

Learning from Experience

By Lanny Vincent

Most of us regard the economy as generally negative, at least compared to the more robust economic conditions prior to September 2008. Yet this “new normal” may be what my mother called a “character building” experience, at least as far as innovating is concerned.

Many companies are increasingly responding to the new realities they face as an invitation to rethink what they thought they knew about their business. Many seem to be more willing to reexamine some of their underlying assumptions, which in more robust conditions left little motivation for questioning. With pain and loss there is the promise of new gains in the offing, if we are willing to learn.

Edgar Schein, a former professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, reminds us that the first hurdle of learning is to unlearn what we thought we knew for sure. Unlearning is especially challenging for companies with successful track records. Karl Deutsch, a social and political scientist, once said “those in power don’t have to learn,” which sounds close to what another sage said 2,000 years earlier: “the meek shall inherit the earth.” This strength-emerging-from-weakness narrative so often ignored by the media, can be seen today in the unfinished Arab Spring, the “Occupy” movement, the rebalancing of global economic power, and even in the emergent nature of innovations themselves.

As a student of innovation for over 30 years, I have been reexamining many of my own underlying assumptions about innovating. I am struck with how much I don’t know,



really, as I reexamine what I thought I knew. The result is a new found humility regarding the nature and character of innovating itself.

Innovating is similar to parenting in many respects. For example, there has been no one authoritative canon on parenting, which has survived more than one generation. What happened to Dr. Spock and all his wisdom? Did he become irrelevant, trumped by books like *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* and the latest findings from developmental, neurological and psychosocial research? The same is true for innovating. Like parenting, innovating is inextricably entangled with the particularities and embodiments of each individual invention. Generalizations about innovating are frequently made, but quickly evaporated in the wake of market conditions, competitive dynamics, technological constraints, and organizational preferences.

While many of us want to believe that innovating can be codified into a repeatable and sustainable process, our experience suggests otherwise. Innovations, innovating and innovators seem to defy formulaic generalizations. They are persistently original and they are consistently “emergent,” to use a term from complexity theory. Parents experience a similar set of challenges.

Lately many of our core clientele—product developers and R&D-based innovators—seem more willing to move forward in the new normal, despite not having all the answers. Powerlessness (not to be confused with helplessness) is now being more freely admitted by both big and small enterprises alike. Veteran firms and early stage start-ups, while more circumspect about their innovation opportunities, seem even more willing to consider first what is going on before rushing into a plan of ac-

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tion. This newly found humility bodes well for improving the prospects of innovating. Why? A willingness to stay open, to learn, and to adapt are summed up in humility. Staying open, learning and adapting are also the healthy precursors to successful innovating.

People who analyze external conditions seemed to be using words like “uncertainty,” “volatility,” “insecurity,” and “complexity” more frequently in their descriptions. I’m not sure whether things have actually gotten more complex. Perhaps we are just more aware of the complexity that has always been there. Whether it’s increased in reality or not, many seem to be more aware of how partial and incomplete our knowledge really is.

A feeling of uncertainty, volatility, or complexity can evoke anxiety in us. It can also catalyze us to discover opportunities amid the threats. Whether we approach it with an anxious defensiveness or an animating hope, the month of January implicitly asks us each year: what have we learned? January—named for Janus, the forward- and backward-looking Roman god of transitions—finds us simultaneously looking back on what we learned and forward to the opportunity for applying and testing what was learned.

Each January for the past 20 years we have reflected back on what the previous year has brought us. Most of those reflections have consisted of a list of lessons learned. This year, there is but one item on the list about innovating: and it is parenting. We hope this does not reflect a flattening of our learning curve as much as it does our appreciation for the importance of the one lesson we learned about innovating, which we want to bring to your attention.

In a nutshell, the lesson is this: powerlessness may be a silent, early partner to innovators. To some extent all innovating efforts are built upon a foundation of learning, especially when the learning is from

direct experience of something ventured without a guarantee of success. The point at which we try something that may not work, whether we succeed or fail, this is the point wherein we act our way into a new way of thinking, which is the essential foundation of successful innovating.

Ingredients of established power—whether status, reputation, or market share—tend toward defensive reaction more than adaptive response. The powerless, in some ways, are actually freer and more motivated to learn than the powerful. However, it would be erroneous to conclude that the small and less powerful have an advantage when it comes to innovating—whether disruptively or incrementally. *The Economist’s* Schumpeter Column (12/17/11) reexamined a common

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assumption: that disruptive innovating favors the small and fast over the big and powerful. Like a parent, the innovator’s passion and care for the product may be a more important factor than the relative size of the innovating enterprise.

This was made clear in Walter Isaacson’s biography of Steven Jobs, which brings forth Jobs’ own lifelong effort to sculpt value at the intersection of engineering and the humanities. The position Jobs seemed to place himself was where design, marketing and engineering met—in the product. Like Bob Lutz’s impassioned plea (*Car Guys vs. Bean Counters: The Battle for the Soul of American Business*) to find leaders who are passionate about the product, Jobs was clearly passionate about the products and services in which he was engaged, from personal computers to music, from animation to mobile devices.

Powerlessness enables innovators to rely more on their ability to listen and observe than on what they think they already know. Powerlessness leaves innovators more reliant upon their empathy and identification with the end-user than dependent upon the false and short-lived confidence from doing what they already know will work, which leads to imitation, not innovation.

Innovations emerge from passionate people who invest themselves in learning experiences that lead to new ways of thinking. Learning is the capital in which we all need to invest even more of our selves and our resources.

Thanks to so many of you who continue to invite us contribute to your experience-based learning investments.

Some highlights of 2011 for Vincent & Associates, Ltd. include:

- The completion of Lanny’s book *Prisoners of Hope: How Engineers (and Others) Get Lift for Innovating* (Westbow Press, December 2011).
- Client assignments that took us around the U.S. and to five continents.
- Engagements with Malaysia’s Innovation Initiative “IP-Driven R&D.”
- Our recent move to San Francisco, near the Cliff House on Ocean Beach. Our new address is 534 48th Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94121.

In Memoriam

Lewis P. Orchard, Ph.D.
1950-2011

*inventor, innovator,
Renaissance man, loving father,
Susan’s devoted husband and soul mate,
and our very good friend.*

You will be missed, Lew.