

‘Seeing’ - A Critical Discipline for Innovation

Successful innovation requires our doing many things right. An excellent starting point is to begin by focusing on developing within our people the ability to see - to really ‘see’. Those of us blessed with vision rely on it implicitly going through all the activities of daily life with eyes wide open.

But how much do we really ‘see’? In reality, not very much at all. Our eyes are akin to a high quality video camera, flooding the optic nerve with a steady stream of vibrant images. However, it is our brain that processes and stores these images, making them available to our thinking processes.

Our brain is very efficient at its storage and cataloging function, in fact, often too efficient. In our modern world and lifestyle, most people living in developed countries suffer from information overload and the majority of that information pours in via our visual sense. We suffer from visual overstimulation.

Have you ever gone to see an action movie and left feeling ‘tired’? You weren’t working, at least not in the traditional sense, just passively sitting and watching. However, over the course of the two plus hours, your brain was running at full speed, analyzing and processing an overwhelming flood of super graphics. This was hard enough when movies were the result of filmed scenes, but today, many of those scenes are graphically enhanced, especially in certain genres, notably action movies.

Processing that much visual stimulation is hard work and your brain becomes tired, signaling your body that it is also tired. It is saying, “Shut off the video stream and give me a rest!”

To combat this relentless graphic deluge, our brains have learned to ‘not see’. It is not that our eyes close or stop streaming the video through our optic nerve, but rather our brains catalog most of the images as ‘ignore’ and file them away. We have seen the images, but our brain has decided not to engage our consciousness with the content of those images.

As a case in point, what are the items on your desk and the pictures and other decorations on the walls of your office? Asked this, many people can only name few of them, yet all of these items are within their field of vision for eight hours or more a day. These items are seen, but not seen.

How does this effect innovation? Most of the time, opportunities and the solutions to our problems are quite obvious. They are literally right there before us, but we do not ‘see’ and therefore, fail to recognize them. Many people believe that innovation is rocket science and sometimes it is, but not usually.

In fact, I have found that just the opposite is true. It is in the simple, not the complex, where innovation frequently lurks. The greatest opportunities for innovation are missed not because we do not delve deeply enough into an issue, process or system, but because we do not step back and take a macro versus the typical micro view.

It is in this stepping back, clearing our mind of details and the encroaching minutia, that we are at last able to take a fresh look. It is the proverbial not seeing the forest for the trees. Stepping back and really 'seeing', enables us to dismiss old preconceptions and gain a new perspective. By doing so, the obvious usually becomes glaringly clear. It is then that we want to kick ourselves for being so oblivious and totally missing the conspicuous.

At one time, I worked with a sophisticated engineering team that had struggled with a nearly insurmountable problem for months. I was able to solve their dilemma in a matter of minutes. Not by some feat of engineering genius, I am not an engineer to begin with. All I did was to rotate the engineering drawing 180 degrees, literally, turn it upside down, top-to-bottom and the solution became as clear as day.

Learning to really 'see' is a discipline that can be taught. For our innovation efforts to capitalize on the simplest and in many cases, the highest value and ROI innovations, we must develop within our people the discipline of 'seeing'.

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