

## INNOVATE FOR ME NOW!

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Innovation has become the buzz word of the business day, with claims of, demands for, theories of, and 'new' approaches to innovation. The term has been used so loosely that it has lost much of its meaning and utility.

Every client wants something innovative... who wouldn't? Many tenders are calling for 'innovative approaches'. But I wonder whether they know what this might look like, and how to create the environment for it to occur.

Just saying something does not make it so.

A quick internet search brings up effusive articles on 'strategic innovation', 'great leaders and innovative companies', '4-key tactics', 'innovation toolboxes', 'innovation management', 'discipline of innovation', 'new patterns of innovation'...I could go on but I think you may be getting the picture. At this point I would excuse you for thinking that I'm going to contribute to the noise and offer the only true 5-step plan to innovation. No, but I will offer a counterpoint to the current fervour, and contribute some other thoughts on the pre-conditions for innovation and how to encourage it in an organisation or team.

To innovate essentially means to bring a new approach to an existing method, or introduce something new. It is being inventive, creative, bringing improvements to what is commonly in use. Humans have been innovating for millennia, and without any 5-step approaches or leaders who need to 'teach' employees to be innovative.

The old saying that 'necessity is the mother of invention' has an element of truth and points us to those conditions and circumstances that tend to give rise to invention, innovation, and progress.

So what are those conditions and circumstances?

**First, there is the target** – a wicked, or intractable problem; an unmet need; a process that causes frustration because of its inefficiency; unjust or unfair conditions; or simply an old way of doing things.

**Second, there is someone or a team motivated enough to want to bring about change, and has access to knowledge.** Perhaps this motivation derives from a frustration, or just a creative energy and excitement.

**Third, the environment is conducive to catalysing and fuelling the interaction of the first two conditions.** In the world of business and government, this is influenced by leadership, culture, and the organisation's governance framework.

**The fourth and final condition relates to the second and third condition.** Many great and disruptive inventions have emerged from an unusual combination or accidental meeting of knowledge domains. Someone who is new to a field or profession, and brings a different and unique frame of reference to understanding the problem. Someone who can think laterally and freely, creative in the synthesis of ideas, and brave in experimentation.

Creating multidisciplinary teams, and taking a systems-thinking approach is therefore essential to creating this environment. Very little invention or innovative thinking comes from teams comprised of similar disciplines or thinking styles.

When a client says they want an 'innovative solution' they are essentially saying that they are not happy with what has been done in the past, and think a better solution can be developed. Rather than presenting a generic 5-step plan that will somehow spontaneously catalyse innovation, it is better to reflect on whether the conditions and circumstances noted above are present. If they are not, then

the only way to stimulate innovation is to change the leadership, culture, team composition, engagement, or other element that is inhibiting the natural creativity in the group.

Good leadership and corporate culture are rare commodities, but there is no simple or adequate alternative.

Now go lead, and watch the innovation emerge.