

A WHOLE NEW THING

■ BY SEBASTIAN SALICRU

In an age of progress through innovation, it pays to understand exactly what it is and what you need to achieve it.

The problems of corporate and organisational life cry out for innovative solutions. But what is innovation? Can it be learned? How can it be made to happen?

While the word is often bandied about, it means different things to different people, due in part to lack of clear information on the subject. As a result, four pervasive myths have emerged.

But first, what is innovation? In clarifying the term, the “four Ps” model of innovation—Product, Process, Person and Press—is useful.

Product refers to what makes a product or service innovative. Many people equate workplace innovation with refining or improving existing structures, systems and processes. While this is highly desirable and challenging, it is more characteristic of an “adaptive” culture, not a truly innovative one.

For a product or service to be innovative, three criteria need to be met: novelty, resolution and elaboration/synthesis.

Novelty refers to originality; the uniqueness is attractive. The product or service may transform the way people do things, as the telephone, television, pocket calculator and internet have. Or novelty may generate related ideas in the marketplace, such as when organisations copy trend-setters with a particular type of software, car design, bank loan package, and so on.

The resolution criterion refers to the workability of the idea, product or service, which must “fit the bill” and be relevant to a problem or unanswered need. It has to be perceived as “the answer”.

Elaboration/synthesis relates to style and finishing—whether the product is well crafted, aesthetically attractive and appealing, and well presented or

packaged. Concepts of simplicity and user-friendliness come into play here. This usually indicates how much a product has been refined, sharpened and developed (such as with the aesthetic attractiveness of Apple computers).

The first myth is that innovation is about continuous quality improvement of existing products, services, processes and systems. In fact, true innovation is about creating novel products and services that solve problems or fulfil unmet needs (be they business, social or community) in practical and cost-effective ways. It may not be necessary or even helpful to use existing systems or conceptual frameworks.

Under the Process heading, we have the mechanisms or practices that lead to innovation. More than 50 years of research into creativity and innovation (which can be defined as applied creativity) has revealed that much about process is universal.

More specifically, process refers to the distinct stages individuals and teams progress through to produce creative ideas and innovations. Some experts assert that this is natural and happens spontaneously, but most—if not all—people need a conscious awareness and understanding of the process that yields real innovation. Indeed, the innovative process can be taught and systematically implemented.

Herein lies the second myth: that innovation happens ad-hoc

or at random, merely by having the desire to be innovative, by talking about it, by telling ourselves and others that we are an innovative team or organisation, or by making minor improvements here and there.

In reality, innovation requires a thoughtful, deliberate and integrated approach to creative problem-solving and the application of a specific set of strategies, processes and skills.

The Person of the innovation model refers to the human factor, including differences in individuals and teamwork, and specifically how interaction impacts on the teamwork required for innovation. Clearly different people process information, make decisions and relate to others in different ways. The important thing here is that such differences are understood by both individuals and teams to achieve the synergy to innovate.

Since 1985, Dr Michael West and associates at the Sheffield Innovation Research Program in England have been investigating what helps and hinders innovation in work teams, the qualities of highly innovative teams, the way innovation processes develop over time, and practical measures to facilitate innovation. Results indicate that team diversity is a major contributor.

At the International Centre for Studies in Creativity at Buffalo’s State University of New York, Dr Gerard Puccio has investigated how individuals’ preferences (as opposed to abilities) match the innovative process. His research suggests that innovation calls for breakthrough thinking—a blend of insight, imagination, analysis and action. He has also identified four distinct preferences individuals display when engaging in the innovative process: clarifying, ideating, developing and implementing. The profiling system he has developed provides teams with insight into

where they excel and break down, without labelling people.

The third myth arises from ignorance of the person factor: that innovation springs from a single-person effort. In truth, it usually requires a lot of synergy, achieved when team members adjust their preferences to work through a systematic process together.

The fourth P, Press, relates to the context—the climate, culture and environment—that facilitates and nurtures innovation. Dr Goran Ekvall, in pioneering work initiated in Sweden some 20 years ago, identified 10 elements necessary to producing and sustaining product innovation in the marketplace. The Buffalo group has validated and refined his work, resulting in a similarly focused nine-point list:

- 1 Challenge—how challenged, emotionally involved and committed am I to the work?
- 2 Freedom—how free am I to decide how to do my job?
- 3 Idea time—do people have time to think things through before having to act?
- 4 Idea support—do individuals have adequate resources to give new ideas a try?
- 5 Trust and openness—do people feel safe in speaking their minds and offering points of view?
- 6 Playfulness and humour—how relaxed is the workplace,

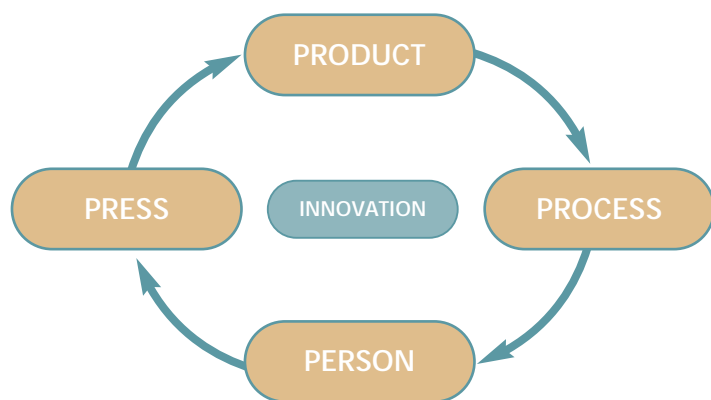
- and is it okay to have fun?
 - 7 Conflicts—to what degree do people engage in inter-personal conflict or “warfare”?
 - 8 Debates—to what extent is there lively, constructive debate about issues?
 - 9 Risk-taking—is it okay to make mistakes or fail when trying new things?
- The Sheffield research program led to a model of team effectiveness and degree of innovation, and an instrument that measures the climate for innovation, with reference to points similar to the nine above.

The single organisational variable that most supports innovation, however, is leadership. Regardless of the type of organisation or industry, unless senior management champions and supports innovation, it won’t permeate through the organisation.

Which leaves the fourth myth: that innovation is relevant only for certain industries and/or large companies. Far from it. It can provide the competitive edge in any area and is relevant to all organisations, regardless of type, size or industry sector. Under the right conditions, any organisation can successfully innovate.

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THE FOUR Ps OF INNOVATION



CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATIVE PRODUCTS OR SERVICES

