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# INNOVATION

## Status Quo Unacceptable What I Learned About Innovation



BY ADAM STEWART

*Paradigm-shifting innovation is worth it when the status quo is not acceptable. Tools and methods that focus on opportunities, rather than problem solving, are available, and they challenge both organizational and personal status quo.*

**HOW OFTEN** have we heard the phrases “It never occurred to her that she couldn’t...” or “He just wouldn’t accept the fact that...” in praise of an innovative pioneer? One of the most critical but difficult challenges in the process of innovation comes at the point at which it is apparent that the status quo is not acceptable—that the way we have been doing things are not producing the results that we want. While it seems like a simple notion, we have so much invested (sometimes emotionally, sometimes financially, and often both) that it takes a significant amount of energy and time to get to this point, *and* it makes the hurdle that much more challenging to clear. It’s no wonder that more successful innovators tend to dismiss the status quo from the beginning and that innovation training leaders like SIT (<http://www.sitsite.com>) have a variety of tools designed to push thinkers “outside of the box” of their own status quo.

Part of the reason, it seems, is that recognizing the status quo as unacceptable falls too late in most innovation processes and that much of the discussion around innovation, in general, focuses on what innovation “looks like” and what it “requires.” Understandably—and in an era where “innovation” has become a buzzword substituted for anything new or sleek or that simply needs to get sold—promoters of true innovation attempt to distinguish it from the fray. This is clearly an important and needed discussion. One only needs to do a video search on the word “innovation” to find top-level corporate executives and institutional leaders giving obtuse and circular definitions of innovation that hold no discursive value. We certainly need to know what it is before we can do it.

What innovation requires is an equally important discussion, especially in the context of Jewish education where the distribution of resources is far from bal-

anced. True innovation takes more time and more resources than we are used to dedicating to our projects. If an organization is making the tough decision to innovate (and apply resources to an area that any budget-minded auditor—be it a board member or CFO—would call overhead), they want to be sure that they have the necessary tools for innovation. Effective tools and methods are a real hallmark of innovation and give a strident example to the notion that innovation can be taught and applied; you don't need to be born with the ability.

With all the attention on what innovation looks like and what it requires, it is no surprise that the discussion of when to innovate has become marginalized. We sometimes speak of innovation as the ultimate good that can be universally applied. There is nothing that we do that couldn't benefit from the process of innovation, so why waste time on the questions of when and why? This couldn't be further from the truth and, in fact, belies the general wisdom from the first two conversations: Innovation is something that is specific and targeted and requires time and resources. So before we target and dedicate time and resources to our programs, we had better decide that it is worth it.

And when is it worth it? Why and when we innovate is of primal importance and is directly related to the question of status quo. There are times and places in our organizational work where the status quo is acceptable (and we hope many cases where it is actually optimal). Our organizations would be horribly inefficient if we didn't ever distinguish between what we

find suitable and what we would like to change. Yet not only do we often ignore this important question, but, as a result, we replicate the status quo in our innovation process.

As an example I take a recent project, which I supervised, that was connected to Project InCITE (<http://www.projectincite.blogspot.com>). The project was to use a social media platform to connect teens in Israel and in the United States. The status quo in this organization was that they built curriculum modules—excellent, well-thought, engaging, dynamic curriculum modules that no one used except for them. For months they struggled—in the name of innovation—to create a better module, trying desperately to find the right module that would change the field and be applicable across multiple settings. It was not until they readdressed their status quo that they understood a new possibility: to stop being the builders of the modules and focus exclusively on building a

status quo acceptable? If it is, this is not an area for innovation. If it isn't, we can't pretend that in the world of endless possibilities the only way to develop our project is within our current frameworks. The determination: "status quo unacceptable" is a prerequisite to our innovation.

This prerequisite is potentially the largest stumbling block to our innovation. For most of us, we have been trained or we are naturally inclined to identify problems and to attempt to fix them. True innovation requires us to look less at the problems and more at the opportunities. If the status quo is unacceptable, let's not find new ways to cope with the reality; let us change the reality. If innovation is to be paradigm shifting, game changing, and reimagining, we need to demand that status quo is unacceptable before we begin the process of innovation. ■

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community of teachers to create their own unique, individual modules for the platform. From there, a very effective, scalable, and potentially field-shifting project emerged.

Nothing in the process led them to understand that they needed to dismiss their status quo—but it was only after they did, that a real innovative process began. Innovation demands us to ask the question first: Is your

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