

INNOVATION NATION? MORE LIKE PONTIFICATE STATE

BY

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Innovation will not get better in Canada. Sorry Minister Bains, we will not become "Innovation Nation" because we are not a start-up nation. Not that being a start-up nation is necessary. But without start-ups, innovation has to come from the enterprise level. In Canada, it will not, except from a few egoless businesses still run by the originator that ignore and avoid "professional" managers/consultants in important leadership roles.

Sadly, the rest of enterprise size organizations will not be helpful though essential. It will not be for a want of desire and intensity. It will not be for want of noise. It's because the biggest fraud and disservice the media and management gurus have perpetrated on gullible MBA-class and younger business executives weaned on two rounds of Internet unicorns, is to make it seem like innovation is easy and immediately accessible to those that want it.

Enterprises can put attention and resources to the challenge. And yet it doesn't happen. So, what's wrong? Obviously, it must be misguided tax (incentives) and industrial policy. No, there is a brain drain. No, it has to be inadequate support and early-stage financing. That's not right. There's a scaling capability shortfall. Or we need an entrepreneurial startup culture. Or maybe, everybody's just not wishing hard enough.

Certainly, based on prevailing problem identification and solutions, it couldn't be because real, noticeable innovation is hard, infrequent, and more demoralizing than cold call door-to-door sales. More than that, it's not simple. In fact, innovation is typically complicated and complex (and if you don't know the difference, perhaps that's part of the issue...). None of which sits well with enterprise executives of the sort described.

We appear to have been convinced that *everything at every stage* should be simple. And some things are—at some well-trod, detail-defying level of description. Innovations, by definition, are not that. Even when, under the adoring glow of market success, the essence of the innovation is ridiculously over-simplified (think Über or iPod or Amazon) for broad consumption, the true measure of non-simplicity is easily scratched out of the polished surface.

Simple is fine. So long as you, behind the wheel of your car understand start (with biometric voice command), engage (GPS-enabled destination command), and let the car do its thing, you're good. We've described *simply* the innovation of the self-driving automobile. Of course, it's absurd. Such a "simple" innovation is unattainable without somebody—the business people purveying it perhaps—knowing the much less than simple (creative) thinking just beneath this placid surface.

Yet too many executives—with an unrelenting commitment to the latest whack-a-doodle pronouncements on professional management technique—have no real clue about innovation. If they did, they would know that asking for product concepts, business plans, and so on for innovations to be simple during that period between fanciful conception and practical realization is neither helpful nor valuable.

Focus not on the first part, but the last three words of what's called Einstein's Razor: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, **but no simpler.**"

There is skill and art in communicating the essence of innovation to different audiences at the appropriate level of complexity. Overwhelmingly that is where the thinking and difficult work falls into the “simplest possible description” trap never again to get back to the necessary level of difficulty that innovation demands. Too many of these professional managers are educationally and temperamentally unprepared to root in the not-simple, not-easy, muck of innovation from which the eventual simple story will eventually emerge.

An innovative idea starts with a simple proposition. But, if achieving it were that simple and straight-forward, it would be done already. That simple proposition, whether a business model innovation or technology development, meets the challenge created by the very recombination or change that makes the simple idea so appealing. Through a lot of trial and error, failure and heartbreak, a Eureka moment *may* happen. It is viable! Only then can the whole endeavor be once again regressed to an easy-to-consume PowerPoint graphic or 20-second elevator pitch or advertisement or what-have-you.

Those who haven't or don't work on innovations regularly have no idea. Until more enterprise (senior) leadership owns and understands (or grudgingly tolerates if not gets mucky themselves) the messy complexity of the process, and accepts that nothing gets simple without being very complex first, innovation will not be a strong suit of Canadian business. Our go-to move will remain able administration.

It doesn't have to be this way. And it doesn't have to be the future. Leaders, especially those phalanxes senior professional managers need to learn to love wallowing in the guts of their businesses—especially if their business is innovation.

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