



Innovative Approaches to  
Outstanding Performance

# The Practical Innovator

For clients, colleagues and friends of Lynne C. Levesque Spring 1999

## From the Editor

**W**elcome to the inaugural issue of *The Practical Innovator*. This publication is designed to provide practical ideas, techniques, and experiences that help leaders build more innovation and creativity into their organizations. Time is tight for everyone these days. My goal is to condense what I have learned in my studies, reading, and travels to provide a quick reference to help you and your organizations solve problems, be more competitive, and keep good employees.

As with any creative endeavor, this first issue is not necessarily in final form. Let me know your comments, questions, and ideas. Feel free to be creative!

## Creativity Messages from Down Under

On a recent trip to Australia, I met several very intriguing people. Conversations with two of them really stand out in my mind because they clearly illustrate some key myths and major paradoxes about creativity, particularly in the business world.

While having dinner in an outdoor cafe in Sydney, I struck up a conversation with Adrianna, a successful artist from New Zealand. Adrianna saw her creative efforts as *research*. She traveled, exhibited her art, talked with other artists about what they were doing, subjected her work to often unfriendly critics—all to learn more about and further develop her own talents. Her passion around her work was clearly evident. Yet, the discipline with which she collected research was also a critical factor in her success and further growth.

Jonathan, a young man from England, was in his third year of a 5-year book writing project on several of the world's great spiritual places. We met on a rainy walk around Uluru, in Australia's Northern Territory. Jonathan had carefully studied what he wanted to do, developed goals and objectives, and meticulously organized the project with timelines and schedules. His project plan convinced several major organizations to fund 50% of his travels and writing. He took copious notes on our walk, which he would later transcribe into notebooks. Though clearly focussed on his goals, he was quite open to the various experiences he encountered at each of his stops.

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## True Stories

*The key to innovation is people.*  
-- Randall L. Tobias

SOL Cleaning Service, headquartered in Helsinki, Finland, is one of Europe's most admired companies. It provides industrial cleaning services to hospitals, grocery stores and hotels, among other customers. Operating since January 1, 1992, it now has 3,500 employees, 3,000 customers, and revenues of \$60 million. According to an article in the business magazine *Fast Company* (February, 1997), SOL's competitive formula has 5 key ingredients:

**1. Hard work has to be fun.** At SOL there are none of the rules and regulations of conventional corporate life, no titles or secretaries, no individual offices or set working hours, and no perks and status symbols. And a lot of work still gets done!

....**"Hard  
work has to  
be fun".....**

**2. There are no low-skill jobs.** In addition to cleaning techniques, SOL employees study time management, budgeting, and people skills. According to SOL's chairman, "our main goal is to ...let cleaners use their brains as well as their hands."

**3. People who set their own targets shoot for the stars.** The 135 supervisors work with their teams to create their own budgets, do their own hiring, set their own performance objectives, and negotiate their own deals with customers.

**4. Loose organizations need tight metrics.** Autonomy at SOL is married with accountability. SOL frequently and visibly tracks results with a focus on customer

satisfaction. "The more we free our people from rules," says the chairman, "the more we need good measurements."  
**5. Great service requires cutting-edge technology.** Laptops and cellphones are standard equipment for team supervisors. Customer accounts are tracked with a sophisticated database.

*SOL's* story is proof that the ideas described later in this issue really do work. Its success demonstrates the incredible results that come from focusing on the internal quality of the workplace and building employee satisfaction.

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**Question:** Life these days has few, if any, anchors; nothing is permanent! What suggestions do you have to help my employees (and me) deal with the stress caused by these changes?

**Answer:** Developing a positive attitude to help see change as an opportunity is one way to deal with it. Look at it as an opportunity for new knowledge, new skills, new friends. Other suggestions:

▲ *Develop your creativity. Enhancing your creative problem solving abilities will enable you to quickly see the opportunities, to respond more flexibly to change and ambiguity, and help you find better, faster ways to deal with old and new problems. It also builds your self esteem! (See CREATIVITY TIPS for more ideas.)*

▲ *Seek support. Reach out and expand your community both inside and out side of work. Develop your abilities to work in teams –one of the best ways to enhance your productivity and morale. Two heads are much better than one and in a fully functioning team, 1 + 1 can equal 10 ... or 100!*

▲ *Learn to deal creatively with conflict. Different ways of seeing and doing things will inevitably lead to conflict. Learn to depersonalize conflict in order to benefit from synergy and cross-fertilization of different ideas. Conflict, seen as a positive way to take full advantage of diversity and the innovative new ideas it can produce, is a powerful creativity tool.*

▲ *Laugh and practice the fine art of not knowing. Have patience and trust that the answer will come.*



## Creativity Tips

Here are four steps we can personally take to tap into our creative talents:

1. Follow the rules of brainstorming (any idea is a good idea, defer judgement, etc.) against our worst enemy: **our inner critic.**
2. Use passive ways to generate ideas, such as relaxing and letting ideas flow in the shower, in the bath, while walking, driving, commuting, or sleeping. We just have to remember to have some way to capture those ideas -- **write them down**, use a dictaphone, or call ourselves on the phone and leave voice messages!
3. Evaluate ideas by first focussing on the pluses and possibilities and then, **lastly**, on the concerns, or negatives.
4. Vary our routines: get a new hobby, take a novel kind of vacation, go to work a new way, do something unconventional! And be pleasantly surprised by a **shift in our perspective!**

*More ideas in the next issue of The Practical Innovator!*

*....“Evaluate ideas by first focussing on the pluses and possibilities and then, lastly, on concerns”....*



## Lessons From Research

A survey of top-level executives of outstanding service organizations, such as Southwest Airlines, ServiceMaster, Xerox, and USAA, produced several principles that build on each other to drive profitability. (See “Putting the Service-Profit Chain to Work,” *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1994). According to the authors, these principles are:

- ▲ *Customer loyalty drives profitability and growth. (The life-time value of a loyal customer can be astronomical!)*
- ▲ *Customer loyalty is driven by customer satisfaction.*
- ▲ *Customer satisfaction is driven by the value of services received.*
- ▲ *The value of services is in turn driven by employee productivity and satisfaction.*
- ▲ *And finally, employee satisfaction is driven by the internal quality of the workplace, as evidenced by job design, employee selection and development, rewards and recognition, and tools for serving customers.*

The internal quality of the workplace is also the subject of Stanford professor Jeffrey Pfeffer’s research. In his book The Human Equation (1998), he defines seven practices of successful organizations:

- ▲ *Employment security*
- ▲ *Selective hiring of new personnel*
- ▲ *Self-managed teams and decentralized decision-making as the basic principles of organizational design*
- ▲ *Comparatively high compensation contingent on organizational performance*
- ▲ *Extensive training*
- ▲ *Reduced status distinctions and barriers, including dress, language, office arrangements, and wage differences across levels*
- ▲ *Extensive sharing of financial and performance information throughout the organization*

Interestingly enough, these same factors—the profitability principles and Pfeffer’s



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These conversations explode some of the major myths and misunderstandings about creativity. For example:

*It's all about being open  
To be more creative, you need to just  
be free  
Creative people are born not made*

*And the list goes on....*

The truth is somewhat different. Yes, you need to be open to new ideas, but WITHIN a disciplined set of goals and limits. Otherwise, your creative efforts are too diffused and you waste energy.

Ernest Hemingway, for example, would write for 5-6 hours a day. He religiously stuck to this schedule, whether ideas flowed or not. The detailed notebooks that Leonardo DaVinci kept are famous. The sculptor Henry Moore also had a routine and set of rituals. Up at 8, at work by 9, a break at 10, then 3 more hours of work before lunch.

So, structure and goals are key. In the business world, this means that the goals of any project need to be clear. According to William F. Powers, VP Research, Ford Motor Co., "In any successful innovation, there is one magic ingredient: a strong, motivating goal that everyone on a team can easily understand and embrace."

Another myth is that creativity is easy. Once you have the structure and know where to focus your efforts, creative ideas do start to flow. But setting up the discipline, knowing where to go, and dealing with failures and critique aren't

necessarily easy at all. These efforts take perseverance, patience, and courage.

Jonathan, for example, spent long hours researching and detailing his itinerary. He carefully framed out his focus and persisted in his efforts to obtain funding. Once that hard work was behind him, his creativity began to flow.

Another myth is that creative individuals are born, not made. The truth is, we are all born creative -- within varying levels and in diverse fields. Over time, that creativity can be squelched by the efforts of others and by our own hand, or it can be allowed to grow. As Adrianna demonstrates, further developing creativity takes effort and discipline. She was constantly learning to be more creative through her research activities.

How do we relate all this to business? Top leaders may often question the value of creative efforts within their organizations. All too frequently results are unclear and activities absorb large amounts of time and money. Is this all worth it?

It is -- provided that structure and discipline are applied to the efforts. Goals and schedules need to be determined. Operating rules and decision-making criteria need to be defined. Of course, these structures need to be flexible, but leaders need to be sure that creative efforts can be effectively channeled. It's a balancing act between organization and openness, flexibility and focus.

Creativity also requires the right mix of expertise, knowledge and new perspectives. You do need to know your subject deeply and continue to study it, as Adrianna did. At the same time, you need to be open to new ideas. You also need to be careful not to become stale or lazy.

Understanding the truth behind these myths can help leaders build more innovative organizations. Teams need diversity, focus, discipline, and training in their business, in conflict management, and in creativity tools and techniques. With these in place leaders can let team members be innovative and find creative solutions. That's the way for organizations to truly benefit from the creative potential of their employees!



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practices – drive more innovation in the work place. Harvard professor Teresa Amabile ("How to Kill Creativity," *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1998) lists the steps leaders need to take to promote more creative ideas and solutions:

- ▲ *Stretch employees' abilities through challenging assignments*
- ▲ *Give people autonomy on how they approach their work*
- ▲ *Provide the right level of time and money*
- ▲ *Pay close attention to the design, composition, and processes of work teams*
- ▲ *Provide supervisory encouragement by acknowledging innovative efforts, serving as role models, and providing appropriate systems and procedures*
- ▲ *Mandate information sharing and collaboration and refuse to allow political problems to fester*

According to Randall L. Tobias, chairman and chief executive emeritus of Eli Lilly and Co., "the key to competitiveness is innovation, and the key to innovation is people. Taking care of people, therefore, is the essential way of taking care of business." (*The Boston Globe*, December 21, 1998) The research cited above certainly supports Tobias. Taking care of people brings profitability and growth as well as innovation.

*"...the key to  
competitiveness is  
innovation..."*

## The Practical Innovator

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*“....the more we free our people from rules, the more we need good measurements....”*

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### Products and Services

Innovative tools and techniques to help leaders implement innovations, solve problems, build more competitive organizations, and keep good employees.

### Consulting Services

Consulting, coaching and process facilitation services support organizations in team building, change and project management, organizational creativity and innovation, and strategy formulation and implementation. Services include organizational assessments, individual and team diagnostics, and ongoing coaching of managers and teams.

### Workshops

Workshops provide substantive material in an interactive environment, focused on practical application. Because of their modular design, they can be easily customized to meet each group's particular needs.

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We welcome your questions, success stories, and suggestions for future issues!  
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### **The Innovative Environment**

- ▲ *Managing for Innovation and Change (two days)*
- ▲ *Building a Resilient and Innovative Organization (two days)*

### **Creative Processes, Tools, and Techniques**

- ▲ *Creative Problem Solving (two days)*
- ▲ *Exceptional Teams Curriculum (one - three days)*
  - *Performance through Principles (basic teambuilding)*
  - *Quick-Start Team Launch (for jump starting newly formed teams)*
  - *Teampayer Styles*
- ▲ *Thinking for the Future (half day)*
- ▲ *Successful Decision-Making (half day)*
- ▲ *Achieving Innovative Results through Effective Project Management (one- two days)*

### **The Creative Individual**

- ▲ *Creativity Styles (half day)*
- ▲ *The Leader as Creative Change Agent (one to two days)*

### **The Creative Product**

- ▲ *Innovation Lab - Problem Solving Session (one to two days)*