

Subject:

November FOCUS



Focus

A publication of Wagner Consulting Group

November 2013

Innovation Fundamentals

The average preschooler asks 100 questions a day. It takes years of diligent and systematic effort by schools and other institutions to beat them down into incurious souls. Fortunately, a few resist and thus we progress in fits and starts.

Dateline: November 4, 2013. Dr. Susan Buttross, Director of the Child Development Center at University Medical Center, Jackson, stated that a classroom environment with more moving around and exploration is better than a rigid deskbound environment six hours a day. This was in the context of a young boy who was inappropriately “diagnosed” by his elementary teacher as ADHD. I now direct your attention to the book *Death by Meeting*, by Patrick Lencioni. The connection? What we cannot kill in the classroom we’ll target in the conference room.

Dateline: November 4, 2013. I was present as the manager of a manufacturing operation rolled-out a new Economic Valued Added system to improve profitability. This manager kept returning to the theme of innovation – new ideas from everywhere. He belabored the point that everyone should speak up, and cited examples where that either helped or would have helped if managers had asked or listened.

Countless books have been written on innovation, and big business works on this like their future depends on it. Hmmm. Remember Blackberry?

This treatment of innovation will be brief – just three main points. The key to innovation is environmental issues. That’s why preschool is fun. You get to move around and use neat stuff, like scissors and Play-Doh and colored paper and glue.

1. Environment is the foundation of creativity. Create spaces that foster thinking and collaboration. These can be simple areas with chairs and beanbags and white boards.
 - a. What!?! You don’t have beanbag chairs in your office? Cheap: \$50 to \$100, or you can go crazy and get a couch for less than \$200. For some reason, slouching frees up thinking, perhaps because we’re in a non-rigid position.
 - b. Add pads of 2x2 sticky notes in various colors, stick-on shapes like arrows and such (school supply store), and colored markers and you’re all set.

2. Encourage experimentation.
 - a. Return to the environment, as in culture. Encourage fresh thinking. Preschoolers know there is NO ONE WAY to build a block tower. Preschoolers have not yet been compressed into the confines of conformity, so return to your youth, mentally.
 - b. Use prototypes for cheap and easy tests.
 - c. Iterate.
 - d. Fail fast, fail early. Or, as Tom Peters put it many years ago, “Fail fast forward.” The idea here is that you’re not pushing the boundaries if you don’t have enough failures.

3. Use storytelling. Humans are natural born storytellers, and a good story engages our minds as nothing else can. Again, think about young children.
 - a. Kids engage in frequent role play. This is another environmental tool that shifts our thinking and opens new possibilities.

- b. Kids create imaginary pets and scenarios. In the adult world, wild scenarios help us imagine things beyond our experience. For example, my young son Mike had Biebert, the invisible green and white dog, who was eventually shot by Indians. Didn't see that coming! Then there was Noodles the cat, who ate too much and exploded.
- c. Once you have a story, you can change the ending by asking, "What would it take to avoid this?" The fancy term for that is premortem planning, but I prefer to just remember Noodles and eat less at dinner.

Ready, set, ideate!

Tom



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