



“Invent a better mousetrap and the world
will beat a path to your door”

(Anon.)

Introduction

“WHO’S SHE?” I HEARD THEM THINK, as a wave of locker doors shut along the corridor ahead of me, revealing a flutter of soft porn.

I was an 18-year-old student trainee at the turbo generator manufacturer C. A. Parsons, in the northeast of England, being led down the corridor into The Works to join 3,000 men. My career was beginning.

I had decided to study engineering two years earlier because I wanted to become a professional inventor. I was always passionate about being creative, but I knew I wasn’t good enough at art to earn my living as an artist. Becoming an inventor sounded even better. It combined several things I was interested in: it would let me be creative, was grounded in science and might actually allow me make a difference in a way that my skills as an artist never would.

It was only much later that I realized I’d made this life-changing decision without really thinking about the implications of being a woman in a male-dominated profession. I suspect that one of these consequences, apart from having a lot of fun breaking people’s stereotypes, was to make me sensitive to the ways in which we all balance asserting our individuality and conforming to the expectations of the group. This is important both in creativity, and in the way in which we get ideas adopted. Some have also suggested that I bring a particularly “female” perspective to the process of the adoption of ideas, focusing more on collaboration than competition, and on engaging support rather than overpowering opposition. This may be true, in the sense that I certainly seem to put more emphasis on these areas than many of my male colleagues. However, I am also very clear these are techniques that are equally valid in both male and female hands. The approach might even be more powerful when used by men, because it would be more unexpected, and, as we will see later, combining the unexpected with the familiar is an

effective way to break through the earlier stages of blindness to new ideas.

The “lads” at C. A. Parsons gradually got used to me, and gave me an awesome introduction to the world of “heavy” engineering: a world in which even the nuts and bolts were so huge they had to be carried by crane. Although wild rumours circulated at intervals about what I was doing there it didn’t put me off, and in due course I went to Cambridge University to read Engineering. After my degree I then spent the next 25 years as an engineer, innovator and technical consultant.

Having started my career at almost the largest possible scale, over the years I steadily moved towards designing smaller and smaller things, so one of my last developments was for a new way of helping people with diabetes measure their blood sugar, in which key components were so small we had to use a microscope to see them. I particularly liked designing products that people would handle and so developed a lot of power tools, as well as various hand-held medical, surgical and diagnostic devices.

Some developments were fun but ultimately rather unimportant, like the “gourmet” toaster or troubleshooting the manufacture of a new brand of “choc ’n’ nut” coated choc ices one hot August. Others, like the computerized fire-fighting training school for the Royal Navy or the manufacturing machine for the Femidom (the surprisingly large female condom), help save lives. Some (39) of them were patented, and the patents were assigned to the companies that then owned and manufactured them. However, by far the largest proportion were never launched and never adopted, and have quietly faded away, except for a few souvenirs and photos.

In 1988, I was fortunate enough to be able to join with a group of colleagues and help set up a technology consultancy, run the way we thought it ought to be run. This became The Technology Partnership (later TTP Group),¹ led by a remarkable man, Dr Gerald Avison, who in his quiet but inimitable way set the tone for a company based on an inspiring mixture of partnership, ethics, autonomy and fun. This made for a very enjoyable, creative and successful business.

However, in 2000 I found that I was getting more and more interested in why some organizations and individuals were so much more effective in their creativity than others, and so I moved away from technology consultancy to set up a learning and development consultancy, The Creativity Partnership.² This grew into a fully independent business, focusing on helping organizations become more creative, building partnerships and running training courses and workshops. I found it very interesting combining my experience of innovation with ideas from the world of organizational development,

because it gave me insights about why ideas are resisted, and what one can do about it.

In parallel with building up the Creativity Partnership, I became increasingly concerned about the way the threat of climate change was being ignored, so I was pleased when I had the opportunity to help set up the UK coalition of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Stop Climate Chaos,³ and get involved in its work to create a public mandate for political action on climate change.

The problem with ideas

This background has made me very aware of the power of creativity, and the value of good ideas. However, it has also made it very clear that the more radical and important the idea, the harder it is to get it adopted. The myth says, “Invent a better mousetrap and the world will beat a path to your door”. But as every creative person knows, the reality is that they won’t. They will deny that mice exist. They will deny that they need trapping. They will deny that your trap is any better than anyone else’s. When finally you do win through, they will claim that they knew your idea was a winner all along. The same pattern repeats itself, whether the idea is a simple one like having some plants in the office, or a more complex one such as a new product concept, a new scientific theory or a campaign to change public attitudes.

You will only succeed in getting your idea truly adopted when you can break through these layers of blindness and denial to the point where people have genuinely taken ownership of the idea. This may need as much creativity, perceptiveness and skill as developing it in the first place, but all too often creative people pay only the most cursory attention to the process. When they fail, they either become discouraged and moan to their friends, or, alternatively, start waging war on their perceived opponents and trying to force their idea through. This is a shame, because neither is an effective tactic and failure means that the world loses the potential benefit of a good idea, while the originators lose out on the pleasure of seeing their ideas adopted.

It is important to point out that ideas do not need to be radical and earth-shattering to make a difference; even small incremental ideas will change the world immediately around you. For example, a junior manager at one of my client’s businesses had the simple idea of putting a white board and some pens by the coffee machine. This transformed the way people discussed and shared ideas, as people from all levels in the company added suggestions and improvements to the current hot idea. When the board was full, she took a

photo of it for the team to use, before wiping the board and putting up a new “trigger”. This was just one step in a process of cultural transformation that lasted several years. Often, as the Japanese have shown in their products and manufacturing processes, the most successful way of making dramatic changes is to introduce a steady succession of incremental ideas in pursuit of the overall goal.

It always surprises me that there’s no single word in the English language for such an important concept as “the process of getting ideas adopted”. Some, like “selling” or “marketing”, are too contractual and commercial, tending to imply that the idea is a completed package, maybe even covered by guarantee, just waiting to be married up with eager consumers. As we will see later, this is not true for ideas, because they almost always need to morph and evolve in the process of being adopted and made to work really well. I also find that some of the people who are most driven to use their creativity to make a difference are very uncomfortable with the concept of “marketing”, because of their perception that it is about using spin and manipulation to sell trivia. Alternative words like “persuasion” and “influence” contain many useful elements of the concept, but are too vague to encapsulate a process that involves a mixture of inspiration and engagement around a specific idea.

The phrase “getting ideas adopted” is not succinct enough to be ideal, but I find the metaphor of an idea being like a child rather useful. Ideas, like children, start full of promise, but will need guidance, safety and space if they are to grow up healthily and fulfil their potential, even though this may well turn out to be quite different from what you first expected. Similarly, it needs careful thought, lots of work and emotional commitment if one is to be successful in getting either ideas or children successfully adopted.

It is important to pay attention to this because the world needs new ideas, both to resolve looming global threats like climate change or global terrorism, but also on a smaller and more local scale in families, communities and business.

Unfortunately, in many cases it is becoming harder and harder to use your creativity to make a difference. As organizations merge and grow in response to the economic pressures of globalization, many develop increasingly target-driven, risk-averse and controlling cultures. This is making them more and more dysfunctional in how they deal with creativity, so even though they are desperate for new ideas, it is increasingly difficult for the creative people within them to get their ideas to see the light of day. If you are a junior employee in this position it may be difficult to do much about the negativity

and bureaucratization around you. However, you can take things into your own hands: rather than feeling frustrated and stuck, focus some of your creativity, skill and energy on being clever about how you get your ideas adopted. The result will be more satisfying for you, and better for your colleagues and the company.

Using this book

Getting ideas adopted is a fascinating and complex art. This book does not attempt to be an encyclopaedia, or to cover all possible issues and techniques; rather, it sets out to explore how you can give your ideas a better chance, deflate resistance and engage supporters.

This book is primarily for creative practitioners, so it assumes that you know how to encourage the flow of ideas: the problem is just how to turn seed ideas into great ideas and get them adopted. Sometimes these will be your own ideas, but in other situations you may just want to get a group of people to recognize that they have a problem so they start looking for ways to resolve it. As we will see later, rather than trying to force-feed people with your own idea for a solution, very often this more sophisticated approach is a better way of triggering the change you want.

I find creativity fascinating, because although ideas may start with the creative insight of one individual, they won’t be adopted unless, by the end of the process, they relate to the needs and norms of the wider social group. This means that, as in so many things, you have to consider both the “internal” factors, such as whether you and your idea are worth paying attention to, as well as the “external” aspects, like why people are resisting it.

Recognizing this, the book is divided into two parts, exploring in turn the “internal” and the “external” aspects of the process.

Part 1 focuses on the “internal” aspects of the process, covering the key issues you will need to think about to get your idea into shape and give it the best possible chance of getting adopted. There are three key elements of this: firstly, understanding the normality of resistance. Secondly, understanding the way in which the very personality characteristics that help our creativity often make people reluctant to adopt our ideas. Some may find this difficult territory, but for those with the honesty to accept that some of the problems they face may be of their own making, I am including an extract from the well-validated Myers-Briggs psychometric test to help you explore and address your own personal strengths and weaknesses. The third element focuses on the practical details of developing ideas that people might actually

want. Much of this is based on my experience running innovation teams and developing technological innovations.

Part 2 focuses on the more “external” aspects of the process, looking in turn at how to overcome the four stages of resistance, when people are in turn “blind”, “frozen”, “interested” and “integrated”. These are very different stages. Initially, when people are “blind” they seem to be wilfully ignoring our idea: we try to tell them about it, but see their eyes glaze over. In the second stage they may be aware of the idea, but they make all sorts of excuses to avoid admitting that it’s important or needs action. It’s only when they reach the third stage, after we have succeeded in unfreezing them, that they become actively interested in knowing about our idea (whether or not they will like it when they hear about it). In the fourth and final stage our task becomes one of helping our recipient integrate the idea into their lives, otherwise we’ll find a few weeks later that they have slipped back into their old patterns of behaviour and forgotten all about it.

An idea is only truly adopted when it feels comfortable and natural and has become part of the way someone sees the world.

This model of the resistance to ideas is based on concepts that are relatively well known in the field of organizational development. However, in the field of creativity and innovation this model is virtually unknown, even though it makes immediate intuitive sense to most creative people.

One of the main reasons I wanted to write this book is because I’ve seen so many creative people get unnecessarily frustrated because they can’t get their ideas to see the light of day. This is never easy, but I hope this book will help.

Note that this book assumes that, like most creative people, once you have understood the basic principles, you would prefer to use them to create your own solution, rather than follow a defined step-by-step process for “guaranteed” success, so beloved of “how-to” books. It therefore contains lots of examples and stories and experiments to illustrate techniques that I have found important and useful from a wide range of disciplines. These include advertising, anthropology, campaigning, cognitive psychology, creativity studies, economics, linguistics, marketing communications, management theory, neuroscience, organizational development, personality profiling, philosophy, politics, presentation skills, psychotherapy, social psychology, story telling, technological innovation and the very recent concept of “Web 2.0”.

This book includes a lot of ideas, so it is easy to be enjoyably overwhelmed and fail to remember any of them. It therefore concludes with a space for you

to note down the three key ideas that you want to remember from each chapter in the book. The table also includes my own favourites, but your choice will depend on your ideas, environment, personality and experience.

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