



Adapting to the Innovation Zone

BY JOSHUA YARDEN

Innovation requires more than moving from familiar to uncharted territories. Creative mind, affect, and behavior combine with purpose to drive reflective and iterative progress within an understanding of personal and organizational capacities.

THE INNOVATION ZONE is a conceptual space, which can be constructed in the creative mind. Cognitive, affective and behavioral capacities, including adaptability, critical analysis, extrapolation, synthesis, thought leadership, and project management can be cultivated for the purpose of traversing the distance between familiar and uncharted territory.

Achieving success in the zone requires building upon existing capacity. A project that requires people to overreach their abilities or overextend the available resources will become frustrating and is unlikely to succeed. This can generate resistance to innovation, born of a fear of failing. Trial and error must be encouraged.

Innovators should have a creative, reflective role in defining, designing, and implementing their project. Innovation is not a test or a method to evaluate work. An innovative project should reflect a learning process and grow out of a synthesis of the demonstrated success and the creative abilities of the innovators. Plans need to be flexible and modifiable in order to accommodate learning during the design and implementation stages. It is entirely unlikely that the first iteration

of a new concept or product could be the best iteration. Locking in a concept is in opposition to innovative thinking and design.

Innovation is a means to an end rather than a goal in itself. It is a purposeful response to a problematic situation, designed to heal, repair or transform, to transcend limitations and increase the possibility for success. Innovation requires a coherent plan, a calculated risk, and effective methods of implementation. Insufficient planning and/or unconscientious implementation could yield to more failure than “leaving well enough alone.” A well-designed system has to be put in place in order to accommodate the plan. The goals of organizational innovation are to:

- 1) Increase organizational vitality by setting achievable essential goals.
- 2) Enhance the internal coherence of a system or an organization by shedding operational elements that are inconsistent with the goals and adding components that can promote them.
- 3) Strengthen the integrity of an organizational mission by aligning goals, content, and method. The capacity of a system to implement an innovative intervention can be characterized by the clarity of explanation of the mission, thoughtful speculation as to how the mission will impact its targets, and an operational plan for how the mission can be achieved, taking into account not only the potential advantages of a successful innovation, but also anticipating possible resistance to change.

Innovation requires thoughtful design and careful implementation for the purpose of achieving intended results. Few successful innovations start from scratch. Moving effectively from point A to point B, from an existing situation toward intended improvement, is a matter of extending expectations to include the possible that has not yet been proven. It is a matter of suitable adaptation, rather than stretching beyond an organization's capacity for change.

The innovation zone can be elusive. It is difficult to map or measure. Answers to the following three questions will provide the initial information necessary for determining organizational capacity for planned change:

- 1) What fungible resources are at the disposal of the organization? That is, what assets (from people to property to processes) can adapt or be adapted from their current situation and be placed on a new trajectory?
- 2) How can they be leveraged in order to promote the change process?
- 3) What assets are missing, and how can they be obtained?

An innovation design process requires:

1) An assessment of the current situation, including definition of goals and an analysis of the gap between actual and desired outcomes.

2) A proposed intervention that can narrow the gap, including an estimation of what resources would be necessary to implement the intervention and a cost-benefit analysis to assess whether devoting the necessary resources is possible and at what price.

3) Balancing the budget of all resources (human, programmatic, and financial) to be invested in both the innovation and the preservation of existing elements of the current situation. This assessment will determine the adaptability factor. Does the system have the capacity to make the shift? Neglecting to conduct a thoughtful and deliberate process will increase the risk of adaptation becoming more of a hit or miss proposition than a calculated opportunity.

The impact of effective innovation doesn't need to be vast or overwhelming. Organizational identities are defined within the tension between preservation and change. The successful intro-

duction of new elements into an existing system can maintain or establish the balance of the system. Adaptation can be envisioned, implemented, and assessed through an incremental process of instituting achievable steps that will strengthen rather than undermine the ability of an organization to achieve its mission. Rocking the foundation of the system with the "next big thing" could damage or destroy rather than improve it. As such, radical change is likely to be resisted, often for good reason. There is no need to destroy the world in order to rebuild the one in which we live. Incremental change will usually have a better chance of taking root in the organizational culture and producing desired results. ■

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SIT MODEL OF INNOVATION

Most Ideas for new products are either uninspired or impractical. Finding the "sweet zone" requires balance that leads to both ingenious and viable ideas. When we innovate, we direct our thinking outward, trying to create something new and different from what we have now. Yet we do not want to wander too far off. A great idea must be both executable and appealing.

The Near Far Sweet principle ensures that you generate ideas that are sufficiently removed from your current situation in order to be truly interesting, while nevertheless close enough to your core competence in order to be feasible.

EXISTING SITUATION

