

ARE YOUR PEOPLE READY FOR INNOVATION?

This might seem like a ridiculous question, but it's prompted by various panel discussions I've attended over the past few years where innovation is being discussed. You would think people would always be ready for new things, right?

Not necessarily. If you look back at Research-Technology magazine's survey of most important issues for management you would see that a little over 5 years ago, innovation wasn't even in the top ten list of concerns. Now it's number 1. We can all give rational explanations for this—global pressure on costs and competitiveness, too much diversification, getting back to basics, and the need for quality and process control (Six Sigma) focus. But nevertheless, we have created an organizational culture focused on doing things without variance and at lowest cost. Now innovation is part of this effort in terms of process improvement, but it's not new businesses and new products. How has this necessary focus changed the nature of management style and the type of people you hired compared with 10-15 years ago?

We all agree that innovation needs to be a key focus for management. We have "Six Sigma'd" things to death. Now we need some newness, some variation. We have "Fuzzy Front End" conferences. We didn't even know what that word meant 10 years ago! Don't be surprised if it takes you and your people a while to adjust. Memories are slow to fade. Also remember the large cutback in corporate innovation programs back in the late 80's and early 90's—the last time this topic was popular (and incidentally the same Research-Technology survey showed innovation to be the #1 concern—check your back issues!). The Fuzzy Front End existed then but we called it something different. Terms like Discovery Research were in vogue.

When was the last time you openly praised unusual ideas and thoughts? When was the last time you visited with someone who is not your current customer? Went to a trade show that had nothing to do with your current business? Studied your customer's customer's business? Be patient with your people. We know it's important, but remember the footprint you've left over the past ten years. It's deep and wide and trusting that you are REALLY, SINCERELY interested in innovation will take time. Show your seriousness with some public gestures to support risk taking and rewarding intelligent failure. And, most of all, think about what you are going to do when the economy goes sour (as it will!). What will you do then that will maintain your innovation trust level.

Isn't innovation always needed?