

# 5

## THE PROBLEM WITH "BETTER": HOW OVERVALUATION STIFLES INNOVATION



### BIG IDEA In A Few Words

Innovation requires change, which is why implementing new ideas is so difficult for people and organizations. Over time, professional disciplines become even more change averse than organizations. We tend to overvalue our own ideas and undervalue the contributions of others. Leaders favor change when their idea is driving the process but are about as change averse as the general population otherwise. Scientists have referred to this as the "toothbrush theory." Everybody needs a toothbrush, everybody has a toothbrush, but no one wants to use anyone else's. Leaders are just as vulnerable to the toothbrush theory as scientists.

Innovation requires change, which is why implementing new ideas is so difficult. People resist change. Organizations resist it even more. Over time, professional disciplines or fields of study become even more change averse than organizations.

The default response for people, organizations and professional disciplines is inertia. We continue to do what we have been doing. Since organizations have more metaphorical "mass" than individuals and fields of study more than organizations, the force of inertia to keep doing what we are already doing is immense. It takes a huge



WATCH



LISTEN



READ ONLINE



BUY



SHARE

effort for innovators to initiate change. No wonder the most common answer to why we do something is “that’s how we’ve always done it.”

Television producers have understood behavioral inertia for years, which is why they place new programs immediately after current programs that have higher ratings. They are banking on the fact that even though your remote control is very light and it only takes a small amount of energy to flip the channel you will just keep watching.

## Overvaluation

You might be tempted to recognize this truth in other people but think that you, as a leader, are more open to change than others. Leaders succumb to this illusion because they are better positioned to submit ideas for change. Leaders tend to be in favor of change when their idea is driving the process. But they are about as change averse as the general population otherwise.

A few years ago FedEx put out a commercial featuring a group of business leaders sitting around a conference room table having a cost cutting brainstorming session. They appear to be stuck until one of the team members breaks the silence saying, “We could get an online account with FedEx and save ten percent on all our shipping costs.” The rest of the team sits in awkward silence, glancing toward the CEO to see how he will respond. After a pregnant pause, the CEO repeats the same idea but emphasizes his point by dramatically slicing his hand through the air with great confidence. The team erupts with supportive comments until their colleague points out he just said the exact same thing. The boss reprises his emphatic hand gesture saying, “But you didn’t go like *this!*”

The FedEx commercial is a humorous illustration of overvaluation. We have a tendency to overvalue our own ideas and undervalue the contributions of others. This tendency applies to both leaders and followers. Leaders just get to act out based on overvaluation more often.

## Overvaluation, Insulation and Elitism

The result of prolonged overvaluation is an insular perspective that ultimately produces elitism and stifles innovation. This process plays out on three levels, individually, organizationally and professionally (in terms of a field of study).

**Individually:** *My ideas are better than your ideas.* If you are not self-aware enough to admit your default setting is to overvalue your own ideas you can refer to a growing body of evidence from the field of behavioral economics proving it to be true. People have repeatedly demonstrated greater belief in the viability of ideas and greater willingness to sacrifice to pursue those ideas when they have played an active role in generating them.

You might think this is true in general but not in the world of leadership or science where ideas are evaluated objectively on their merit alone. You would be wrong. One of the more glaring examples of individual overvaluation in the world of science comes from the research lab of Thomas Edison. He fell in love with direct current (DC) electricity and could not except the competing idea of alternating current (AC). Nikola Tesla, the Serbian inventor who was working for Edison, contended that alternating current could do much more than illuminate light bulbs. It could operate over greater distances and power gigantic industrial machines using the same electrical grid. Tesla believed AC was much better suited for a modern industrialized world. And history proves he was right.

Because Tesla was working in Edison's lab when he developed AC electricity, the patent would have belonged to Edison. But rather than work together Edison branded his colleague's idea as, "splendid but utterly impractical"<sup>16</sup> and did everything he could to discredit AC as being too dangerous. His obsession with discrediting AC prompted him to start a public relations campaign against it, even instructing his technicians to electrocute stray dogs and cats to demonstrate to the public the danger of Tesla's idea. He went so far as to secretly fund the development of the electric chair using alternating current, again to show how gruesome it could be.

Scientists have referred to this kind of overvaluation as the “toothbrush theory.” Everybody needs a toothbrush, everybody has a toothbrush, but no one wants to use anyone else’s. Leaders are just as vulnerable to the toothbrush theory as scientists.

**Organizational:** *The way we do it is better than the way you do it.* Organizations are made up of individuals who tend to overvalue their ideas. Collectively this tendency expresses itself in organizational cultures that become so familiar and comfortable with how they do things they are slow to accept breakthroughs from outside their ranks. In the world of business this is referred to as the Not-Invented-Here bias. The more success an organization has the more likely it is to develop mythologies and corporate legends that reinforce an insular focus and amplify the problem of overvaluation.

After a long string of successes, such as the transistor radio, the Walkman and the Trinitron tube, Sony fell prey to the Not-Invented-Here bias. Even as its corporate rivals were introducing next generation products that customers clearly wanted, like the iPod and Xbox, Sony did not believe outsider ideas were as good as their own and missed market opportunities for MP3 players and flat-screen televisions. James Surowieki wrote in *The New Yorker*, if it “wasn’t invented at Sony, they wanted nothing to do with it.”<sup>17</sup>

Organizational overvaluation and elitism are significant barriers to the much needed wave of mergers and acquisitions in the world of missions. We fall in love with how we do things, convinced “our way” is better than “your way,” until entrenched cultures undermine the potential for an otherwise well conceived consolidation of kingdom resources. We tend to be suspicious of others who experience breakthroughs in areas where we have labored long and hard with little progress to show for our efforts, assuming they must be compromising somehow in order to produce results.

**Professional:** *Insider experts know better than outsider amateurs.* Whereas organizations are comprised of individuals, fields of study are comprised of organizations and educational institutions that are populated by professors who worked at or consulted with organizations in the field of study. This circular

integration produces insular thinking.

One of the symbols and examples of overvaluation at the professional or field of study level is the development and use of acronyms. And few fields of study have been more prolific in the development of acronyms than missions. What begins as a means to simplify ideas for insiders simultaneously complicates those ideas for outsiders, reinforcing the notion that experts know better than amateurs. Daniel Ariely says, “Acronyms confer a kind of secret insider knowledge; they give people a way to talk about an idea in shorthand. They increase the perceived importance of ideas, and at the same time they also help keep other ideas from entering the inner circle.”<sup>18</sup>

Though I have a graduate degree in inter-cultural studies and have been engaged directly with mission leadership for six years, I routinely find myself in meetings where people rattle off acronyms that are as meaningless to me as a bowl of alphabet soup. Mission leaders do this so instinctively that a new name for an initiative or event is often evaluated based on the acronym, without even thinking about the fact that no one outside the meeting room could possibly decipher what it means without an explanation.

## Celebrating Bright Spots<sup>19</sup>

I realize the tone of this chapter may cause you to believe I’m more cynical about the Great Commission community than I really am. I believe there are many examples of innovative thinking in our ranks.

In the last chapter I referenced the **eXcelerate** Award. One of our recent winners was *mPower*, an organization that reinvented medical missions for dentists and powerfully illustrates what can happen when we challenge the status quo.

On a typical dental mission trip one dentist will extract about 300 teeth in six grueling days of ministry. *mPower* created a six-day dental training module to equip national believers with no background in the health sciences to safely extract teeth. Those six graduates, serving only two days per week, can extract more than 7,000 teeth in a year and multiply the work of the dentist who trained them by more than

twenty-three times!

As you might expect, the greatest obstacle *mPower* faced was skepticism in the professional community that a person with little or no formal education could be trained at all, let alone in six days, to deliver high level care consistently. In response to this criticism, in 2009 *mPower* commissioned a blind study by the University of Kentucky College of Dentistry. The study confirmed that within the limited scope of extractions and palliative care, *mPower* graduates render diagnoses and treatment indistinguishable from professionally trained dentists.

These layers of insular thinking and overvalued elitism at the individual, organizational and professional level are real. But they don't have to hold you or your organization hostage and limit the flow of new ideas. To what extent has professional elitism infiltrated your C-Suite? What is your track record for engaging new ideas that are "not invented here?" When was the last time you asked "missiological amateurs" for input?

---

## NOTES

<sup>16</sup> Richard Munson, *From Edison to Enron: The Business of Power and What it Means for the Future of Electricity* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 23.

<sup>17</sup> James Surowiecki, "All Together Now," *The New Yorker*, April 22, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Ariely, *The Upside of Irrationality: The Unexpected Benefits of Defying Logic at Work and at Home* (HarperCollins e-books 2010, chapter 4, Kindle location 1658-64).

<sup>19</sup> Content for this part of the chapter was updated from the original Learning @ the Speed of Life vlog post.

---

*Sieze the Vuja de* is a compilation of transcripts from Learning @ the Speed of Life, the video blog of Missio Nexus, by Steve Moore. Missio Nexus was formed out of the merger of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange and is the largest network of Great Commission oriented evangelicals in North America. For more information visit [www.MissioNexus.org](http://www.MissioNexus.org).

### Other books by Steve Moore

