

## Innovation Takes Perspiration

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To foster invention, organizations need to build in a process for experimentation.

by Karen Otazo

A century ago, Thomas Edison thought deeply about what drives invention or, as we call it today, innovation. One of his famous sayings, “Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration,” stresses that innovation involves more than just great ideas. Edison knew from his own experience that the systematic hard work of trial-and-error experimentation paid off. His inventions, like the lightbulb and the phonograph, emerged through thousands of attempts as he refined the process step by step.

Like Edison, leaders need to build innovation systematically into their leadership style in order to foster it in their organizations. As with many apparently spontaneous workplace triumphs, good innovation is the result of well-planned project management, or, more specifically, “process management.” It’s not always clear where the process will end up, so it’s best to lead from behind, giving the team frequent feedback and building in feedback loops, encouraging them to stay positive and keep moving, and testing and refining their ideas as they gradually develop an outcome.

## Modifying Leadership Style

Nico, the marketing leader at an international food company and a natural innovator himself, found engineering innovation in others more difficult. A forthright

character who could smell consumer trends, he found it natural to critique his team’s dead-end ideas and praise their good ones. But the more he pushed his staff for new ideas and products, the less they produced and the less happy he was with the quality of their work. Nico gradually learned that his swings between great enthusiasm and great negativity weren’t working.

Nico realized that the creative freedom and fast prototyping he delighted in could be daunting, even paralyzing, to others who didn’t think or work like he did. Now when a team member presents an idea he likes, he restrains his impulse to say, “Great, let’s launch that right away.” He has learned that although he had believed this to be encouraging, his team felt pressured to finalize their projects too quickly, before they had finished “perspiring” over them.

A more structured approach to developing creative thinking works better for Nico’s team. In advance of a new project, he now sits down with them and thinks through the aims of the project, as well as the challenges or problems that might be encountered along the way. By adjusting his leadership style to keep the excitement up but the anxiety down, he has helped his team to stay grounded. He meets with team members personally on a regular basis to gently encourage their best ideas.

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**Connecting with Consumers in a New Way**

Once Nico started to modify his leadership style, he realized that an important part of the “perspiration process” for his team is staying up-to-date with consumers. In keeping with the new, more structured approach, they now spend a portion of each day trend-spotting, using the Internet to keep tabs on new ideas in the marketplace and looking for ways to adapt novel concepts. They turned to such sites as OpenAd.net, Ziki, Sense Worldwide, and Brand Republic to spot trends, buy ideas, elicit pitches, and more.

Combing these Web sites led Nico’s team to the Oishi Group in Bangkok, a model of innovation through hard work and close contact with customers. Oishi was founded by an entrepreneur who paid attention to consumers’ need for affordable, tasty food in locations such as department stores and shopping malls. Tan Passakornnatee started a Japanese buffet system in which customers had to pay a surcharge for uneaten food left on their plates (the source of wastage in buffets) or for spending more than an hour and 45 minutes at the buffet.

But the aspect of Oishi that caught the attention of Nico’s staff was its customer-centric strategy. The company’s executives and staff are directed to pay attention to customer conversations, as well as requests, commentary, and suggestions. They also conduct internal studies and visits by mystery shoppers. Such perspiring led Oishi to boost its revenue by offering customers a greater variety of options at its buffets and to successfully market the restaurant’s green tea for home use. Nico’s team, in turn, drew valuable insights from Oishi’s success. They hung out at Oishi buffets, observed beverage choices, and listened to what customers had to say about

their drinks. Based on what they heard and saw, Nico’s team decided to reposition a line of sports drinks to focus on its health benefits — with excellent results.

For the Oishi Group and for Nico’s team, who learned from Oishi’s example, innovation came through careful and systematic observation of customer needs and reactions. It came through trial and error and through a willingness to thoroughly explore a wide variety of possibilities. In short, it came through a lot of perspiration that ultimately made inspiration “no sweat.” +

**Resources**

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