

MAKE IDEAS HAPPEN: THE 100-BOOK EXPERIMENT CONTINUES

By Jonathan Cullen

In the spring issue, I introduced my attempt to read 100 books last year and its impact on my advice as in-house counsel in safeguarding my business. Now I'll apply those learnings to driving innovation.

1. CHANGE FRAMES. A powerful way to foster innovation is to reframe a problem. The next time you approach an issue ask, "How would an octopus handle this?" Sy Montgomery's *The Soul of an Octopus* is a revolutionary exploration of the consciousness of one of the world's most unique creatures. An octopus has three hearts, a brain wrapped around its throat and venom like a snake. It changes colour based on emotion, tastes with its skin and can outweigh an adult human. Yet, it can squeeze its boneless body through an orange-sized opening, and it is a wildly intelligent problem solver, from Ru-

bik's cubes to brazen aquarium escapes. However, because its brain is organized in a very different way than ours—50 to 75 lobes and most of its neurons in its arms—we have not figured out how to measure its intelligence. So while thinking like an octopus is hard to imagine, the next time your organization faces an insurmountable dilemma, challenge colleagues to consider unconventional perspectives, thereby finding solutions that are difficult for competitors to replicate. Develop a trigger phrase for the mindset: "Okay everyone, how would an octopus get out of this aquarium?"

2. PRACTICE LATERAL THINKING. "You can't dig a new hole by digging the same one deeper." Lawyers are usually excellent vertical thinkers: each step to solve a problem is deemed the most "correct" and are sequential in nature. We are trained to exclude the irrelevant and stop when we discover the best option. While necessary, vertical thinking is not sufficient for organizations to make innovative leaps in products, services and technology. What is also required, and where lawyers receive no formal training, is lateral thinking. This thought process seeks out the irrelevant, ignores the order information is received in, and continues even when a solution is found. The absolute need for the irrelevant is counterintuitive to us. However, if we seek only information relevant to an existing mental construct, it will be difficult to change that construct. Lateral thinking allows us to both generate new

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constructs (insight) and break free of the old ones. But it has to be practiced. I highly recommend the tools in Edward de Bono's groundbreaking *Lateral Thinking*.

3. LIVE THE STOCKDALE PARADOX. The most poignant part of Jim Collins' *Good to Great* is his interview with Jim Stockdale, a Vietnam POW who was tortured over eight years: "This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be." Studying survivors, such as in *Unbroken* and *Escape from the Deep*, is very powerful. As Laurence Gonzales, author of *Deep Survival*, says, "The word 'experienced' often refers to someone who's gotten away with doing the wrong thing more frequently than you have". *Difficult Conversations* can provide tools to ensure you have the skill set to foster entrepreneurial spirit while also confronting the brutal facts.

4. STUDY GENIUS AND PATIENT PROBLEM SOLVERS. Genius, when properly examined, is often revealed to be a combination of pure will and unrelenting practice, such as in *Beethoven: Universal Composer*. The story of how one scientist solved the greatest navigation problem in history in *Longitude* is the perfect example of problem solving as a patient, iterative process. Pay attention to your organization's high-risk projects but don't neglect long-term policy change, which requires patience. Glaciers make for big change.



Removing the faults in a stage-coach may produce a perfect stage-coach, but it is unlikely to produce the first motor car.



- Edward de Bono, author of *Lateral Thinking*

5. ALLOW YOUR BUSINESS TO TRAIL BLAZE WITH INTELLIGENT RISK. Pierre Burton's tales of exploration from Canada's past in *Wild Frontier* and Earnest Shackleton's incredible story of leadership and survival in *Endurance* are harrowing reminders that someone has to go first. Your role is to ensure that your business is taking intelligent risk. Don't be the explorers who are never heard from again!

6. ENCOURAGE INNOVATION IN YOUR TEAM. You can't expect to drive innovation all by yourself. Learning how to manage a team is an essential step toward being a broad change maker. In Linda Hill's *Becoming a Manager*, we follow a group of new managers over the course of their first year and watch as their preconceived notions of "being the boss" bows to the reality of that tricky skill set.

7. TO SPARK CHANGE, KNOWLEDGE IS NOT ENOUGH. In *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath use the analogy of riding an elephant to describe change efforts. We must direct the rational rider, motivate the emotional elephant and clear the environmental path. Each component requires its own approach: "Trying to fight

inertia and indifference with analytical arguments is like tossing a fire extinguisher to someone who's drowning. The solution doesn't match the problem."

8. EXECUTE, EXECUTE, EXECUTE. Innovation driven but unexecuted is like the best meal you've ever made being left to get cold on the kitchen counter. It's a waste and the downfall of many an organization. Use *The Knowing-Doing Gap* and the 1985 gem, *Executive Survival Manual*, to ensure your organization follows through on its strategy. If you can't because you are bogged down by too many emails, ask me about the system I follow from *Getting Things Done*.

An in-house legal department that creates fertile ground for innovation and thoughtful risk taking is one of the last untapped bastions of competitive advantage that our organizations deserve and crave. You have an opportunity to unleash this.

Just find your octopus. ■

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