

Visionary vs. Competitive Innovation

By Lanny Vincent

My father taught me to race a small sailboat on a lake in northern Wisconsin. One of the cardinal rules of racing is to always “cover the boat behind you,” assuming, of course, that you are not the last boat in the fleet. This means that when the boat following you changes direction to find clean air, you should change course in parallel with them. If they find better air, you will also.

There was another rule I learned later, after many seasons of racing. It came from the expert lake sailor Stuart Walker, who observed that there are always two winds on a lake. He said, “Pick one and stay with it.” Walker observed from all his years of racing experience that the wind direction next to the shoreline typically differs a few degrees from the wind direction out in the middle of the lake. If you go from one to the other you can lose out, due to the lull in between.

Paying attention to the competition is one thing. Reading the wind is another. Sometimes you have to choose one or the other.

These rules and choices apply to innovators too as colleague and veteran innovator, Carol O’Neill, senior vice president at Spartech, reminded me recently. Thank you, Carol, for referring us to “The Creative Monopoly,” an article by David Brooks published in the *New York Times*. It is a must read. (nytimes.com/2012/04/24/opinion/brooks-the-creative-monopoly.html).

Brooks does a riff on a course Peter Thiel (founder of PayPal) is teaching at Stanford. One of the core points of the course is that we tend to confuse capitalism with competi-

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“I used to call people, then I got into e-mailing, then texting, and now I just ignore everyone.”

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Confusing Connection with Conversation

By Lanny Vincent

We all drink at the fire hose of connectivity yet thirst still for substantive conversation, Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT, observed recently in the *New York Times* (4-22-12). We have sacrificed meaningful conversation and relationship skills for “mere connection” and transactional “friendships.” It seems Facebook, texts, emails, tweets, crowd-sourcing and other social-media induced behaviors are really more media than social.

Turkle has devoted her career to examining and understanding the interactions of humans with technology and how they influence one another. It doesn’t take an advanced degree to know what she is talking about as most of us experience it every day.

And social media’s impact on substantive innovating can be debilitating.

According to Turkle, in contrast to messaging, “face-to-face conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. . . as we ramp up the volume and velocity of online connections, we start to expect faster answers. To get these, we ask one another simpler questions: we dumb down our communications, even on the most important matters,” diminishing our chances for reflection.

Personally, this happens in my own life, too. I used to daydream or reflect when a break came in the middle of a busy day. Now, sadly enough, when those moments appear I check my mobile for messages.

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tion. When that confusion extends into the realm of innovating, innovating can suffer at the hand of competition. "Competition has trumped value-creation," Brooks says, and this undermines innovation.

My own experience facilitating invention and R&D-driven innovating efforts over the past 30 years resonates with and confirms Brook's conclusion. Steadily over those three decades, innovating efforts seem to have become more competitive and less visionary. Increasingly innovators are focusing on "adjacencies." Adjacent opportunities, theoretically, are arenas where risks appear hedged by an entirely rational pursuit of improvements in value already established and validated for existing customers. Focusing on adjacencies carries the reassurance that in the risky endeavor of innovating, one can minimize the risk by staying close to the customer and just ahead of the competition. Covering the boats behind you.

As more companies take this more rational and less risky approach, fewer established companies are looking to create new value for people and create new customers, markets and initiate "monopolies" in the process. Now it seems that looking for the new winds, whether in the center of the lake or along the shorelines, is an innovating strategy being left to the entrepreneurial start-up.

What if you are in the boat behind, or see a wind on the other shore? You may have the incentive not only to think differently, but also act differently, and break away from the pack. It's risky for sure. But if you see a new wind, it just may be worth it. If you fail, you will have learned a valuable lesson—perhaps that is the real value that cannot be taken away.

In his book, *Birth of the Chaordic Age*, Dee Hock, the founder of VISA, said in his wonderful story of the company's creation "what is possible cannot be determined by opinions: only by attempt." □

Losing Conversation for Connection

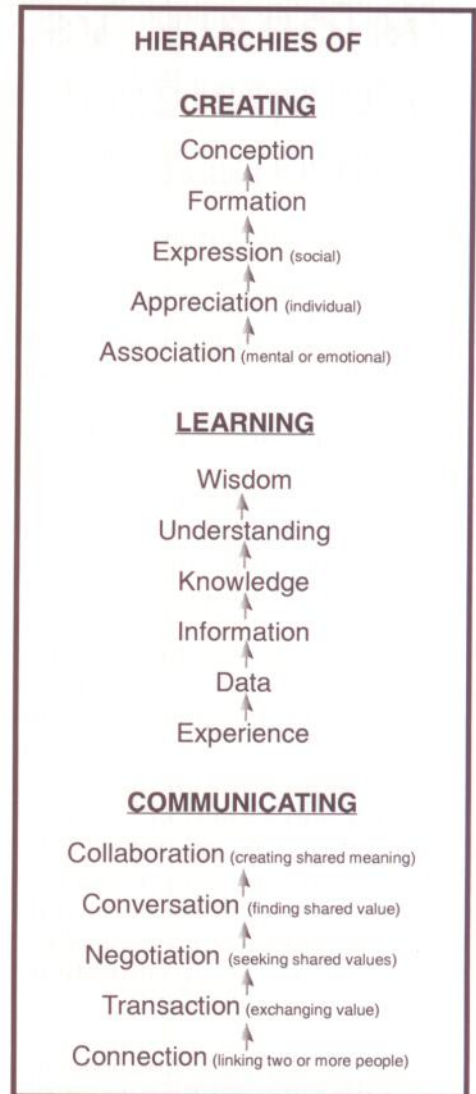
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Professionally, I see this happening more and more, too. Hardly an hour goes by when I am facilitating a workshop—an intense face-to-face conversation—that someone checks in on his or her mobile device and checks out of the conversation. He stops listening to those talking around him, even to himself. Social norms don't enable us to create what Turkle calls "device-free" zones. Yet allowing electronic interruptions subtly erodes empathetic listening and understanding, both of which are essential to innovating efforts. Thanks to Paula Rosch, a veteran innovator and principal of The Paula Rosch Group, for bringing Professor Turkle to our attention.

We used to differentiate the terms "creativity" and "innovation." Creativity meant coming up with new ideas while innovation meant bringing those ideas to market. Now innovation means creativity and it seems we are losing our "connectivity" and relationship with reality. Perhaps this tendency of words to morph their meaning is inevitable. Yes, creative skill and capability are certainly involved in innovating, but so too are knowledge, knowledge-creation, empathy and awareness of prior art. We should remember Peter Drucker's observation that "the bright idea" is the least reliable source of innovation.

Like Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs in psychology, we have thought much about the hierarchies of learning and creating in this information age. Perhaps we should also consider the hierarchy of communicating as well—the necessary third leg of the stool in our digitally connected age.

The basic phenomenon of innovating is not creating ideas alone nor just discovering new knowledge, neither is it the combination of these two. Something else is needed—genu-



ine communication through dialogue. We need to value and create spaces for innovators to play and eat together to socialize and converse face-to-face. While innovating requires a dynamic network of connections, it also requires patience to listen, wisdom to discern and trust to engage in conversations—the old-fashioned kind—where two or more people gather together at the same time and same place just to talk, and listen. □

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