



Conversations on the *Cutting Edge*

June 2011

Thoughts from the Front-End of Innovation Conference

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After speaking with many attendees, I noticed an emerging insight beginning to move into mainstream thinking ... the gaining recognition **of the critical importance of the human system** (leadership, culture, individual predispositions, key staff selection) when it comes to *truly innovative* concepts and making them a commercial success. The *truly innovative* has more of a feeling of *new* and *different*. And if we tell the truth, most of us humans are uncomfortable and unskilled in this realm.

Highlights and Key Takeaways:

Jonah Lehrer, Author, *How We Decide*: When people are solving “seemingly impossible” problems, moments of insight come from making remote associations, not from focused thinking. We can develop “wise emotions” that point us in constructive directions and away from impulse decisions. When we have a knowing feeling that we are making progress ... focused attention works. When we don’t have our inner guidance working ... go for new insights. An unexpected insight: when looking for predictors of successful people, the key personal attribute is perseverance ... people who delay immediate gratification and stick with getting the gritty work done.

Terri Kelly, CEO, W.L. Gore & Associates: What does Gore cultivate in its leaders? The ability to engage in contradictions, challenge, change people’s presumptions, and do battle with the opponent in one’s own head. The Gore mantra: “Let’s be innovative and creative where it matters” and have that live in the organization every day. Gore understands ... leaders create culture.

Charles Camarda, Astronaut, NASA: When failure can be tragic, how do you manage? Assume that the impossible can occur. Create forums to openly question assumptions, encourage dissent. Beware of the confirmation bias. Test to the failure point.

John Kotter, Harvard Business School, speaking on ‘Buy-in’: Once the mind has learned something, it locks into patterns. False urgency is anxiety-based activity; true urgency is aligned movement towards a big opportunity. People don’t understand how to operationalize what they see needs to be done. This last point is quite salient coming from the originator of organizational change management.

As I said at the outset, we humans are unskilled in the truly new and different. So, **how do you create the capacity to focus on future and new?** Panelists drew on their experiences. 1) Tell a new story or “walk-back” stories of past blockbuster successes ... BMW DesignWorks is using Hollywood to create video trailers for a new idea. 2) Find the things that have appeal to individual C-level executives. 3) Build new and future oriented cadres scattered throughout the company vs. focusing in one place. 4) Use the words of customers - what they actually say.

If I were to boil it down to a key takeaway with which I walked away from FEI2011, this would be it ...*you can cultivate truly innovative enterprise-wide thinking and behavior but you can't gift wrap and tie it up with a bow.* This is hard work ... and requires perseverance and true grit. As Terri Kelly said, "There are never enough leaders to do this."

**For more insights into implementing Breakaway Growth & Business Innovation
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