

Books and Missiology

Institutionalizing a Culture of Innovation

by Derek T. Seipp

“The whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.” Ephesians 4:6 (NASB)

The art of innovation lies in using what you’ve learned through the scenario building process for identifying higher impact opportunities. Peter Drucker wrote, “There are, of course, innovations that spring from a flash of genius. Most innovations, however, especially the successful ones, result from a conscious, purposeful search for innovation opportunities” (Drucker 1985, 3). The tools discussed in previous chapters are some of the most widely used tools to which today’s businesses are turning for finding these innovative ideas.

These innovative ideas certainly come from a variety of sources. Drucker talked of this as a “flash of genius.” Flashes of genius, however, are hard to come by and are notoriously unpredictable. It’s also generally not recommended to rely on one single innovative thinker to find new ideas and opportunities. Such a person will find themselves frustratingly at odds with the larger team.

Instead, businesses institutionalize the innovation process. They create innovation centers based upon these principles. They empower their employees, then reward them for coming up with new ideas.

Bill O’Brien, former Vice President at the Southern Baptist Convention Foreign Mission Board (now the International Mission Board), has been helping Christian organizations institutionalize the innovative process ever since he read an article on the subject written by a NASA physicist (World Futures Society 1994; Seipp 2015). The 1994 article described how NASA’s Dr. John Andersen used a group process to challenge his team’s assumptions about interplanetary space travel. The result? His team found a new method of space-propulsion that reduced the time for new probes to get to Jupiter, cutting down several years to a just a couple of months.

According to O’Brien, the key is to help a group conceptualize a scenario they’ve developed, far off into the future; then the group is pressed to find higher and higher level capabilities within that scenario. After identifying an

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idea or opportunity, the group works backwards to today, discussing all the steps necessary to arrive at this new future. O'Brien says this type of scenario planning results in revolutionary ideas for everyone involved: "This is not a way of creating strategic plans, but it is a way of creating new ways of thinking" (Seipp 2015).

Drucker stated, "Purposeful, systematic innovation begins with the analysis of the sources of new opportunities" (Drucker 1985, 7). The goal of innovation is not just to come up with one new idea, but rather to cause the organization to become purposefully systematic in identifying new opportunities. It is a continuous process of attacking strategic drift, by moving beyond it. It's about aiming for where the ball is going to be, rather than where it is now, or was last year. It's becoming like the tribe of Issachar, knowing the times and knowing what to do in response.

The Mission Society was facing its twenty-fifth anniversary. They were proud of their history, but felt an uneasiness (Seipp 2015). Leaders noticed a gap developing between their vision and the deployment of missionaries on the ground. O'Brien was called in to help. A cross-section of leaders and missionaries was assembled in Prague in 2008.

Looking at the trends and challenges developing in their world, Vice President Jim Ramsay realized, "If we don't change, we won't be addressing the key global issues in 10–15 years . . ." But it wasn't just about ministry opportunities. Ramsay said, "We have to rethink how we do everything." They assembled a group: a cross-section of individuals from across the organization. They examined scenarios twenty-five years into the future, and it fundamentally changed everyone who participated. Eight years later, Ramsay says, "Broad organizational shift is [still] happening as a result of that meeting—its fingerprints are all over many aspects of our organization today."

The process of orienting the team to the issues of the future, rather than the issues of today, forever changed the members of the team. Ramsay says that new innovative ideas still continue to emerge. As O'Brien said, it's a new way of thinking. It changes people.

The goal is to embed these new ways of thinking into the organization's culture. This is not a one-time activity, but a living process. Each change we encounter is an opportunity for us to use the creativity God gave us to impact our world for Him and His glory. The innovation process must be kept alive. To create such a culture, we begin by focusing on spiritual leadership.

Spiritual Leadership

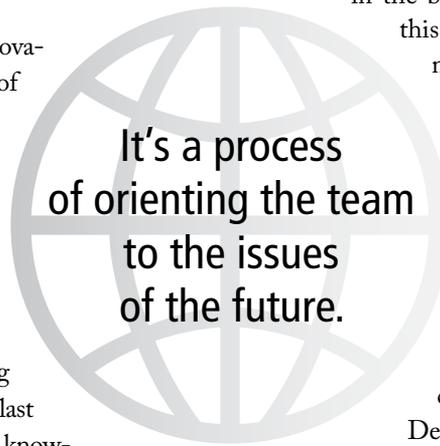
Spiritual leadership "reframe[s] our relationships with others, appreciating them with dignity and love" (Oster 2011, Kindle location 78). The Bible describes this type of love as *agapao* love (Winston 2002). It seeks the best for others as described in the beatitudes. Jesus is the ultimate example of this love. He worked for people's best interests; not just their spoken needs, or their surface problems.

According to Oswald Sanders, this kind of spirituality comes from authentically living out the values of discipline, vision, wisdom, decision, courage, humility, integrity, sincerity, and humor (Sanders, J. O. 2007). When corporations lack these values, they become crippled, difficult places in which to work (Mitroff and Denton 1999). Teams working in an atmosphere starved of these values stagnate (Winston 2002; Sanders, T. I. 1998). Moreover, innovation won't thrive in such an environment either (Oster 2011).

Agapao love focuses on truly loving God and others. This kind of love builds maturity, both in the giver and the receiver. All it takes is for one individual consistently living out this kind of love to radically transform toxic relationships into healthy ones (Clinton and Sibcy 2006). It transforms ordinary teams into high performance teams (MacMillan 2001).

It should be noted that just because an organization performs *spiritual ministry* does not necessarily mean the organization dynamics are also *spiritual* (Sanders, T. I. 1998). Ministry organizations can easily be devoid of wisdom, courage, love, trust, vision, or other values. An environment of micro-management and distrust will stymie innovation and individual commitment. We have all heard stories of churches led by overbearing pastors, leaving no space for individual soul expression. Though these organizations may be made up of spiritual people, the dynamics are anything but spiritual. It also doesn't matter if the senior leadership team thinks these are present in the organization. Leaders may need to invite a few of their individuals out for coffee, and ask them how they perceive the core values of the organization. It may be that some teams model these values well, while others have become toxic.

There is not one "correct" set of values that will transform your organization into a spiritual organization (Mitroff & Denton 1999). Yet, it only takes a few of these values to completely transform the dynamics. The most important factor is that these values are modeled at the top, by the senior leadership (Daft and Lane 2008).



Incorporating spiritual values into organizational dynamics will enrich the soil that innovation needs in order to take root and begin growing (Mitroff & Denton 1999). These values also help organizations from calcifying. When organizations become rigid, they quit adapting to external changes. Energy is required to keep our organizations from succumbing to entropy. Just as we do, our organizations need times of renewal. It keeps them fresh and alert to what God desires to do in our changing world.

When organizations are supportive of innovation they adapt faster to their changing environment. Innovation enhances the resilience, or adaptive capacity, of organizations (Holling 2001). It keeps our organizations from becoming a boiling frog. True resilience includes the ability to know when to change and adjust. There is only one thing to which we may hold unswervingly, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ. God left much of the specific methodology up to us as an expression of the creativity he gave to us.

When the gospel came to Antioch, it was presented with a host of new and different conditions. Peter and the disciples in Jerusalem approached the situation with rigidity. Paul, however, approached the situation with innovation. It created a tense situation resulting in the leadership in Jerusalem having to wrestle through some very difficult and fundamental questions regarding change. Imagine what the church might be like today if Peter and the other apostles had remained rigid on a purely Jewish expression of the Gospel?

Leadership science has changed significantly over time. A hundred years ago, when the environment was changing at a much slower pace, organizations functioned much like factories. The focus was on developing assembly lines with high efficiency. Centralized, hierarchical, and bureaucratic leadership structures supported the standardization of actions which rarely changed. Levels of bureaucracy helped ensure that change happened in a precise manner, where each minute change was understood for its impact on each other area of the manufacturing process. This kept efficiency at its peak.

Today's environment is very different, and it requires a different type of leadership. Having levels of bureaucracy is too rigid to respond to the rapid, daily changes we face. By the time a decision travels up and down each level of command, it's already too late. Strategic drift has widened into a gulf.

To keep up with the changes, organizations have shed layers of management in favor of adaptive structures that can learn and react quickly with a greater degree of autonomy (Daft and Lane 2003). As a result, organizations look much flatter. Teams are empowered to make quick decisions, but they must also be able to defend their choices.

The removal of management layers left a hole in the organization (Daft and Lane 2008). To fill the void created by removing layers of management, employees need clearly defined tasks, the empowerment to fulfill those tasks, and accountability to outcomes. Management relationships have to be replaced with team cohesiveness. Tight structure provided by hierarchy was significantly relaxed, and it was found that an atmosphere of professionalism kept the organization from sliding into chaos. On-going training improved the skillset of the workers and contributed to the professionalism, holding the structure together. All these became known as the necessary substitutes for layers of bureaucratic management. When used together, we've found organizations perform much more efficiently than under tight bureaucracy. This leads us to the issue of organizational cultures which promote innovation.

Innovation doesn't just happen. As leaders create space for organizational members to be creative and take reasonable risks, they must foster a culture of innovation. Supporting innovative thinking while stifling the implementation of new ideas will shut down creative ideas and create frustration. Creating an innovative culture happens as leaders reproduce spiritual values in and through other leaders and teams. This takes significant time and effort.

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Teams need faith-based stretch goals, to help them reach far beyond their natural abilities, so that innovation is necessary to break through their assumptions about what is possible. All unnecessary obstacles to implementing new solutions need to be removed, while they are encouraged to try multiple small experiments. New ideas should be tried quickly with a value placed upon new insights to be gained. Each failure is a learning opportunity, but failures should come quickly. Keeping innovation experiments small keeps failures from taking down the entire organization, or entire teams in the process.

Organizational Learning

Each team and team leader should promote an intense curiosity among teams where members are encouraged to learn everything they can from other industries and disciplines. This turns teams into "learning factories." This cannot happen in an

environment where information is protected and controlled. Organizations have found that as they open up the complete sharing of all organizational data; individuals begin to understand the complex issues being faced. Oster says this about the link between innovation and organizational learning:

Innovative people and organizations are “learning factories.” They consistently capitalize on their God-given talent to explore, learn, and retain new concepts... Corporate leadership supports multiple forms of institutional learning and builds systems into place where new information is embraced instead of feared... Innovation leaders continually remove physical and organizational barriers that hinder information sharing, and are on the lookout for “sacred cows” and “silos” that hinder the flow of information. (Oster 2011, Kindle Locations 712–23)

Too little diversity leads to constrained thinking. Too much diversity leads to dysfunction. Developing a productive amount of diversity is a challenging endeavor. Individuals have a psychological need to fit in on a team (Kristof-Brown et al 2005). Hence, if you have too much diversity, people will shut down, feeling they will never be able to work together. Productive diversity takes time to develop. Every team should understand they’ll need to work through Tuckman’s developmental stages of forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckman 1965). After the group forms, they eventually begin storming as they bump into each other’s diversity of thought and skill. Here they have the opportunity to learn how to work with each other’s differences. Hopefully, people realize that God created us differently in order to fill in each other’s gaps of skills and

Religious organizations tend to attract people with similar worldviews. Embracing diversity will mean increasing friction; however, many Christians believe team friction is unspiritual. Productive, positive friction shows you’re learning and wrestling with new and creative ideas.

Diversity is an important part of organizational learning. Diversity brings people with different perspectives together creating a complexity of thought which has been shown to increase organizational performance, creativity, and innovation (Daft and Lane 2008, 332). When people are of the same income level, race, marital status, background, age, etc., they tend to think alike. Religious organizations tend to attract people with similar worldviews and theological views. While conformity may make some working environments easier, it tends to narrow the boundaries of our creative thinking. Even though mission organizations work in a wide diversity of cultures, it is highly possible that the organization itself has very little diversity. Think about the actual diversity that exists among your own leadership structure and on specific teams within your organization. Putting aside the places your people work, how diverse are you, really?

Increasing diversity broadens the breadth of experience and learning from which we may draw. Actively look for people with different backgrounds and experience. Embracing diversity, however, will mean increasing friction within your teams (Daft Lane 2008; Oster 2011). Many Christians seem to have a view that interpersonal, or team friction is somehow unspiritual. If there’s no friction, people are all thinking the same way. Productive, positive friction shows you’re learning and wrestling with new and creative ideas. Rather than eliminating friction, teams need the skills to work with differing viewpoints in a productive and unthreatening manner (Senge 2006). They need the skills to deal with friction in a healthy way.

abilities (Werbel & Demarie 2001). If they successfully work through the storming phase, they’ll move below the surface, appreciating what each member adds to the team, and eventually launch to high levels of effective performance. But if they cannot get through the storming phase, team members will simply work with each other at a relatively unproductive surface level.

Ephesians 3 and 4 show us how God created his church for diversity. God purposefully placed Gentiles together with the Jews, living stone by living stone, laid next to each other into the temple of God. Paul says he did this in order to display God’s manifold (which means diverse!) wisdom. Later, we’re told we become mature as we appreciate and make space for the variety of each other’s gifts (Eph 4:7–13). We’re told that when we walk this way, we walk in love with one another (Eph 4:15).

Paul continues by comparing this diversity to a human body, in which unique parts all work together the way God intended (Eph 4:16). The Gentiles, however, by choosing to live in discord rather than accept diversity, shows that their hearts are darkened and their minds are ignorant (Eph 4:17–18). Paul urges his readers to throw away the old self and walk in this new way, appreciating our diversity which we learn through Christ (Eph 4:20).

Dialogue

Some people believe that in order to become a smarter organization, all one needs is smarter people. But just because an organization employs a large number of geniuses doesn’t mean the organization is smart (Senge 2006). In fact, in many cases,

the higher the collective IQ of an organization, the more dysfunctional the organization becomes. Place the world's brightest economist, psychologist, ecologist, and the world's brightest business mind together in the same room and ask them to solve the world's hunger problem. Odds are they couldn't agree on anything. Goleman (2002) states that when it comes to working together, emotional intelligence is much more important than IQ. The one doesn't necessarily correlate to the other, either. This is why Senge believes that the organizational IQ is generally much lower than the average IQ of the individuals making up that organization. It all depends on whether you are able to get these people to work together effectively. If you can make that happen, it is possible for the organization to operate at a much higher IQ than its member's average. A lot of this relates to the art of dialogue (Senge 2006).

Organizations with high IQs are called learning organizations. They get their power from their ability to learn more about their environment and collectively process that learning into targeted, innovative action. Learning happens through a skill called dialogue, in which individuals learn to explore new and different ideas from many angles in a non-threatening way. Individuals hold their own judgments loosely, placing a greater value on meaningful group interaction.

Best-selling author and speaker, Senge, states that most business schools place too high of a value on developing student's debate skills, where the emphasis is on presenting and defending ideas (2006).

The usual Western approach to problem-solving or improvement is to attack and criticize, then look for an alternative. This analytical approach does not always lead to creative or fruitful solutions. (Hines and Bishop 2006, 50)

The problem is that debate skills start working against people as they advance through organizational ranks. Eventually, the issues they face become more complex than for what their own personal experience has prepared them (Senge 2006). In essence, they start debating and defending strategies which are beyond their own knowledge and experience. When individuals get to these higher levels, the skills they need are not debating and defending, but the ability to spur creative dialogue and work with the group processes to let new creative solutions emerge.

It's like the findings of Lausanne, 1974: missionaries placed too much focus on proclamation, and not enough time asking questions and helping people wrestle through difficult issues as a part of the discipleship process. Theological schools may be placing too much focus on teaching people how to "teach" theological truth, rather than helping seminary students learn how to help individuals wrestle through the application of spiritual values into their own lives.

Dialogue is one of the top skills needed to navigate the complex future environment. As problems become increasingly complex, we have to learn to release the collective knowledge and experience residing in our teams (Senge 2006). Answers won't come from the top. Debating and arguing about ideas doesn't work. Debates assume the opponent must be won over to a correct point of view. It assumes one person is right and the other is wrong. Dialogue, however, assumes that the answer resides in the collective wisdom of the team. It assumes teammates can, and need to, learn from one another. Differing viewpoints are not opportunities to win someone over; they are opportunities to learn something new. Dialogue has a goal of creating a "shared reality" (Hackman and Johnson 2009, 6). Researchers Reverend & Tannenbaum state,

there is this magical thing in an organization, or in a team, or a group, where you get unrestricted interaction, unrestricted dialogue, and this synergy happening that results in more productivity, and satisfaction, and seemingly magical levels of output from a team... The challenge, of course, is in learning to appreciate differences in interpretation without feeling pressured to either demonize the other or strive for complete agreement. (1992, 48)

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The result of this kind of dialogue is transformational. Yet for this to happen, organizational goals and group effectiveness have to become more important than any one individual's personal aspirations (Senge, Roberts, Ross, Smith, & Kleiner 1994). The real learning happens as we recognize our assumptions and willingly open them up to others to be probed and explored. Initially, this may feel threatening, but when teammates and organizational members begin placing organizational outcomes above their own ego, true synergy becomes possible.

MIT credits its tremendous successes in creating a long history of technological innovations to this type of dialogue, which they say "mines" the collective intelligence of their people. Imagine the world's smartest PhDs working together, not fighting over who has the better idea, or who gets credit for a breakthrough, but approaching every conversation as an opportunity to learn and build upon each other's ideas. Imagine the depth of maturity this requires.

MIT may think it stumbled upon something revolutionary, but the idea is entirely Biblical. Paul wrote something similar.

Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well. You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had, who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature. He humbled himself... (Phil 2:3–8, NET)

Dialogue requires an atmosphere of humility, especially if individuals are to present their ideas to be challenged and questioned by others. It also requires authenticity where people learn to clearly speak the truth without fear (Eph 4:15). It requires love, as people examine and challenge the ideas of others in a way that honors our love towards God and our coworkers (Luke 6:31).

Creating an environment in which communication supports creative and innovative ideas is difficult work. It's not about you having a good idea. Focusing too much on your own perspective creates a closed, unfriendly atmosphere (Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim 1994). Alternatively, it's not about complete blindly yielding to others either. Placing all the emphasis on others' ideas ignores the inherent value of your own ideas. And, interestingly, it's not about compromise. Too often compromises result in neither party feeling completely satisfied with the outcome. Rarely will any of these methods of working together lead to an innovative solution.

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The secret of this type of rich communication lies in the ability to maintain a high concern for others, while concurrently maintaining a high degree of concern for your own perspective as well. This takes much more time and energy than developing a compromise. To do this, each individual must seek to understand each other's individual world—as it is understood by them (Eisenberg, Goodall, and Trethewey 2010). This requires much deeper communication than surface talk. Its power lies in acknowledging the intrinsic value arising from the diversity of our experiences.

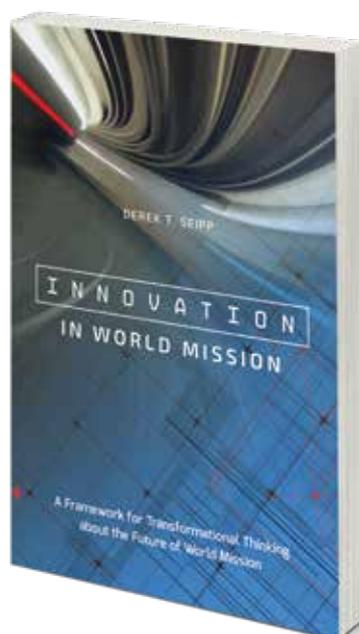
This is the goal of Ephesians 4 diversity: that our conversations become creative processes through deep collaborative interaction. When we get to this place, no individual is carrying an agenda other than to achieve team goals in the best way possible. Deep collaborative interaction doesn't result in compromise, it results in synergistic breakthrough thinking.

In this chapter we talked about some of the essentials necessary to institutionalize a culture of innovation. It begins with developing spiritual organizations led by spiritual leadership. Leaders should model agapao love, seeking the best for each individual. We discussed the values necessary to create cultures that support innovation. Next, we discussed orienting our organizations toward continual learning to create organizations with high IQ's. Lastly, we discussed the core skill of dialogue that unleashes the collective experience in teams. **IJFM**

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