

# The innovation mindset

If you want to innovate, you need deviation, but this is more a mindset than a break from standard procedures, says **Dr Leandro Herrero**. All forms of innovation can come from three approaches – looking for the unpredictable, understanding exactly what it is you're asking, and learning to say 'however'

Joe has been made redundant after many years in the company. He is the victim of cost-cutting, re-structuring, right-sizing, re-deployment...of a re-something. A friend comments: "There he goes poor Joe, 20 years of experience going out of the window." The re-engineering consultant overhears the comment and hits back: "There he goes Joe, one year of experience repeated 20 times."

As the joke goes it is a clever one that has a sad part converted into

something you want is innovation – you want the assurance that the task will be done within well defined borders and under well defined rules of the game. Regulated industries such as bio-pharmaceuticals produce environments where the invocation of regulation is very heavy and usually used as a driver to justify a rather conservative view of things. Usually those voices mistake, whether consciously or not, regulated processes with

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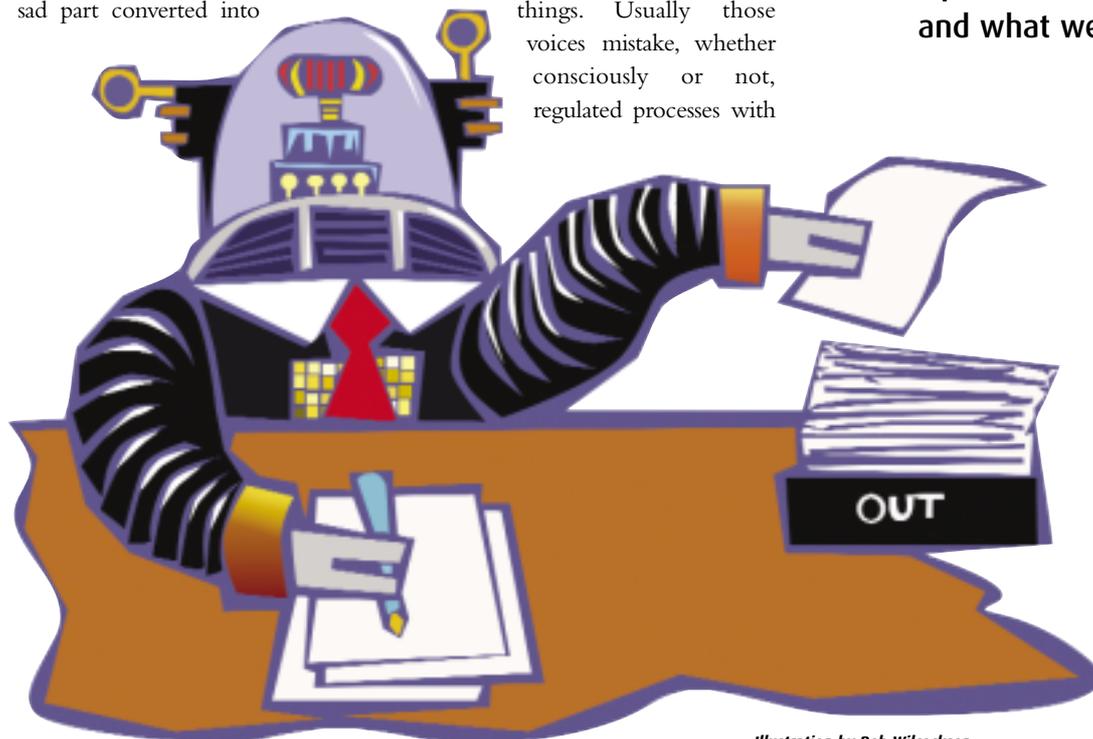


Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

something that many people can relate to. Many jobs and tasks have to do with repeated processes with little room for change or improvement, let alone new ways, new thinking and what we broadly call innovation. Indeed I know many who would argue that, in most cases, the last

total rigidity as the way of getting things done. Not only is there always plenty of room for manoeuvring within a regulated framework, but also the framework often does not include things that we are just happy to attribute to it.

Innovation needs deviation, but most of the

time this starts as a mindset, not as a break from a standard operating procedure. Whether the result is one of product innovation, process innovation, idea innovation, or a culture of innovation, there are three key drivers, a model that I use with my clients or in my teaching. They reside just a few centimetres down your own scalp, in your mind, not in any handbook of your library. Granted, some people seem more able than others to exercise them, but my three proposed engines of innovation can also be cultivated, taught and nurtured. And, if this is the case, this is good news for children's education which is surely where it all starts.

**1. Seeking unpredictable answers from questions.** It is only from an unpredictable answer (answer, angle, viewpoint...) that we can obtain the 'deviation' that generates a new idea, process, way of operating or outcome. Unpredictability comes naturally from people or groups relatively distant from us. It is more likely that an unexpected viewpoint comes from somebody, somewhere, who's unfamiliar with a way of working, rather than the opposite. Familiarity breeds predictability. This is why cohesive, strong, balanced and established teams are not very good sources of innovation.

If you have worked very closely, and for a long time, with Paul, Peter, Mary and Joe in a team, even if they come from several disciplines, chances are you know their points of view on things. You may even consider them very intelligent and knowledgeable and therefore, surely, a good source of fresh new ideas. And you are probably right about the 'good', but not with regards to the 'new'. There is an embedded predictability within the group. You know each other too well and although good ideas may be generated, they are unlikely to cross the border of the predictable and expected. Those borders may still host a very rich pool of ideas, no question about that, but limitations are created by the very nature of the borders.

To seek unpredictable questions you need to tap into looser connections with people or groups which you do not know much about. In other words, the team above – which could do wonders operationally due to the very good and close relationship of its members – is unlikely to innovate unless Paul or Mary, or both, or all, have their own looser connections with other people and groups and constantly tap into them, and bring those insights into the party. Tip: the clue is in the two 'ands'. Sociology has a name for all this – the closeness of the internal relationship would be described as 'strong ties', the opposite as being 'weak ties'.

Mark Granovetter, a professor at Stanford University, published a paper in 1973 entitled 'The strength of the weak ties', which developed into a full mathematical theory. One well known example of the theory in practice came from his analysis of how people advance in jobs and careers. His findings were somehow counterintuitive but supportive of the theory of the 'strength of the weak ties'. His data showed that a significant amount of job introductions came from people who were not close to the individual in question. Loose and 'weak' connections were far more important than friends, family or people who were close.

In organisational terms, looser connections can be engineered. It's a matter of designing ways for people not only to be allowed, but also, encouraged to establish and tap into networks. Designed collaborative spaces such as the 'team space' could be left for operational tasks such as the ones usually present in project teams or product development teams. Networks, however, are the natural source of innovation. You could easily imagine the connection between both spaces. It is not one or the other but the coexistence of the two models that creates a better chance of delivering both productivity and innovation, as long as the expectations are managed. To have a bunch of good brains locked in a room and tell them to innovate is not a good idea. To tell them to cook all the variables already known for a project, allocate resources, organise work and create rational paths within a context already given, is probably OK. Seeking unpredictable answers to questions is, in managerial terms, the opposite of managing the inevitable. A great deal of managerial life is consumed by managing things that would happen anyway, as opposed to, say, create things that would not happen if we were not there.

**2. Reframing the questions or seeking alternative ones.** I have often said that the most important management question is 'what's the question?'. If every time we opened the adrenaline tap and went straight into action, stood back and questioned 'what's the question that we are trying to answer?', we would avoid a great deal of fiascos and waste. The ability to ask questions is a sign of wisdom and maturity while the ability to produce answers may, or may not be. We are very good at providing beautiful, sophisticated answers to wrong or irrelevant questions. The splendour of the answer sometimes blinds the mind and the original

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question fades fast. An almost obsessive ‘is this the question?’ question, married with the quest for alternative questions, is the best pathway to possible ‘deviation’, which, as I said before, is a condition for innovation. By seeking alternative questions we are opening the windows to unexpected (here we go again) angles and we stand a better chance not only of addressing the original but of discovering new ones that we had not thought about. A question is a frame for the mind. It establishes the borders of the thinking and re-arranges the mental energy within the brain so that focus occurs and the mind’s highways open to the journey of thoughts.

Apologies if this sounds too poetic but it is plain cognitive psychology. Our brain is heuristic which means that it does not work by assessing all possible logical algorithms (as a computer does) but draws on past experience and stored patterns, oiled by (very old evolutionary) emotions, to drive towards a conclusion quickly. It has been created to bypass the assessment of all possible avenues of logic, trade off a certain level of risk, and get a final destination with an acceptable probability of success (truth, efficiency) but not certainty. Reframing questions, and seeking alternative ones, triggers parallel heuristic pathways that confront themselves with the original one. It is like a trial-and-error playing of scenarios which may eventually trigger an unexpected one.

**3. Practicing the ‘however’.** Linked in part to the above, the third driver is the use of ‘however’ thinking versus ‘therefore’ thinking. Our logical mind and, perhaps, solid education has prepared ourselves for a sequential rationale: we have data X, we have considered Y, we have reached point Z, therefore we need to do B. There is nothing wrong with this. We all thrive in the excitement of that ‘however’ moment of truth when a decision can finally be made once all the sequential ingredients have been brought to the table. It is embedded in the most pure scientific thinking, mindset and mode. People in scientific and technical professions tend to be very good at it.

Contrast the thinking with this alternative: we have data X, we have considered Y, we have reached point Z, and it seems clear that we need to do B, however, we could also consider A, C and D. I call this the however thinking (vs. the therefore thinking) but I am, perhaps, just describing the ability to think in terms of options. These are always present no matter what and even in cases where *a priori* it may seem impossible or illogical. In my work with

project teams and the way they make decisions, the ‘must always bring options’ is a key ingredient, even when those options are apparently difficult to see and a pre-determined pathway has been agreed. This forcing ourselves to see choices, even when these seem invisible, is a key innovation driver. Bring lots of ‘however people’ together and you’ll have a world of wealth and options. Yes, they will drive the ‘therefore people’ nuts, but the dynamics will be healthy. ‘Therefore’ people tend to project an image of decisiveness and good structural mind, while the ‘however’ crowd convey one of too much analysis and less decision power. Scientific and technical leaders are naturally comfortable in a therefore environment but however thinking is needed for innovation of all kinds. Find those people!

Albert Einstein said: “Innovation is not the product of logical thought, although the result is tied to logical structure.” The challenge for leadership in organisations is to recognise, accept, allow, embrace, and seek (note the progression from passive encounter with a reality to create a new one) degrees of irrationality. It is a challenge because it may look like madness, may be interpreted as chaotic and, on top of that, may confuse your boss – not a clever promotion strategy. There are no universal operational receipts for innovation. How the walkman was invented is different from how other (product and concept) innovations were. Tip: our glorified market-driven and customer-driven cultures produce good rear-mirror strategies but usually not forward-looking innovation. Tip two: use the intrinsic toxic properties of the innovation mindset, which translated means, surround yourself (you, the team, the organisation) with innovation mindset people who can seek the unpredictable, reframe questions and practice lots of ‘howevers’. It’s contagious. The opposite is also true: hire predictable people, people with lots of answers, people with one single pair of glasses and people with an incredibly logical mind and you’ll have a stable, well organised, continuously improved, zero defect, oiled machinery. The choice is yours; I just know where the next breakthrough will come from. 

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