Leaders need to experiment to identify the processes and behaviors that work best for them and their people. If you are already using methods that are working, see what you can tweak for improvement. And if what you're doing hasn't been yielding the desired outcomes, be willing to try something new and different to get the results you want.

The Experiment

Try these fun and adaptable exercises to get you and your team thinking innovatively:

- Take an ordinary office supply—paper clip, kneaded eraser, anything—and set a timer to 3 minutes. How many different uses can you think of for these seemingly ordinary items? Push for ten ideas, then twenty, then fifty. Transfer this process and apply it to one of your current products or a customer need while your mind is still in an expansive state.
- Think of a common product unrelated to your industry. If you could improve upon it in any way, how would you? You don't have to bind yourself by what's realistic. Think fantastical! If you could do anything to improve this product, what would it be? Then, spend 2 minutes pitching your idea to the others in the group.
- What circumstances could make your organization's current products obsolete? In a worst-case scenario, how could you reinvent your company to market something new?
- Try the Marshmallow Challenge! Open your mind to different ways of thinking and behaving. <http://bit.ly/a4Dfm6>

THE CONVERSATION: Share the results of your experiment in the comments below or contact the author directly at donnarae@bright-side.com.

ABOUT DONNA RAE SMITH

Donna Rae Smith is a guest blogger for Smart Business. She has forged a career, enterprise and an applied discipline on the practice of teaching leaders to be masters of change. She is the Founder and CEO of Bright Side, Inc., a transformational change catalyst company with an emphasis on the behavior-side of change. For more than two decades, Donna Rae Smith and the Bright Side team have been recognized as innovators in executing behavioral strategies coalesced with business strategies to accelerate and sustain business results. Bright Side®, The Behavioral Strategy Company, has partnered with over 250 of the world's most influential companies. For more information, please visit www.bright-side.com or contact Donna Rae at donnarae@bright-side.com.

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