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Thought Leadership Basics

An Innovator's Point of View:
Our mindset got us into this mess;
changing it can get us out

An Innovator's Point of View: Our Mindset Got us into This Mess *Changing it can get us out*

By Dayna Hubenthal and Scott Burr

Almost daily, we overhear stories of crisis: “My retirement is disappearing;” and “My job is at risk;” and “My company is in peril; my country, the global economy, climate conditions, just about everything seems to be in crisis.” From an innovator’s point of view, many things going wrong at the same time is a red flag - and a clue to the solution.

Innovator’s think about things differently; that’s their great genius. So, from an innovator’s point of view this red flag (so many different things going wrong at the same time) indicates ‘our mindset has created too much inertia.’¹

Inertia is the tendency of a resting object to remain at rest and the tendency of a moving object to remain moving in a constant direction. Objects with large mass, such as train, requires a lot of energy to start moving - that’s inertia. However, once a train is moving, it’s hard for it to stop. That is also inertia.

Companies have inertia, too. When management sets a direction for being first-to-market, then the company strengthens around that concept and it’s easier to continue moving the company in that direction - that’s inertia. However, if management announces that Six Sigma (process-centric behavior) is now mandatory and workers must significantly change habits, well, it won’t happen overnight.

Individuals develop mindset momentum. The most successful among us are adept at finding patterns that win. The rest of us learn from the winners and use those success patterns over and over again, repeating the familiar. Producing predictable results makes us feel skilled; others view us the same way. It’s satisfying.

This psychological momentum develops into habits, values, expectations, and beliefs, which can be beneficial. When millions of people support the same mindset, shared experience is created along with systems, traditions, and education - a social landscape. We teach what works to our children by constantly reinforcing certain behavior patterns. We survive, things run smoothly.

The downside of all this momentum, however, is when it crosses over into stagnation. Too much inertia causes unused skills to atrophy. For example, by consistently choosing the same action it may cease to be regarded as ‘an option’ and instead become ‘a fact’ and we no longer challenge this ‘fact’. So when things change (and they always do), we have fewer options in our toolbox.

Stagnation happens when momentum crosses over into too much inertia and we don’t adjust. Instead, we stick to conventional patterns because they used to work, because ‘that’s how my lineage did it’, because that’s the way it’s always been, because I’m entitled. We cling to paradigms too long. We don’t notice the unaddressed flaws contained within our psychological inertia and secondary problems sprout up.

Even worse, we train others to believe our limited paradigm is valuable and necessary so the dominant, observable behaviors reinforce themselves and this inertia is hard to halt.

¹ The discipline of *Structured Innovation* calls this ‘Psychological Inertia’.
Rev. 2_24feb09

Financial crisis, security pressures, lack of energy alternatives, climate change, healthcare at odds with business needs, and ethics at odds with personal benefit - these are a few examples of what happens when millions of mindsets rely on decades of steadfast behaviors rather than questioning their mindset in a disciplined manner (e.g., using innovation tools).

Traditionally, when hemmed-in by limited possibilities and immersed in unexamined habits, we get frustrated and turn to historical reference to figure out solutions and/or huddle together seeking solace in common experience, which stagnates our mindset even further (in a self-reinforcing cycle). In other words, when problems seem to suddenly spring up in every aspect of our lives and gain momentum, then psychological inertia is at the core.

So who is to blame and who can help? From an innovator's point-of-view, we all have accountability for creating today's perfect storm of problems and our leaders have not developed the awareness to recognize the warning signals or else they lack the discipline to change their mindset. This leadership crisis occurs at all levels.

Albert Einstein said, *"The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them."* While campaigning, President Obama said, *"I don't want to just end the war, I want to end the mind-set that got us into war in the first place."* And in a recent article, Harvard Professor, Bill George, said *"We cannot solve problems of this magnitude simply by replacing today's leaders with people who think and act just like them."*

Here, then, are three different torchbearers highlighting the same important message: If we want our situation to be different, we need to first examine our psychological inertia and act from a different, better mindset.

These are the first two steps towards innovating our way of our crisis.

Once again, the first action is to recognize we are responsible to some degree for creating this perfect storm of problems - our moribund mindset - our acherontic psychological inertia.

The second action is to change to a more relevant mindset.

The red flag is flying right now. Let's take the innovator's point of view and change the mindset(s) that got us into this mess.

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