

## Where Does Innovation Come From?

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*'In a world where so many people now have access to education and cheap tools of innovation: innovation that happens from the bottom up tends to be chaotic but smart.*

*Innovation that happens from the top down tends to be orderly but dumb.'* Curtis Carlson, CEO, SRI International, as reported by Thomas L. Friedman in his NY Times column, June 2011.

Friedman went on to write, "... the role of leaders today – of companies and countries – is to inspire, empower, enable and then edit and meld all that innovation coming from the bottom up." Against this, the big challenge for so many executives is that they have been reared in "boss" rather than leader cultures. Bosses too often believe that they have to come up with all the innovative answers. Consequently their people will sit and wait for the boss's next epiphany.

Most entrepreneurial ventures are born because people at other levels in companies have good ideas, but their bosses didn't listen. In some instances, new entrepreneurs ultimately put their former employers out of business. And it didn't really have to be that way...so much for the "boss" culture. Where companies have leaders of the ilk defined by Friedman above, then those companies continue to flourish and evolve toward the next wave: as opposed to become stifled and destined to expire. Even bosses run out of creative ideas.

In extreme boss cases, there's not much that can be done. Such people build a cadre of "yes men" around them and everyone waits for their command or the next crazy idea. But at least the "yes men" have jobs (sometimes at pay beyond their true value because of blind obedience and loyalty).

Right now, in these recessionary times, there are a lot of enterprises stagnating because their people are waiting for their "boss" to paint the picture going forward. Some of these bosses are reluctant bosses because they don't know any better. They've grown up within certain organizational cultures and, even though they probably detested waiting for their former bosses to innovate, they now perpetuate the syndrome themselves.

Good leaders don't set themselves up as innovators. They build up the confidence and talents within people around them and nurture their creative ideas. They realize that a lot of half-baked ideas, if watered properly, can become sizzling ideas. Also, even though their people may not readily latch onto a new trend, they will coax, nudge and educate them until the "light bulb goes on."

Let's consider three suggestions which will enable reluctant bosses to migrate to become leaders:

**Education and Learning** – Good leaders have a great appetite for learning, especially regarding more effective ways of motivating people and building positive, innovative environments. Bosses on the other hand do little of the education and learning piece because they know it all already. Bosses rarely want to learn about fresh approaches or

inspiring their people unless they're in a "rock and a hard place." Good leaders will seek out insightful books, quality seminars or worthy mentors. What they discover will be taken seriously and then applied as assiduously as possible. In this writer's estimation, when executives stop learning their leadership prowess begins to wane.

**Focus on Your People, Not Yourself** – Traditional bosses are generally described as people with big egos. In other words, they're more focused on themselves and their own prowess and generally have scant regard for the capabilities of their people. Their sentences are full of "I." On the other hand, smart leaders focus on building up and encouraging their people. They invariably have people around them that they respect and appreciate. Humility is more likely to be a key value rather than their own ego. People like Thomas Jefferson always gave far more credit to individuals around him for his success: in turn they did their best for him.

**Let People Make Mistakes** – Once you take a leadership posture toward people, you will be open to let them learn from their mistakes. From this, they will discover and innovate. As their confidence grows, they will explore opportunities and take reasonable risks; always knowing they will receive encouragement and reinforcement whichever way it goes. Who knows, one out of every ten interesting ideas will bear real potential. As their leader, you will help facilitate the assembly of resources and talents, as well as the creation of a vision-picture to give the innovation full life. Whatever set-backs occur, you will encourage the innovator to hang in there (whereas bosses just trample and take over; thereby encouraging some innovative people to leave and "do their own thing").

**Where does innovation come from?** It comes from all those talented people operating within your organization, which is now well led. Your people probably have many unrecognized talents, which, when harnessed properly, could put your enterprise on an exciting new track. Give up being a typical boss and try leadership instead, it's worth it.

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