

Can you Learn Innovation?

Innovation is imperative to the competitive success of a company. Innovation is taking creative ideas and turning them into practical products or services to fulfill a need. The best creative idea is just the beginning – it is not an innovation until it is implemented.

Many people believe that innovation comes from the fortunate few great thinkers who have a special talent or gift for great ideas. We can point to many geniuses who created wonderful new innovations that have changed the world (electricity, radio, airplanes). If you believe that innovation only comes from a few, then you are quite certain that most of us can forget about innovation. But don't despair!

There is a second type of innovation. Most innovations are not new, but are improvements or changes to existing products or technologies. They can also result in major changes in our lives (cell phones, digital cameras). This type of innovation can be learned, and with practice people get better at it. The more we learn about innovation, and the more we study innovations from the past, the better we get at it.

Innovation requires a systematic process, and must involve customers, stakeholders and employees. The four steps are:

- Identify the problem – the problem is the stimulus. Get to know your customers better and get a clear understanding their real needs. You need to “think outside the box” (to coin a tired phrase) by finding new ways to think about your customers’ needs. Brainstorming can be a good first step to creative thinking.

Get an in-depth understanding of the problem or need and its unique attributes in order to offer an improved solution.

- Research and analyze – get information. Identify concepts that may contribute to the solution to your clients’ specific need. Challenge concepts and look for flaws or problems at this point and be sure the concept is well thought through. Translate the customers’ needs into services/products that meet their requirements. Involve the customer throughout the process.
- Design a solution and test – define/design the solution; include all details and try different ideas as potential solutions. Work closely with the customers, stakeholders and employees at every step.
- Implement – follow an orderly implementation process. Earlier steps done well will result in a successful implementation.



Each step in the process of innovation can be done by any individual. Different people may have differing innate abilities in these areas, but they will be able to contribute and become more innovative. Because someone does not have the highest level of natural talent for one discipline, it does not mean that you cannot master the basic skill. Remember, you don't have to be a world famous musician to play music beautifully.

This four step process provides a framework for successful, repeatable innovation as part of your organization's set of skills.