

## The Seven Deadly Sins of Innovating

By Lanny Vincent

**I**nnovating is filled with risks and surrounded by uncertainties. Many are out of the innovator's control. Yet some factors *are* controllable. These are within the heart and the mind of the innovator, innovating virtues and vices, if you will.

Think of using that age-old guide of vices and virtues—the infamous gang of seven deadly sins—as a template for looking at your own motivation and behavior as an innovator. Greed, gluttony, covetousness, sloth, lust, anger and pride.

As a human endeavor, innovating is hardly immune to these “sins”—whether sins of omission or commission. Likewise, in-

novators can manifest the opposite virtues as well: generosity, restraint, gratitude, industriousness, selfless love, forgiveness and humility. In the context of innovating, these vices and their opposing virtues are the few things innovators *can* control.

Greed is perhaps the easiest to spot. The greed of innovators manifests in various forms, such as overestimating the rate of market adoption (“build it and they will come”) or excessive optimism in setting the price an innovation will fetch from customers. Clayton Christensen advises innovators against this greed-infected thinking with his pithy suggestion: “be patient for growth and impatient for profits.” Profit proves

to be a more reliable early indicator of the innovation's value.

Gluttony of innovators shows up in various forms as well. Premature brainstorming activities based on the belief that hundreds of ideas are needed before one good one can be found is one form of innovator gluttony. Gluttony is also evident in well intentioned but over-diversified development portfolios. Spreading risk across too many different projects often leaves each innovation undernourished. Apple's example of disciplined focus on a precious few stands in stark contrast to the way many companies gorge on unfocussed creativity. Likewise, the innovator's obsession for more resources can easily mask the fact that, as David Packard was fond of saying, “more companies die of indigestion than starvation.”

Covetousness (having what you want rather than wanting what you have) can distort innovating efforts. For example, innovating efforts are often driven more by the desire to emulate or imitate other companies who are admired for their innovating, rather than focusing on the needs of customers. Apple is the prevailing icon in this regard. Not too long ago it was Toyota. While there is certainly much that can be learned from these “virtuous” innovating tribes, each company has to work out its own innovating purpose and process. Success will be shaped more by the conditions and particulars of the innovator's own immediate opportunities than attempting to imitate an icon.

Sloth (laziness) for innovators is often embedded in the expectation that users will articulate their unmet needs in unambiguous expressions or explicit requirements. Veteran product developers know from experience that the “voice of the customer”

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*“At least you have something to look back on. Mine were all sins of omission.”*

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*Continued from the previous page*

is nuanced—code that can only be discerned with empathy, imagination and identification with end-users. This empathy is accessible with active listening, iterative feedback and direct observations. It takes a lot of work, requiring both inspiration and perspiration.

The lust of innovators can manifest when the innovator's desire to innovate is met by unfavorable conditions, poor timing, or weak opportunities. The cookie war of the 1980s is a glaring example. Several companies, including Keebler and Nabisco, flooded the market with so many new cookie products that retailers couldn't find room on their shelves to carry them all, manufacturers couldn't sustain the spending required to support their own offerings, and consumers quickly became satiated. In this case the innovators' love of the category became distorted into a lust for market share.

Anger from innovators, often over failed attempts to gain attention from the market, management, or both, can lead to fights or flights. Innovators with a bit more emotional self-regulation recognize the fear that underlies their anger. Instead of fighting or fleeing, experienced innovators work through their fears and in doing so discover what they need to do next.

Pride, perhaps the most prevalent of the innovating vices, can seduce innovators into being overly impressed with their own capability. Often this manifests itself in the conviction that the innovator has discovered or invented something new, only to discover later, newness actually reflected a severe incline in their learning curve rather than

the originality of the alleged discovery or invention. It may be new to the innovator, but not to others "schooled in the art." Likewise, innovators can become so enamored with their own cleverness, they neglect the value perceived by end-users and are often blinded to the customer's need by the brilliance of the solution. Experienced innovators know more can and will be revealed, and remain humble as a result.

Years ago the managing partner of Ernst & Young asked me if I would conduct a motivational workshop on innovating. My initial reaction was mildly skeptical. I wondered if he really understood what he was asking for or was he simply looking for someone to come in and inspire the troops? Nothing ever did come of the workshop. I wasn't able to overcome my skepticism, I suppose, and he wasn't able to find anyone else. But for all these years his request has popped in and out of my mind. Maybe he did understand what he was asking for.

Perhaps it's because I have gotten a little older and maybe a wee bit wiser; or perhaps it is simply that so much is being said about innovation these days that is focused on technique and aimed at creating the new and different rather than the meaningful and substantive. Whatever the reason, perhaps now is the time to address the question of motivation.

Why innovate? Whether we ask this question of individuals in R&D, the advanced development group, or the company as a whole, how we express our answer makes a difference, as Donella Meadows suggests in her posthumously published book, *Thinking in Systems*. According to Meadows, how one expresses the purpose or function of any system—be it a product or an organizational department—can have profound effects on how the system behaves, not to mention the value it contributes. As essential parts of innovating systems, innovators themselves might pause every now and again and ask themselves why.

What motivates an individual, a group or a company is always a matter of purpose. Purpose determines what is important and therefore valued. And since innovating is

*"There is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favor; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had the actual experience of it."*

From *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli, 1513

all about creating new value, how value is recognized is at least partly a matter of purpose and its expression. Perhaps the more extrinsic values sought in commercial innovations reflect an underlying intrinsic value. The closer the extrinsic is to the intrinsic, the more substantive, meaningful and even redemptive the innovation.

Are your innovating efforts really attempts to make your products different than those from competitors? Do end-users really care about those differences? Are your innovating efforts more about growing the company and serving shareholder interests? Is there a mission in your innovating purpose that has to do with the love of the category and a desire to contribute something important to the customers you want to serve?

Innovating *per se* is neither moral nor immoral. But it may not be entirely amoral either, that is, if we seek to spend our time on what is compelling.

Whatever the purpose, and however it is expressed, every purpose implies its own set of enabling and disabling attitudes and behavior—innovating virtues and vices. These are among the few things that innovators can control in the midst of their innovating endeavors. □

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Please send us your thoughts and opinions on this issue of *Innovating Perspectives*.

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