



## Curiosity, Creativity and Innovation: The Cinderella Syndrome

### Driving Retention, Productivity and Growth

by Dr Freddy Colson



Like Cinderella in that ageless fairytale, who never imagined that she had the potential to dance with the prince until she was given the chance to do so, a significant number of people in your organisation find themselves in a similar situation: their potential remains hidden and therefore untapped.

If you were able to unleash the full capacity of creativity and innovation that exists in your workforce, you might be pleasantly surprised at the result: useful ideas would come to the surface; complex problems would be anticipated

earlier and solved more quickly; and employees would be more engaged, resulting in increased productivity and a greater commitment towards achieving the strategic goals of the organisation.

How many Cinderellas or Cinderfellas are running around in your organisation? How many of your employees – that is, outside your R&D or innovation departments -- are even expected, let alone required, to be creative and innovative at work?

Managing and sustaining an attitude of creativity and innovation within our workforce is difficult. However, there are ways to rekindle that creative flame in all of us, and to develop the right environment that will support innovation.

But let us first examine a few unusual phenomena.

#### Curiosity - Creativity - Innovation

It is fascinating to observe that all children, regardless of their background, experience a period of insatiable curiosity and questioning. Equally fascinating is the fact that as children grow older, their curiosity decreases.

A vast majority of adults do not utilise their curiosity as much as they could, while a minority actually does develop a true investigative capacity. Exploring exactly why this happens would lead us too far astray. At this point, let us merely share with you one



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of Albert Einstein's famous sayings: "It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education. It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry."

Lee Iacocca, former CEO and President of the Chrysler Corporation, defines in his book *Where Have All The Leaders Gone?* the nine "Cs" of leadership, starting with "Curiosity". This competency is not traditionally attributed to leaders. Is this perhaps because adults tend to associate curiosity with meddling in someone else's affairs or with being intrusive, instead of with a genuine interest to discover the "what" or the "why" of things? Or because asking questions could distract managers from their own focused path towards achieving their goals? Or because we generally expect our leaders to already have all of the answers?

In a complex world, finding out what is happening - in the market, on the work-floor, in the boardroom - and why is essential for any leader. It is the only way leaders can make the right adjustments in their strategy in order to continue to address needs inside and outside the organisation.

While curiosity may be considered quite a simple concept -seeking information by asking questions- creativity is not. Nevertheless, there are some elements that most researchers seem to agree on:

- Creativity is a characteristic that enables an individual to think about things, to perceive things in a way that has never been done before.
- Creativity is linked to curiosity.
- The output of creativity needs to be shared with others in order for it to be labelled 'creative'.
- Creativity is normally distributed in a population.

According to West and Farr, innovation can be defined as "the intentional introduction and application within a role, group or organisation of ideas, processes, products or procedures, new to the relevant unit of adoption, designed to significantly benefit the individual, the group, the organisation or wider society".

Although this definition may seem outdated, and although we would definitely add "behaviours" to the list of ideas, processes, products and procedures, this definition clearly delineates the difference between creativity and innovation, concepts that are frequently used as synonyms.

Innovation is not about the one-in-a-million-idea, but about any idea, process, etc. that has not yet been conceived of or applied in an environment limited by time and space.

#### What about the Cinderella Syndrome?

We are all familiar with the fairytale of the beautiful girl, neglected and harassed by her evil stepmother and stepsisters, but who had the luck that her godmother happened to be a fairy. A few mice, a pumpkin and a glass slipper did the trick and won her a real prince.

There are plenty of Cinderellas in our organisations today. Perhaps we could even claim with some sense of drama that there are nothing but Cinderellas, because employees tend to equate potential and worth based on each other's job titles or descriptions.

As illustrated earlier, everyone is innately curious and possesses a certain degree of creativity. Since job descriptions (we can substitute this concept by: the manager, the organisation, the company...) rarely pay attention to these competencies and equally rarely challenge the employee to



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use them, these employees are reduced to Cinderellas whose potential is not fully addressed.

#### Exogenous-Endogenous Innovation versus Innovation-By-All (IBA)

Many organisations that innovate, focus on products or services and the relevant processes needed to produce them. Their scope consists of the customer and the market place and how to provide added value for these groups. We call this exogenous innovation.

Or organisations turn their attention inward. This is what we call endogenous innovation. Their scope is the organisation itself and by changing its structure, culture or internal processes they aim to, for example, reduce costs or increase productivity.

It goes without saying that quite a number of companies deploy both exogenous and endogenous innovation, and rightly so. The more complex society grows, the more need for organisations to innovate in order to grow or even assure their existence. And this is even more critical in times of economic crisis. Therefore we have to ask the question: do these forms of innovation sufficiently cover the 'innovative universe' in order to enable organisations to find the right answers for the challenges they are

facing in a global and complex society?

We believe that exogenous and endogenous innovation needs to be complemented by what we call Innovation-By-All (IBA). We argue that an organisation that succeeds in making the transition from an organisation that innovates to an innovative organisation, an IBA organisation, not only will strengthen its endogenous and exogenous innovation efforts, but will also create added value in realms that up to now have not yet been addressed.

It is generally believed that all human beings are curious and creative but that, especially in Western societies, the educational systems limit children's curiosity and pay insufficient attention to develop children's creativity, as illustrated earlier.

Few of us seem to escape. As a consequence, one tends to believe that only those who have kept a tight hold onto their creative capabilities are the ones that can innovate as adults. In this view, the universes of innovation and creativity are one and the same. The appointed innovators in an organisation are supposed to be creative, while all other employees in the organisation, no matter how smart they might be, are actually not required, or even asked, to be innovative.

We take this reasoning one step further and argue that all members of an organisation can and should be involved in innovation since they all are innately curious, intrinsically creative, and have the competencies –or can learn to rekindle and develop them- that contribute to innovation.

In order to tap into these resources, an organisation has to promote an environment (culture and structure) in which all members are invited to contribute and also are supported in their contributions. If these two conditions are fulfilled, innovation



will lead to an interiorised attitude of the people involved. Moreover, by inviting all members of the organisation to use their curiosity and their creativity in their work, and by permitting them to participate in innovation, sustainability can be guaranteed.

People will feel happier in their jobs, more engaged and committed to the organisation (the social component). Competencies and capabilities will be fully utilised, thus no waste of human intelligence and creativity (the ecological component). The organisation will flourish, even in bad times (the economic component).

#### IBA: Mobilising Your Entire Workforce

How does IBA compare to exogenous and endogenous innovation?

Exo/Endogenous Innovation	Innovation By All (IBA)
top-down	bottom-up
limited use of human capital	full use of human capital
structured & planned processes	structured & unplanned processes
clear scope & limited focus	unlimited focus & global scope
calculated risk & expensive	limited risk & inexpensive
internal competition	limited internal competition
Outcomes & Benefits	
new/improved products or production processes	previously untapped input for exo/endogenous innovation
new/improved organisational processes	greater cohesion & alignment
added value for internal/external customers	increased job satisfaction
increased market share or new markets	greater employee engagement
	new/improved ways to leverage talent
	PLUS all benefits listed in left column

#### Creating an IBA Environment

Much has been written about the innovation process. Surprisingly, the authors broadly agree on a number of major issues, although they may describe the same concepts using different terms. Most prominent is the distinction between incremental and disruptive or radical innovation, the latter being the big bang or the bright idea that generates revolutionary products or production processes. Incremental innovation deals with step by step improvements which can be compared to building a wall, one brick at a time.

In an IBA environment, where the free flow of thoughts is stimulated and ideas are generated that will be channelled towards innovation processes, innovation is neither incremental nor disruptive per se. On the one hand, it can pertain to a step by step improvement of the 'normal' workflow in an organisation or an exo/endogenous process. On the other hand, it could entail a complete change in 'the way things are done', in developing a new business model or a new product. The main theme underpinning IBA is that the focus is not on the kind of process or model used, but on the mobilisation of the entire human capital in the organisation to take part in innovation.

Organisations need to create IBA environments in which the entire workforce can rediscover their innate curiosity and creativity and can contribute to the organisations' innovation processes.



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