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Thought Leadership Basics

Problem-Solving: Traditional
vs Innovative

*The Perils of an
Over-Experienced Mindset*

Problem-Solving: Traditional vs Innovative

The Perils of an Over-Experienced Mindset

By Dayna Hubenthal and Scott Burr

In the fourth century BC, a courier named Damocles was invited to a banquet in order to experience for himself the joys of excess, power and rank. At the banquet, Damocles was seated beneath an unsheathed sword which was suspended by a single hair; learning, one can assume, that success, power, and privilege can be precarious.

The joys of rank, power and prestige have been experienced by American manufacturers for decades. Our great reputation was built from a tradition of supportive beliefs, beneficial experiences, world-class skills and education, a substantiative culture & environment, and strong leadership. At some point, all this momentum (psychological inertia¹) crossed over into stagnation so now the USA's powerful manufacturing industry is sitting at a 'sumptuous banquet' and upon glancing up, we see a sword above us suspended by a single hair. So what are we to do?

US manufacturing leaders could do what most people do when facing a major problem (or a multiplicity of things going wrong at the same time). We could try to solve our problem using a traditional methodology based on historical experience, well-honed skills, and established mindsets. Or we could use an innovative approach.

The conventional action plan might be as follows:

- "If it ain't broke, don't fix it"
- When it breaks, figure out who or what is to blame;
- Prioritize which parts need to be fixed;
- Draw upon experience or look around for who can help; "What's new?"
- Figure out "Who is standing in my way?" or "Who needs to get on-board?"
- And calculate how much of the solution we can afford to implement; "You can't have it all."
- Then take logical, obvious actions. (Six Sigma works great for this step)

As we can see, the subtext of an orthodox action plan is one of *reactivity* and a *trade-off* mentality.

From the onset, the subtext of a conventional problem-solving methodology is very different from the subtext of an innovative approach (e.g., Structured Innovation), which are *responsibility* and *persistence*. The innovative action plan might be as follows:

- Determine the current AS IS situation; "What's not working now?" or "What's going to stop working?" or "Where can we improve?" (Six Sigma works great for this step)
- Determine what we want by asking, "How can I get more of what I want AND less of what I don't want?"
- Decide whether it would be better to draw upon experience, look around for what's new, or take the-steps-of-innovation to create a more beneficial outcome.
- Innovate with key stakeholders to create a robust solution (this is a natural approach to change management). Together address secondary problems and predict and solve failure before it happens.
- Then take logical, obvious actions. (Six Sigma is often to tool for this step)

From the onset, it is the innovator's responsibility to keep tabs on (manage) the mindset and monitor goals and recognize signals that point to obstacles. The innovator is also responsible for challenging the

¹ The discipline of *Structured Innovation* calls this 'Psychological Inertia'.

assumptions that created the AS IS situation. And the innovator is also responsible for believing a more ideal situation is possible.

An Ideal Solution is the opposite of a trade-off. A trade-off dictates that improvements in one desirable parameter happen at the expense of another desirable parameter. This belief in trade-offs creates paradigms that do not serve. The ideal solution, however, dictates that a solution that delivers more of what you want AND less of what you don't want.

Because the underpinning of orthodox problem-solving is reactivity, past successes and conventional skills and history and education are not questioned. This reactivity and reliance on assumptions can drive traditional problem-solvers into corners they can't think their way out of.

For example, innovations like aluminum molds or short stroke die sets with small diameter guide pins could have occurred up to 20 years earlier as no limitations existed in materials or process. The only barriers were in mindset.

Innovators do not readily get stuck in corners because when they access historical experience or well-honed skills or education to solve problems, innovators question the validity of those assumptions; and that opens the door to possibilities. Then they use the correct established tools (such as Six Sigma and Structured Innovation) to implement the best solutions for the situation.

Begin an innovative journey by switching the subtext of your problem-solving approach from reactivity & trade-offs to responsibility & persistence. Be responsible for the solutions (don't *try* to solve a problem, don't *hope*, don't *think* a better solution is possible; *know* an ideal solution exists) and all-the-while manage the AS IS mindset.

Creating success, power, and privilege is why innovative geniuses have been revered throughout history. Innovation will keep America great - will keep American manufacturing great. We may be sitting under an unsheathed sword suspended by a hair today, but with innovation and the proper toolsets, we are not stuck under that threat.



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