

Moonshots, Engagement and The Crowd Sourcing of Innovation

More and more of our leadership challenges seem to be “moonshots”. Incredibly complex and seemingly intractable challenges. What alternatives exist to “problem solving as usual”? Recent history and current experiments may offer suggestions. The last 10 years have shown us the potential of web based social engagement. Our second decade is showing us how that potential can be applied when the challenge requires a “moonshot” – a level of innovation which is beyond the ability of any small group of people acting on their own. “Crowdsourcing” (human engagement at the scale of the whole) may hold some hope. Consider the following three scenarios:

Tapping a newspaper’s readership. The BP Gulf of Mexico oil spill is on its way to becoming North America’s worst ever man-made environmental disaster, despite the best thinking of the industry’s experts. An unlikely friend has stepped forward with an offer of help. By inviting its readers to be part of the solution, the UK Guardian, has generated some 186 suggestions for dealing with the spill – suggestions that have been sourced from people and places as divergent as a physicist in the White House’s Office of Science and Technology Policy to the Construction Engineering Program at the University of Alabama to a west coast University student. Building on this, BP has established its own crowd sourcing process to generate innovative ideas. So far their search has yielded some 4800 ideas. They are looking for ideas that have “practical novelty”, i.e. innovations rather than inventions.

Unleashing a world of thinking. Ten hours and 37 minutes by air to the north east, sits the 150 year old campus of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology. With its towering domes and oversized courtyards, it is an impressive example of 19th century European architecture. Within these walls, a cross disciplinary team of sociologists, physicists, and traffic engineers is pursuing what, for now, they are calling a “knowledge accelerator”. The goal is prevention of global financial meltdowns. In other words, a “moonshot” that has so far exceeded the capacities of the best and brightest minds on the earth. More than creating just another economic model, they seek the ability to predict and prevent the complex environmental, human and financial dynamics that underpin worldwide economic disasters. None of what they are doing requires *invention* – the pieces of the puzzle, the computers, the informatics and the communication technologies are all there. But success with their “moonshot” will require innovation of a different sort - innovation in how and who we engage in the challenge. This means a shift from the traditional model of a small smart group as the source of solutions, to a model of working that is based on the use of “global collective wisdom”. The *knowledge accelerator* being built is a manifestation of the understanding that today’s social, economic and environmental issues “dwarf the capacity of any individual’s comprehension”. When completed, the institute’s *knowledge*

accelerator may allow the thinking of a million minds to be focused and applied in ways never before possible.

Transforming the management of everything. Six time zones to the west, another equally ambitious undertaking is shaping up. Harvard's management guru, Gary Hamel, is coordinating a global, "open innovation" team. The aim of his team? Nothing less than transformation of the management practices and principles which keep so many of our organizations (both public and private) from "delivering the goods". Their mission recognizes that organizations exist in a world where they (and the networks within which they are embedded) have no choice but to "be adaptable, innovative, inspiring and socially accountable". Can this be done? What will replace our tried and true (but increasingly failing) emphasis on control, command and efficiency? Hamel and company's answer is their "management information exchange" or MIX. The MIX seeks "practical novelty", that is innovations in the way managerial work, (such as strategic planning, project management, performance reviews, etc.) is both conceptualized and enacted. Because the MIX team is searching for new ideas that are proven (rather than untested theories), it is concentrating on learning from everyone and anyone. In so doing they are giving voice to everyone (in the world) who cares about its six "moonshots" - management innovations that mend the soul, unleash capability, foster renewal, expand minds, distribute power and seek balance. The MIX team orchestrates their adventure by following seven simple principles :

1. Everyone Wins When Everyone Shares
2. Every Innovator Deserves a Hearing
3. Accomplished Innovators Deserve Acclaim
4. The Most Important Problem is the One You Care Most About
5. It's Good to be Humble
6. The Devil's in the Details
7. Innovation is a Social Process

Implications for Managers – The AI Connection

Every manager has access to some version of his or her "crowd" – whether that crowd is your immediate team, your whole organization, your total supply chain or the world at large. Making the choice to engage that crowd is the first step. Inviting a focus on already existing positive exceptions as a doorway to possible and preferred futures is the second step. Beyond that the shape of your inquiry will depend on your unique situation – but the principles described by Gary Hamel's MIX project are a great set of guidelines. Let's explore them from an Appreciative Inquiry perspective.

| MIX Principle | Appreciative Inquiry Connection |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Everyone Wins When Everyone Shares | As stories of positive exception are unearthed, the sense of self-confidence increases, creating a sort of "crisis antibody" in the organizations immune system. |
| 2. Everest Innovator Deserves a Hearing | Positive exceptions can come from anywhere in "the system". The more people involved in the inquiry the greater the numbers of positive exceptions identified. |
| 3. Accomplished Innovators Deserve Acclaim | Both accomplishments and people we lift up, appreciate – that is they grow in value and in contribution. |
| 4. The Most Important Problem is the One You Care Most About | Appreciative inquiry produces the best results when the topic is something people are really curious about and which matters a lot to them. |
| 5. It's Good to be Humble | If people in your "system" have been hurt, disappointed or feel deceived by prior requests for participation, acknowledging mistakes and their impact on people, is an important place to begin an inquiry. |
| 6. The Devil's in the Details | Stories, rather than powerpoints, capture the richness and complexity of positive exceptions. |
| 7. Innovation is a Social Process | When you and I are connected, with each other as well as the many who are part of our "system" (but who we don't usually "meet"), the capacity to create new social realities increases exponentially – in fact, its only in our conversations that new realities come alive. |

Appreciative Inquiry is about innovation...i.e - the search for "practical novelty"... that is rooted in insights from the past which serve as springboards to future innovations. With its assumption that the seeds of a preferred future already exist within the present system, AI invites a full voice exploration and identification of the positive exception. The study of these positive exceptions is one route to innovation. By definition, the positive exception is "new" (i.e. novel) and "workable" (i.e. practical).

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