

# Innovating Yourself and Your Business

BY ANNA CONRAD



**I**nnovation is a term thrown around a lot in today's business world. Companies want to innovate and change, to adapt to what consumers and customers need. Most companies miss one key element—in order to innovate, a company must have leaders who also believe in innovating themselves.

Identifying who you have become, accepting both the good and bad of this, and committing to change other behavior requires courage. Being innovative means being vulnerable—not a trait that many think is positive. However, learning to be vulnerable will propel you to the next phase, as a person and in your career. People respond strongly to leaders who are human—those leaders who admit their faults and embrace growth.

In the most basic sense, to innovate means to change. It's one thing to talk about innovating or changing your business strategy, but what about innovating or changing

yourself? Most people have a feeling of fear if not downright resistance to this idea. But innovating yourself does not mean changing who you are on a fundamental level, it means re-examining who you are at this moment, and who you ultimately want to be. And the hardest part of this is innovating in an authentic way.

People often come to me because they have climbed the corporate ladder and yet they feel a sense of loneliness or emptiness. I also receive a lot of requests from leaders who feel disengaged or “not themselves” in the role they play at the office. This often comes out in their inability to excite the organization to tackle changes, in personal fatigue or in some more serious cases, illnesses. The first thing I help leaders do is

**BEING INNOVATIVE MEANS BEING VULNERABLE**

hold a mirror up to themselves and take an honest look at what they see.

## WHO YOU ARE: HOLDING UP A MIRROR

It's not easy to see a gradual change process. Our values, vision, wants and needs may be different than what they once were. For the first decade of our professional lives, most people seek a job that aligns with their degree and the path they chose as a young adult. But as time goes on, experi-

**THE HARDEST PART OF THIS IS INNOVATING IN AN AUTHENTIC WAY.**

ences open up different opportunities and different things that we didn't even know existed. Often the values we cling to are aligned with the person we were when we identified them, not with the person we are today. And one day you may realize you are looking at things a little differently. Perhaps it is election time, and you realize you are not voting down your party line. Or maybe it's when you apply to that job that is the logical next step in your career, and you are filled with a sense of dread, not excitement.

This step of the development process is one of the hardest for leaders to undergo. It requires an open mind and self-compassion. To do this, you need to look at your leadership style as you see yourself, your style as others see it, and re-examine your values.

## HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF?

Self-assessments such as Myers-Briggs, DiSC, or Insights

are a good start, but they are only your view of who you are. I recently facilitated a team effectiveness session to the senior leaders of a large oil and gas company. As part of this session, we used Insights as both a self-assessment and then a 360° version where other people determined their characteristics, leadership and communication styles. Eight of the 12 leaders saw themselves with different styles than others saw them!

#### HOW DO OTHERS SEE YOU?

A more realistic view of who you are is a true 360° assessment, where others rank you and make comments on specific behaviors that you feel are important to your leadership style and effectiveness. As a coach, self-assessments and 360s show me how the person sees himself, and who he would like to be. It shows me the behaviors that the person thinks makes her successful because most people do not purposefully admit or see behaviors that they know are unacceptable.

#### VALUES

When I work with executives, I push people to identify their current values, and I force them to look to see if they are living these values. I was working with a senior VP of human resources. She pointed to a picture of her two young children, smiled and proudly proclaimed family her top priority. Yet she worked a minimum of 70 hours a week, including weekends and evenings. If a value is real, you use it as your compass and the basis for all of your decisions.

### TAKE AN HONEST LOOK AT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WHO YOU ARE NOW, AND WHO YOU WANT TO BE.

#### WHO YOU WANT TO BE

Ask any emerging leader to describe characteristics that make a leader, and the list will undoubtedly include “gets results” and “takes charge.” Yet if you ask these same young leaders who they would follow, the characteristics they identify are usually different. The traits they describe are usually more about collaboration than command, respect rather than dictating. You must decide for yourself who you want to be, and how you want to be seen as a leader. I frequently have clients describe and define “professional,” including describing in detail how professional people behave, what they say, and how they make decisions. This usually gives me an indication of the person they have modeled themselves after. Next, I have them describe someone whom they would follow to another company or another team. We then compare the two. An amazing realization often occurs—the former is whom they thought they wanted to be, and the latter is whom they themselves are really wanting to become.

It is important to be honest with yourself about who you want to be. If you try

to fake being someone you are not, others will know it. Your true feelings about what you are doing will leak nonverbal cues, and people will consciously and subconsciously pick up on it. If you have been told that you need to be more focused on people, you may ask them about their weekend, or their child’s soccer game. But are you truly listening to the answer, or are you only partially listening as you check your email?

#### HOW TO GET THERE

Take an honest look at the difference between who you are now, and who you want to be. Keep what has worked in the past, as long as it still serves you. Your competitive nature has gotten you results and success, but is your company and your position requiring collaboration? If so, you must work with the rest of the organization and colleagues. A lone wolf reputation may work for an individual contributor but not for a leader of a department or organization.

Scientists have watched different areas of the brain light up in response to certain thoughts, and they consistently come to the same conclusion about change: We try to avoid it. If you are serious about being innovative with yourself, make an action plan with timelines. Just as you need employees to support an initiative, you must have someone who will hold you accountable and support you as you change.

Innovation in your company cannot occur if you are not innovating yourself. These suggestions give you a great start in doing just that. ▲

