

Innovation Fatigue

by

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Innovation is important. Without it, we are Medieval crafters, farmers of pre-antiquity, or hunter-gatherers sans wheel, lever, and fire. I have been professionally innovating most of my adult life. I say this both for contextualize and to avert some of the vitriol that comes to perceived apostasy.

Question: When will *Innovation* finally, mercifully burn itself out?

I italicized innovation to indicate that I am referring not to the act of bringing forth valuable novelties that advance ability, capacity, and so forth. I'm referring to the exhausted management fashion rivaled today by only the equally invasive trend "User Experience."

Innovation is the Atkins™ of the business world. This is good because it works and can help achieve an important goal. But, then again, so will TQM (a cluster of masteries that add up to a "low fat" phenomenon) and BHAGs (a quintessential "California Diet"). Each works for a time but is largely unsustainable and probably harmful in the long run. None is as effective as a balanced, common sense regime that moderates the contributions of each of them.

Innovation is as important as customer-centricity, unique value (propositions), managing efficiency, etc. Unfortunately, *Innovation* has—for now—become the alpha and omega. The usual suspects of trend creators have perched it atop corporate and government agendas because its poster children (Apple, Google, Tesla, et al) are doing well. But they, like GE and Six Sigma, will eventually find the disfavour of the ink-shedding class.

Innovation is in the eye of the beholder, just like every other trend. From within this particular whirlwind, one can see *Innovation* defies specific definition. Anybody can weigh in and attribute to the word whatever features are needed to suit a current purpose: to leapfrog/eliminate competition, define new categories, delight customers, break down barriers, etc., etc.

Genuine innovation is complex. It encompasses everything from tiny process evolutions through to jaw dropping invention. It demands not just creation of a capacity but its popular implementation. This makes innovation merely one tool in the kit. It makes *Innovation* a hospitable environment for charlatans.

Real innovation takes only a desire and willingness to do better and to solve problems. It's hard work and experimentation, serendipity and vigilant opportunism; it's not magic. It must, however, overcome both a stubborn human tendency and organizational gravity: the comfort of not changing and the demand to not risk what we already have.

Innovation is the same as every other fad that has preceded or will follow it. Sensible people, who don't overthink it or take to heart the countless "how to" guides based on what worked at one place and time for one organization, will survive and thrive. But those who pursue it religiously will eventually fail. And they will sweep those failures away in the rush to scramble onto the next fad.

Which brings me to what ought to be a natural next focus for organizations, now with a heightened attenuation to all things *Innovation*. Adaptation.

Not dramatically leaping forward, Adaptation is closer to how nature—the Earth, life—innovates or moves. Nature evolves blindly through the success of those that best adapt to *prevailing*, possibly changed, conditions. Revolutionary species do not survive let alone thrive; those that align best to the world as it is *right now* do. Our social and economic evolutions can be progressive because we make directed decisions (often not blindly). So we can make measured steps that end in transformation.

Inventors and the avant-garde move the environment. Organizations that use those altered conditions not to force giant leaps forward (despite advertising claims), but to give the world what it's ready to step into now will succeed as innovators. A starlet wears Dior custom made; Prêt-a-Porter runways show haute couture; but the Bay and Nordstrom move the needle. Knock offs are innovations that win because they better align to what the broader market—the environment—*is* and will accept.

The chronicles of our changing ideas, customs, technologies, and consumption—what we call innovation—are littered with profitable examples of what I call Adaptations. Organizational leaders, primed with sensitivity to *Innovation*, ought to refocus on Adaptation.

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See Institute-X.org for more about Adaptation.

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