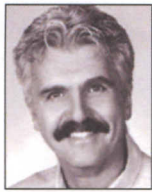


Innovating with Meaning

Authentic leaders build on this foundation.



by Alex Pattakos and Elaine Dundon

INNOVATION MANAGEMENT IS ALL THE rage. We've witnessed the transition from viewing innovation as simply the commercialization of new technology to a broader perspective that encompasses innovation in products, services, processes, and strategies.

Leaders must evaluate how they will foster and sustain innovation. Yet many leaders struggle to lead their innovation agendas. Many leaders pursue innovation for the sake of innovation, or espouse innovation, then launch new products and services that don't add anything to the world or even to the bottom line.

The missing element in this equation is the foundation of authentic leadership—*meaning*. Authentic leaders lead *with* and *to* meaning. With this meaning-centered orientation, our paradigm is *innovating with meaning*.

Our Products Lack Meaning

Customer expectations are rising. Competition for the attention of customers is fierce. There's an overabundance of products and services to choose from, and many offerings are duplications of other offerings. Many new products and services that are touted as "innovative," don't add any value or *meaning* to customers' lives. Customers simply are not engaged.

- Is introducing that new cherry flavor of your cookie brand innovative and meaningful or is it just another "activity" and a waste of resources?
- Does the new food product you are introducing help address the obesity problem or does it just ignore, or worse, add to the problem?
- How does that new approach to paperwork at the hospital resonate with your patients? Does it just add confusion to an already cumbersome process? How is it *meaningful* to your patients in terms of their experience?

These are examples of the questions

we ask to get to the deeper meaning of what customers want and need.

- *Vancity*, a large credit union, is connected with its customers and communities. Their *Shared Growth* term deposit enables customers to choose a community project in which to invest. This innovation gives *meaning* to customers, employees, and community. From passion and purpose come profit!

- Our local Toyota dealership calls us on our birthdays to make us, as customers, feel important and to let us know that our relationship with Toyota is *meaningful* to both of us!

My Job Has No Meaning

How often do we, as leaders, hear people say, "My job has no meaning. I'm just going through the motions. Is that all there is?" How often do people complain that they've heard it all before, that the speeches are "the same old same old," and that they're too busy to think about "innovation?"

The role of leadership is to help people connect with the meaning in their work and show them that what they do is important. Yes, leadership is about setting the direction, encouraging new ideas, allocating resources, rewarding performance or taking corrective action; but the essence of leadership is to tap into the meaning of what each member of a team is asked to contribute. If people can connect with the deeper meaning of their work, they can be more engaged and contribute to reaching their highest potential. Without meaning, people become disengaged, lose passion, stop innovating, and harm productivity.

Meaning gets at what organizations are all about. Why do we do what we do? Are we doing all we can do to add value to the world? Are we making a positive difference? What is the true meaning of our work?

As leaders, we can help others connect with the meaning of their work. There is meaning in identifying new ways of doing things, in the way co-workers interact, in choosing a positive attitude instead of complaining

that things are always changing. When we bring meaning to work, we bring with us the possibility of meaningful change in our work and workplace.

One of our clients asked us to visit their headquarters to share our views on innovating with meaning. When we arrived, we saw many innovation banners but received a lot of negative feedback about the lack of authenticity behind the message. We shared this feedback with leaders and helped them address these comments through more authentic and meaningful dialogue with the employees, and through other channels. It's one thing to talk about innovation—it is another to walk the talk and meaningfully engage everyone in putting innovation into practice.

One way that IBM tapped into the meaning of its employees' work was to engage 319,000

IBMers in an open "values jam" on its global intranet. Everyone was asked to share thoughts about things that get in the way of innovating and serving customers. One core value was "Innovation that matters, for our company and for the world." As CEO Samuel Palmisano said, "We need to work for each other's success and innovate in ways that truly matter by taking personal responsibility for our relationships."

Innovating with Meaning

Advancing and sustaining innovation requires a transformation of culture. It requires strong leaders who encourage employees to engage with each other in more meaningful ways and encourage customers to relate to the organization in meaningful ways.

Meaning drives engagement, which drives innovation and productivity. Meaning is the foundation of authentic leadership and the primary intrinsic motivation of all people. It drives innovation—along with the passion for excellence, quality improvement, and peak performance. Without true meaning, innovation *activities* are busy work, a waste of resources. It's time to take innovation to the next level—to lead and innovate with meaning. **LE**

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ACTION: Build on the foundation of meaning.