

Future Horizons

By Lanny Vincent

As innovation practitioners spend at least some of their time thinking about the future, it may be worth taking time occasionally to pause and consider the underlying assumptions we are carrying about the future itself. Beyond the old adage “the future is not what is used to be,” the vocabulary we use to describe the future can reveal much about what we assume the future holds.

Consider the time-oriented vocabulary of “short-term, mid-term, and long-term” and the metrics of “time-to-market and time-to-positive cash flow.” How often have we designated something as longer-term, only to discover later that our predictions of pace needed to be revised? What we thought was going to take longer—and therefore allowed us to delay investing—actually started happening sooner.

Likewise, how often have we designated something as short-term, only to find out that what we thought was right around the corner ended up taking much more time to develop? Timing is very difficult to predict; and so we should be prudently cautious anytime we use these temporal designations in our portfolio decisions.

Spatial vocabulary is also used, for example words like “core and context, adjacencies and outlook.” While it has some advantages of avoiding the guesswork inherent in the strictly temporal orientation to the future, thinking of different spaces—whether adjacent, white space or blue ocean suffers from a similar difficulty as the temporal. That which seems close-in can prove to be more difficult to realize than we had anticipated, and that which appears far-a-field can be more readily

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An Old Saw on Innovation

By Lanny Vincent

Here’s a story about a hard working but inexperienced do-it-yourselfer working on a home improvement project. It may be a parable for our corporate innovation efforts?

One day, this DIYer went to the local hardware store to buy a saw for a tree-cutting project. The hardware store clerk showed him various makes and models before finally presenting him the premier chainsaw. “This one will cut four cords a day, guaranteed.” This was enough to convince this hard worker to buy it and take it home, full of hope and expectation.

The next day the proud owner of the new chainsaw ate a hearty breakfast before tackling his trees. He worked very hard until late in the afternoon,

then he took a break and measured how many cords he had cut. To his great disappointment he found that he had only cut one cord. He thought maybe there was something wrong with the saw.

The following day, determined to achieve the four cord guarantee, he got up earlier and worked later; and when he had finished for the day, he found that he had only cut two cords of wood, still a full two cords shy of what the clerk had promised him. So the third day, he got up even earlier and worked non-stop all day until it was too dark to see. But still, when he measured his output for the day he had cut only three cords.

Now he was certain there was something wrong with the saw. The next day, he

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realized by means of a slight modification of existing complimentary business assets.

Geoffrey Moore's article on Horizon 1, 2 and 3 (see *Harvard Business Review*, July 2007) is an attempt at least to bring the temporal and spatial together, which is likely a wise thing to do when considering what the future holds. Stronger still is Moore's borrowing of evolutionary theory.

Timing is very difficult to predict; and so we should be prudently cautious anytime we use these temporal designations in our portfolio decisions.

Thinking of the future as “emergent” and “evolving” avoids the difficulty of predicting temporal pace or spatial position and reminds us of perhaps something more important: the future is not something to worry about or predict, so much as it is something that requires constant attention, experimentation and adaptation. ■

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took it back to the hardware store, put it down on the counter in front of the same clerk who had sold it to him and complained, “There is something wrong with this chain saw. I worked from early morning to late at night and all I could get was three cords! You guaranteed me four.”

The clerk carefully examined the chainsaw. The blades looked sharp. The chain slid through the bar effortlessly. He checked for oil. Everything seemed to be in order. “Well,” the clerk said, “let's go outside and start her up.” The two went outside and after just one pull of the starter cord the chainsaw started with a roar. The diligent do-it-yourselfer jumped back startled and exclaimed, “What's that noise?”

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Are we using our skills and knowledge in the best way we can? This is a perennial question that follows stewards of innovation management systems. Are we fully using the competencies that we have, or are we cutting wood the old fashion way, even with a chainsaw in our hands?

Answering this question in the context of operational routines—where the skills, knowledge and experience resident in our organization are already aligned with fairly well defined tasks—is one thing.

Answering this question in the context of innovation efforts, where neither the context is known nor are routines established, is another thing altogether.

How we define a person's skills, knowledge and experience is determined in part by the times and places wherein they have applied those skills and knowledge in the past. Dorothy Leonard was getting at this innovation management dilemma when she observed how core competencies can become core rigidities when specialization becomes captive to what is relevant only to established routines.

Applying the skills, knowledge and experience developed in one operational context to the emergent realities of an innovation context requires a healthy dose of adaptation and improvisation. It is this willingness, confidence, and faith to improvise and be flexible that ends up being the more precious resource. And this is a resource that may be more responsive to invitation, experimentation, and playfulness (innovation efforts) than to conservation, preservation, and control (operations).

Asking the best and brightest in our organizations to take what they are good at and adapt and improvise may indeed be the best way to avoid cutting the wood of opportunities the old fashion way and innovate our way into the future, instead of simply survive. ■

Articulate Speechlessness

Bill Wilson, who was a mentor of mavericks and a visionary innovator at Kimberly-Clark Company during the 1980s and 90s, constantly urged those of us who worked closely with him to pay attention to artists. They represent not only a renewable source of innovative thinking, but also at times a bell weather of change.

So it was natural for us to take note when we ran across an article on the contemporary artist and social activist Paul Chan recently (*The New Yorker*, May 26, 2008). “Politics is about concentrating power, Chan says, and art is about dispersing it.” Certain works of art resist our attempts to interpret or explain them, Chan believes, and the resistance—what he calls their “articulate speechlessness”—is what gives them enduring power.

Isn't this what we as innovators are attempting to do with our product and process innovations—create “articulate speechlessness”? ■