Chapter 18

Tools for Success IV: Brown Bags and Sticky Notes

There are different kinds of innovation. There is the spark, the "A HA!" moment. There is the day when three people ended up at the same table, realized they were working on essentially the same project and began to work together. There is a new method or process that changes the way a company does work usually involving new hardware, software or human activity, or some combination thereof.

I have proposed that a great way to ***encourage*** **innovation**, both in people and small groups, is to **make it easier to capture and find information to let the spark fall on new fuel.**

Implementing innovation so that it can help you succeed is a different process. **It is the process of changing practice - doing something in a new way.**

My personal trainer and I talk about how muscles work together. I have a moment where I see the connection between how I breathe, how I walk, and how I lift.

We talk about how the body falls back into old patterns when it is tired, even if those patterns are not as effective as the new way. I see how **organizations do the same thing falling back into old, ineffective patterns in times of stress.**

We have all had a moment of inspiration. **What happens next?**

Perhaps it's like this - You have an inspiration and when you get to work, you write down your thoughts and email them to several colleagues. They get excited and you talk together about ways to apply this innovation to your working groups.

You have moved from an individual moment to a group. **Now you want to spread it further.**

How do you do that? It was time consuming to get to the level of understanding that you are now. **To create the flash of understanding, you need to re-create moments when people and ideas meet in time and make a change.** How do you scale up your efforts?

Enter engineering and Henry Petroski.

Henry Petroski, who I've mentioned before, writes wonderful books from an engineer's perspective on the world. A particularly wonderful book is ***Design Paradigms: Case Histories of Error and Judgment in Engineering.*** In it, Petroski points to common paradigms or views of the world that engineers have adopted over time and the errors they cause.

One of the most enduring is the **problem of scale - something works when it is small, but doesn't when it is large.**

He tells the story of a young hotshot engineer in ancient Greece who replaced the old engineer of a town by showing the people of the town a design of a wonderful crane that could overcome any war machine by picking it up. When the city was under attack, and the town wanted him to build the crane, he couldn't. **It wouldn't work as a full sized thing.** Read the book to find out how the old engineer saved the day.

Tom Schwen writes of a fundamental problem with instructional design. Practitioners regularly build interventions that teach one person at a time. They test these interventions on one person at a time. That's fine, but then they **assume that this intervention will scale with no problems to large groups of people in many places.** Many internet applications have this paradigm at their foundation what works for one person will work for thousands or millions, one person at a time.

Bad idea.

In the industrial age, **we could view people as interchangeable parts of an assembly line.** However, **innovation is not spread by an assembly line.** We cannot install an upgraded chip into everyone's head and have them magically reboot and be different.

Those companies that ignore the problem of scale are destined to fail in the information age.

Those companies that encourage local groups to create a culture of learning…a culture of innovation...will succeed.

One of the most effective ways of creating a culture of innovation that can be replicated is creating semi-structured semi-social settings.

Try regular lunch meetings that combine some information with some social chat. By coming together across the organization for both conversation and a forum for asking questions, **a huge amount of information can be transmitted**. More importantly, **the moment of learning may occur.**

These brown bag lunches, where people bring their own lunch and management provides drinks, should not be required. However, they can grow and replicate (scale). They become known as a place to learn the ins and outs of a new inspiration. Connections between co-workers are made that can grow over time. **This is the fertile bed of the information age. This is where learning occurs.**

I went to a workshop with the head of the grants office. He talked about all

the things the office could do for faculty. Several of the people in the workshop expressed a need to get together to trade stories and ask questions. I suggested that the answer might be a regular lunch meeting. We could talk and ask questions. Everyone thought it was a great idea. No one did it. **It is hard to see the power of this innocuous activity. It's not sexy, but it works.**

This is a **mini strategy that embraces local diversity.** Such strategies are the most effective (and perhaps the only) way of scaling to larger organizations. **Unless you plan on investing in clones, rejoice in small groups sharing with each other.**

Funny thing is…**that is exactly why the internet is so powerful**. It is NOT a big system. **It is a network of thousands of computers.** It was designed that way from the beginning. DARPA wanted a network that could not be bombed out of existence (this was during the Cold War). So, it was designed with lots of autonomous "nodes". It can't be taken down, because there is really no one "IT". **There are lots of little its.**

We are coming into an age of small groups connecting together based on shared information need.

Embrace this change and succeed. Ignore it to your peril.

What about those times when the innovation has grown and people want to pick the fruit.. use the thing, but they need a little help. Think small, think simple, think performance.

Instead of thinking training course, first think about the lowly sticky note.

Remember the code for my phone? I don't need a manual or a course. I just need the number. **You often don't have to design these interventions.** Take a walk where people are doing the work. They will have devised ways to make the work go faster. **Pick the fruit growing in your own yard.**

Years ago my father (a mathematician) was asked by management to try to analyze the most efficient route for garbage collection through a facility using computers (they were new back then). He roared with laughter. "The guys on the truck get paid by the job, not time. There's no way I could do a better job then they can!"

Look for solutions (sticky notes) that people are using. Then print up a bunch of them. Share these easy shortcuts.