Invitation to Innovation



*Psychologist and Coach based in the UK and the US, Ian McDermott shares his passion for making*

*innovation a lifetime companion, collaborating with our brain to refresh and renew our lives and our*

*coaching.*

People can be creative without being innovative. Ever met those people who have great ideas but nothing ever actually happens? Innovation, however, produces something demonstrably new. Whether it’s a new product or a new process, innovation brings it into being. From a business perspective, innovation is a primary means by which organizations reinvent and reposition

themselves and what they have to offer. Commercially, as someone once said, innovation is the ability to convert ideas into invoices. Innovation is also the primary way we renew ourselves as people: it will ultimately determine the future we create for ourselves as well as our clients.

Failure to keep innovating means we become stuck in our present and just keep repeating ourselves.

Most people aren’t used to thinking of themselves as innovators, but unless you’re the same as you were twenty years ago you must have been making changes. Some will probably have worked better

than others; some you may have made deliberately; others may have been vague aspirations which have now come to pass without necessarily working at

them; some may have been big changes, but more often than not they will have been incremental. This is important because contrary to popular myth most innovation is incremental and not a Eureka or ‘light bulb’ moment. Incremental innovation is however cumulatively profound. Human beings have an amazing ability to habituate. This means that when change is incremental we can experience considerable change over time but not really notice it: it happens little by little, day by day. (If you’re in any doubt try looking in the mirror as you get older!) So we can have the strange paradox of not really noticing how over time we have gradually changed and even invented new ways of living –including earning a living. However, coaches are change agents so we need to be aware of how innovation happens in people’s lives – starting with our own.

What triggers innovation?

Whether you’re a coach, a team leader, an entrepreneur or someone who wants to be more

innovative in their life, it’s important to understand what triggers innovation. How often have you woken up and thought ‘everything’s perfect so I think I’ll innovate’? The answer is probably: never! The unfortunate reality is that innovation is invariably preceded by discontent. That doesn’t mean people are disgruntled; they may just have a sense that ‘we can do better than this’ but not yet be clear how to. This means living with discomfort until you figure a better way out. No one enjoys feeling thwarted, frustrated or disappointed, so people often try to ignore or avoid these signals. In so doing they frequently get in their own way and inhibit innovation. Innovators are the people who actually use such thoughts and feelings as the spur to new thinking.

Yvonne von Amerongen, a manager in a nursing home in the Netherlands, was at work when her phone rang: “My mother called me and told me that my father had passed away suddenly. He just had a heart attack and died. And one of the first things I thought was ‘Thank God he never got to be in a nursing home.’ That’s crazy that I have to think that. I’m in the management of a nursing home and I don’t want my father to come here. My colleagues had similar thoughts. So in Nov 1992 we sat down and decided to take a day to consider what would make nursing homes worthwhile to live in.”

Fast-forward some years and now there is a brand new four acre care complex which houses 152 residents. It has the same budget as any other nursing home in the Netherlands. No more, no less. But it delivers a totally different quality of living. (2)

The innovation lesson here is that a model of excellence came into being not through a remote

central government initiative, but through one woman confronting the disparity between her personal response to her father’s death and what she was doing professionally. She and her colleagues recognized that for their own peace of mind they needed to do better. If we have the courage to confront our own discomfort we may just come up with a better way of doing things.

On the other hand if we are forever ignoring how things don’t really stack up in our lives, we’ll likely

keep repeating what we know in our hearts really isn’t good enough. Suppose you were to reframe feelings of discomfort and discontent as feedback; an invitation to innovation? Now they become your early warning system. Both individuals and teams can learn to do this. One of my clients now refers to these feelings as his ‘innovation signals’ and says it’s one of the most valuable things he’s got out of our work together. Coaches can really add value when they know these

signs because they assist in giving birth to the new...

# Making innovation easier

Innovation frequently happens at the interface between disciplines. For me this is part of its

attraction. Over the years I have been involved in a variety of collaborative ventures, enabling me to learn from and innovate with others with different skill sets and areas of expertise. Almost all innovation involves collaboration. This requires a set of core competencies that enable people to work together to achieve what none could accomplish alone. Learning how to collaborate more effectively – be it with clients, colleagues or your nearest and dearest - is critical.

And you can. This is what good leaders make possible. I have found that when leaders get serious about promoting collaboration they become infinitely more effective. It is also crucial for entrepreneurs if they are to thrive. Why? Because being a one wo/man band limits what you can achieve. Imagine being able to foster this mind-set in others - much of my own work centres on helping people navigate the various stages of what I call the Innovation Journey.

# Neuroscience supports innovation

What we are learning from neuroscience research has implications for promoting innovative thinking. It’s much easier, for example, to make this journey when people believe they are capable of it. So much of what we do as leaders, coaches, trainers, managers – and parents! – is affected by how the brain works. This is emphasised in the programmes I run with my colleague Professor of Applied Neuroscience, Patricia Riddell. Your brain is the driving force behind every thought, memory, emotion and behaviour you have had or ever will have. So it‘s smart to have a basic understanding of how you can work with your brain – and make sure you’re not working against it!

Specifically for innovation and collaboration it is useful for individuals and teams to have some rudimentary understanding of the brain’s neuroplasticity. “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” is just one of a number of out-dated myths that advances in neuroscience have disproved. Neuroplasticity refers to the ability of your brain to literally reorganize itself by forming new neural connections. We now know this happens not just during the early years of life but throughout the whole of your life. Recent research makes it clear that we have infinitely more potential at any age than previously imagined. Every human brain – and thus every team - is capable of continually

growing and adapting. But too often people are held back by not understanding what their brain – and therefore they – are capable of.

This has huge implications for how we understand the potential of individuals and organisations. The

converse is also true: living with an outmoded understanding of your brain can stunt your mental and emotional growth – and thus your innovative potential.

# So how to begin?

Recently, when asked to demonstrate Innovation Coaching at an international business conference, I

worked with a delegate who wanted to stimulate more innovative thinking in his team. What emerged was that he was way too fond of telling people what to do. He needed to learn a coaching approach - drawing out more and advising less. The breakthrough came when he said, “you know, my wife says I tell her rather than talk with her.” We ended with him committing to start innovating when he got home that evening! A new kind of collaboration promised a better marriage – and the basis of better work practice. Innovation is like charity – it starts at home. So before helping others ask yourself where might you want to innovate in your own life?

To learn more and to access free innovation videos go to the

Ian McDermott Innovation Hub: http://www.itsnlp.com/innovation-hub/

(1) CNN The Dementia Village (broadcast 12.7.2013)

(2) For more information see REF INNOVATION BLOG on AC site

Ian McDermott has a wealth of experience in giving