

Face-to-face in an Online World

By Jim Ferry

In this digital age, why is it that people continue to meet face-to-face to solve problems? Why go to all the trouble and expense to meet in big conference rooms and waste time traveling if you can sit at your desk and get the same information? Wouldn't it be easier to move it all online?

There are several reasons, I believe, for the continued existence of face-to-face problem solving meetings:

1. Nuances are explored better in person. Recently one of my clients said, "We sell food products. Food is an emotional purchase (nurturing, pleasurable, guilty, etc.). We need face-to-face interaction to fully explore the nuances of human emotion associated with food."
2. Connections and associations are catalyzed. Confidential asides that we wouldn't say online, accidents, laughter, random meetings
3. Meeting other people who are grappling with the same issues we are is essential for invention. Nathan Myhrvold, Microsoft's former chief technologist, hosts "invention sessions" face-to-face with brilliant scientists and engineers who go to great bother to convene in one place. (Ironically, Microsoft advertises its *Go-To-Meeting* heavily.)
4. A face-to-face meeting has more lasting associations both socially and cognitively. Online interactions are fleeting.
5. Sometimes we need to keep things to ourselves. The open innovation trend is terrific for infusing new ideas into moribund companies, but for decisions and directions, we might need to play it close to the vest in a small face-to-face meeting.

in the hall: serendipity is enhanced.

Continued on the next page

Between the Shoulders

By Lanny Vincent

Remember those cartoons depicting a little angel on one shoulder who whispers, "do the right thing" in one ear, while a little devil on the other shoulder urges just the opposite?

Innovators have analogous counselors on their shoulders. Instead of angels and devils, however, innovators find themselves between "prophets" and "priests." Prophets speak about change, possibility, and how things could be different. Priests, on the other shoulder, speak about accepting reality, security, and honoring the wisdom of past. Keeping your head between these two perspectives, without losing your mind, can be a daily challenge.

I confess (where's a priest when you need one?) that in my thirty years as a perpetual student of innovation, I have been biased toward the prophetic voice. The future. Change. New. Invention. Learning. Being on the cutting edge. Creative destruction. The Maverick Way. All very fresh, adrenalin-laced stuff.

Like many though, I often mistakenly think that the prophetic voice is about predicting the future. We believe if we can predict the future—even partially—then we have a chance to gain an edge on the competition. Yet prophetic tradition is less about predicting the future than in its about changing the way people are thinking and behaving in the present, so as to help them live more fulfilling, purposeful and loving lives. This may be more at the heart of innovations that endure with people than the new, edgy shiny surfaces of innovations that we read about in the press. The value that innovations bring in the long run may be more important than their novelty.

On the other shoulder, the innovator has to contend with the voice of the priest. Avoid

Continued on the next page



©Cartoonbank.com

Vincent & Associates, Ltd.

Innovation Management Services

Face-to-face in an Online World

Continued from the previous page

I have been watching the development of online idea generation tools for several years now. Will face-to-face idea generation (and the need for a facilitator) become extinct? Will clients see that they can get the same level of creativity from online sessions at a dramatically lower cost?

So far, most seem disinterested and/or dissatisfied with online tools. Many have tried them and found them lacking. A market researcher from a consumer products company told me, "We're going the other way and having more face-to-face meetings to get people engaged."

About five years ago we fell in love with and bought a painting by a local artist, Paul Schulenburg. We assumed we would acquire more of his work over time. Each time he produced a new set of paintings we would go over to Addison Art in Orleans to attend a showing. But nothing he produced ever moved us the way the first work did, until this past weekend. Addison Art sent us a flyer about "Paintapalooza," the output of twelve artists from California, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Mexico, Maine "who over a ten-day period painted together, ate together, slept under the same roof, exchanged strategies, mixed paint, and stayed up late conversing about everything from politics to his-

tory to approaches to painting outdoors."

"The creative stimulus was high," said Frank Gardner. "For me, the challenge of painting different subjects in a different light than what I am used to really pushes me creatively. Being around a group of painters many of them challenged by the new environs as well, helps to push that creative energy even higher."

Paintapalooza led to a burst of creativity that we had not seen from Schulenburg and the others before. We bought two paintings. (To learn more about Paintapalooza, go to www.addisonart.com.)

It got me to thinking about what has happened to creativity in corporations today. We seem to have moved away from intense extended and focused face-to-face encounters to develop new ideas. Now we are often working remotely, or in isolation, to solve problems.

Years ago, offsite meetings were held over several days to provide focus, inspiration, and shared learning. Today? Perhaps a half-day meeting in a conference room or online chats with software tools like *Go-To-Meeting*. Yes, they are less expensive and they are appropriate for routine discussions. But it would be a minor miracle for a truly new idea to emerge from an online meeting.

Paintapalooza unleashed such creativity because isolation from other concerns provided focus, the unique setting provided stimulus, and spending time together in a relaxed creative atmosphere led to learning and remarkable results.

Corporate America could learn a lesson or two from these twelve artists. Business leaders need to remember the creative process is intrinsically fun and rewarding. People enjoy solving problems and creating new things together. The reward comes from participating with others in the endeavor. For many of us, the face-to-face interaction is the most rewarding and productive. □

Jim Ferry is the president of the Boston Innovation Group in Harwich Port, Massachusetts. You can contact Jim at (508) 430-1244 or big@capecod.net.

Between the Shoulders

Continued from the previous page

risk. Disruption. Honor the "core" business. Defend market share. Manage boundaries. All very conservative, care-related stuff.

Like many others, I often mistake the priestly voice as overly concerned with preservation and loss avoidance. However, the priestly function is also about confessing—admitting our mistakes—the first step in changing our way of thinking. Perhaps the priestly and the prophetic voices are not all that opposing after all. Webster's definition of each word gives us a clue. Both words etymologically have the same root word "pro" which means "going before." In the case of the priest, it is going before the herd. The priestly role in our organizations—think IT and HR—is oriented toward the organization. In the case of the prophet, this "going before" is oriented toward direction, what awaits in the future, "out there."

The Boston Consulting Group recently published its annual Innovation Survey. One of the findings states "that a risk-averse culture has been consistently identified as one of the largest obstacles to maximizing the return on innovation investment" in past surveys and it was the biggest obstacle in the 2009 Survey. (Two sectors—technology and telecommunications—were noted as the exceptions to this finding, which cited their cultures to be a particular strength in their innovation efforts.)

Innovators can see in their mind's eye, and even craft with a sculptor's finesse, an elegantly designed prototype. Both can represent a persuasive and promising vision of changed thinking, demonstrating what is possible. However, the innovator cannot ignore the organization. The "herd" is never too far away. Without the organization, the innovation either will be stillborn or it will never attract the support and resources necessary to bring it into reality.

Innovators are surrounded by a multitude of voices, some prophetic, some priestly, some just Monday morning quarterbacks. We are especially grateful for the innovators among you, who, amidst all these voices, hear the still quiet voice of your customers' needs, and listen closely to the resonances in your own imaginations. □

R. S. V. P.

Please send us your thoughts on this issue of *Innovating Perspectives*. We appreciate your ideas and we enjoy hearing from you.

Vincent & Associates, Ltd.
Innovation Management Services

412 Red Hill Avenue, Suite 22
San Anselmo, California 94960
innovationsthatwork.com
415.460.1313
415.460.1341 fax