SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

The Stepping Stone

July 2008 – Issue No. 31

Vu Ja De: The Opposite of Déjà vu

by Bela Patel-Fernandez

In today's project–filled, deadline-driven work environment, having to do more with less is a painful reality. One way to deliver more with fewer resources is to promote a culture of continuous innovation.

Innovation has many forms. On a basic level, innovation involves going to a previously uncharted realm, where something earth shattering revolutionizes the way things have been done. On a more subtle level, innovation can also be seen as doing something new in the commonplace. It is the ability to do something for the hundredth time as if it were the very first time that defines this type of innovation. This *vu ja de* mentality generates a questioning of commonly held assumptions that could redefine a process for the better through incremental innovation.

Tips for creating, promoting and sustaining this *vu ja de* innovation is explored in Robert Sutton's book, *Weird Ideas that Work.* Some of his 11-½ ideas are controversial and counter-intuitive. However, they are guaranteed to do one thing: *shake things up!*

Hire Slow Learners (of the Organizational Code)

This does not mean that you should hire poor performers. This step encourages managers to hire individuals that are slow to learn about a company's organizational code. The usual norms of politics and "doing things the way we have always done them" will not affect these slow learners. These slow folks have a certain stubbornness about them that allows them to think individually and creatively. They are driven by high internal standards of excellence and will drive an organization to the best solution, even if the solution is controversial.

Hire People Who Make You Uncomfortable

Folks who think differently from you may have different strengths than you, and will bring new perspectives and insights to a project. It may be difficult to hire this type of person, so this perspective can be watered down to hiring people who will make other people uncomfortable. This type of hiring strategy will be sure to end homogeneous group thinking, which could allow inefficiencies to thrive unquestioned.

Hire People You (Probably) Don't Need

The key behind this concept is to hire people with interesting backgrounds that may not be directly related to the job. This background should demonstrate an ease with learning new things and a resilient attitude in changing times. This broad background will bring a fresh perspective to projects.

Encourage People to Ignore and Defy Supervisors and Peers

Once you have hired these slow learners with weird backgrounds who make people uncomfortable, do not teach them company procedures or norms. Instead, teach them to observe, question what is accepted as fact, and give them the authority to solve problems that may not have hit your radar screen. Encourage them to believe in a flat organizational structure, where one can freely talk to peers, directors, VPs, and C-levels.

Find Some Happy People and Get Them to Fight

The right type of fighting is centered around ideas. When a good team argues about conflicting ideas, the solution will probably combine

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the best elements of all the ideas. The key is to make sure that these folks are happy. There should be a level of respect, humor, fun and free food interjected in these discussions so disagreements can be resolved without hurt feelings.

Reward Success and Failure, Punish Inaction

Actuaries are in the business of quantifying risk. In order to be successful, a certain level of risk-taking must be encouraged. Instill in the team the belief that wacky ideas should have their tires kicked. The most valuable skill here is courage. Give your team the freedom to try new problem-solving approaches. They may take more time than planned, and may not even succeed, but the new mental agility could spur new epiphanies.

A controversial take on this is to try something that will probably fail, but convince yourself and others that success is inevitable. It seems dishonest, but being honest in this situation will ensure the project's failure. Optimism could provide the spark that is needed to find that one-in-a-million solution. Setbacks and failures will come, but if they are perceived as temporary, the team can ricochet off them and get back on the path to success.

The only true failure is inaction. When nothing is attempted, one cannot succeed or learn from mistakes. Rewards should be given for success and failure. However, failures should be monitored, analyzed and not repeated.

Don't Learn from People Who Say They Have Solved the Problems That You Face

Sometimes, having too much knowledge can be blinding. Ignorance is not bliss, but a *tabula rasa* with a healthy dose of curiosity will come up with surprising solutions.

Forget the Past, Especially Past Successes

This is the spice of life. Mix work groups around. Put curious people in positions that they do not currently know how to do. Encourage questioning of past successes, and encourage changes needed for future success.

At the end of the day, the goal of any organization is to hire teams that are passionate about solving problems. This passion, if carefully nurtured, can yield surprising results, and eventually the impossible becomes possible. ❐

Bela Patel-Fernandez, FSA, MAAA, is an actuarial director at Health Net of Arizona. She can be reached at *bela.h.patel-fernandez@ healthnet.com.*