

Seeds Innovation
Cultivating the Synergy that Fosters New Ideas
By
R.M. Tiruhungwa
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Book Review

One of the many dimensions along which a lucid difference can be observed between any two persons is the extent of the gap that exists between one's 'actions-in-the-head' and his 'actions-on-the-ground'. Yet, it is this very dimension that helps to underline one key similarity among people. All human beings do have 'actions in their heads' (ideas) and, at least, do translate some of these ideas into action ('actions-on-the-ground'). It is the gap, referred to above, that makes the difference. How many ideas does one have 'in the head' at any time, and how many of these (ideas) are actually put into practice? It is not the number or type of ideas, but the actions thereof which bring forth 'innovation'.

This is probably one domain which Elaine Dundon sought to address in her book: *The Seeds of Innovation: Cultivating the Synergy that Fosters New Ideas*. Ideas need to be translated into action before they can qualify to be associated with any 'innovation'. Ideas 'in the head' alone, therefore, do not wholly constitute an 'innovation'. Dundon devotes a whole chapter (Chapter 9) on the need to translate ideas into actions. As she correctly points out in the first paragraph of the chapter, there exists a big difference between deciding to do something and actually doing it! In no uncertain terms, she states that: "...great ideas are not 'innovative' unless they are successfully implemented. The critical factor is not the number of ideas that you or your team may have, but the successful implementation of the ideas. There are many examples of organizations that were on the right track but failed to take action, took too little action, or moved too slowly with their ideas" (p. 157).

Even her definition of 'innovation', which she apparently owes to "...applied research, interviews with executives and managers, as well as practical experience working with many international companies and other organizations ..." (p.5), has 'implementation — putting a new and useful idea into action' as a key component. Other key components include creativity, strategy and profitability on seed innovation.

Another scenario that might have prompted Dundon to write this book relates to the socio-economic realities of today. As she observes: "We are in midst of a significant transition, largely as the result of three main factors: technology, the expanding world, and more demanding customers" (p.2). The

ever-changing socio-economic and technological environment in which we live in today poses several challenges to mankind. Without innovation, these rapid changes might render many people and their actions out of place. This would, in turn, make life meaningless. What is taking place today, therefore, might be ample justification for a book on 'Innovation' as succinctly put by Dundon that "...in an era of economic uncertainty, constrained resources, and increased global competition, more and more organizations are turning to Innovation Management as a source of new solutions and renewed inspiration" (p. vii).

With this ever-changing universe, there is no 'today' which will be exactly the same, in every sense, as 'yesterday'. Increasingly today, the present (and most likely, the future) does not easily borrow photocopies of the past. Replication, in many aspects, is increasingly becoming formidable. New ideas and new actions are undoubtedly needed to fill up space which can't be fully managed by mere 'cut or copy and paste'. One needs to be continuously aware of this potential dynamism and keep on guard. Changes bring about new or unexpected experiences. These can be sufficiently and fairly dealt with through innovative thinking.

If our foregoing interpretation holds any truth, then the relevance of this book, today and tomorrow, needs not be over-emphasized. Innovation holds the key to success in almost every economic activity. Survival in the business world, as well as in almost every other sphere of life, largely depends on the degree of innovative thinking and actions of those who want to survive. Broadly, this is what this book is all about. It is about 'innovation'. "It is designed to guide innovation activities from start to finish, maximizing their impact and ensuring success" (inside front cover).

The book describes an innovation process and presents "innovative thinking tools to help the reader to break down the barriers of conventional thinking ... (p. ix). It is, thus, a practical book intending to prompt a reader into some action. This book is not merely meant to provide knowledge about 'innovation'. It challenges every reader to become an innovator, and systematically shows how to go about it. It is a book that, once read, should not be simply returned to the shelves but should drive the reader into taking positive action 'breaking down the barriers of conventional thinking'.

In this book, the author seeks to show how an innovation system may be created both at an individual and organizational level. The author contends that in order to create such a system, one has to address "three components (or 01seeds') that are essential for innovatiobn (inside front cover). The three seeds are: creative thinking. strategic thinking and transformational thinking.

Essentially, this is SOI at the whole book is about the 'seeds' of innovation. The 'seeds' are discussed in parts 1, 2 and 3 of the book respectively. Apparently, the book consists of only these three parts.

It appears, Dundon has a liking for number 'three' at least in as far as the layout and structure of this book is concerned. The book mainly addresses 'three' seeds. Each seed is guided by 'three' principles (pp. 189-193). The 'three' seeds are presented in 'three' parts, and each part carries 'three' chapters. Moreover, each chapter constitutes a step in the 'Nine-Step Innovation Process' (pp. 14, 196-198). The process itself consists of 'three' key stages namely; understanding, imagination and action (p. 14).

According to the author, the 'Understanding' stage involves gathering background information about a problem or challenge that an individual is determined to address, formulating potential problem statements, and determining the range of potential solutions by setting the 'Innovation Goalposts' which "effectively guide the development of new ideas by setting limits on the range of ideas that would satisfy the needs of the particular situation (pp. 76-77). Goalposts are important because "organizational life is full of wasted idea-generation effort. Many such efforts are too random, leading to too many obscure ideas that are not valuable for solving the problem at hand" (p.76).

The 'Imagination' stage involves gathering as many stimuli as possible in order to maximize the probability of making new connections. Stimuli could have origin in the analysis of a current state of one's business, customer needs and ail that surrounds an individual (pp.88-94).

Further, the 'Action' stage involves building the ideas into full business concepts and then into business plans. These plans should be presented in accordance with the strategic Innovation Goalposts so that they can be easily accepted as being more realistic. Then they are implemented.

When one goes through this book more diligently, one is likely to notice that the book's content structure seems to present a continuum. Some chapters fall 'conveniently' under one extreme of the 'actions-in-the-head', while others fit well under the other extreme ('actions-on-the-ground'). The first four chapters: 'Believe in Creativity' (1), 'Be Curious' (2), 'Discover New Connections' (3) and 'See the Big Picture' (4) broadly fall under the former. They cover what could be termed as the 'foundation' phase of the 'Innovation Process'. In these chapters, the author generally describes what ought to take place in 'our heads' before our innovative ideas are ultimately translated into some action.

Chapters on 'Look to the Future' (5), 'Do the Extraordinary' (6), 'Seek Greater Awareness' (7), 'Ignite Passion' (8) and 'Take Action' (9) expand the scope of thinking' in terms of horizon and direction. The 'thinking' now ought to be dictated and specific. As a matter of fact, this trend starts already in Chapter 4 where the would-be innovator is supposed to set 'Innovation Goalposts'. These goalposts seek to direct the innovation efforts, set expectations and facilitate decision making (pp.77).

This latter part of the book is closer to 'actions-on-the-ground'. It concludes with Chapter 9 which specifically exhorts the reader (would-be innovator) to take action. This is the final stage of the Nine-Step Innovation Process. It is at this stage that the would-be innovator ought to develop the 'Innovation Roadmap' (pp. 159-161), gain commitment (pp. 161-168) and implement the roadmap (pp. 168-172).

As hinted at above, this book generally describes a process of innovation of what a reader needs to do in order to become an innovator. Chapters I to 9 explain the step-by-step process at an individual level by describing the three 'seeds' of innovation and how these seeds can be made to 'germinate' and grow into trees and other offshoots. Chapter 10 "contains more down-to-earth advice for stimulating innovation within the organizational setting" (p. 173). According to Dundon, the chapter is intended to enable the reader to design an optimal organizational environment in which everyone is encouraged to take an active role in building a truly 'innovation-centric' organization.

With regard to 'Creative Thinking', the first 'seed' of innovation, the would-be innovator has to 'believe in creativity' (pp. 16-28), 'be curious' (pp.29-40) and 'discover new connections' (pp.41-66). These are the three principles of 'Creative Thinking'. In order to 'believe in creativity', one is advised to do the following: believe that everyone is creative (pp.16-17), believe in one's own unique creative-thinking talents (pp. 17-20), combine different talents for maximum results (pp.20-21), eliminate obstacles to creative thinking (pp.21-27), learn to unlearn and forget (pp.27-28) and accept failure (p.28).

Of interest, here, is the discussion on the barriers that are likely to hinder individuals from becoming innovators. Dundon observes, unfortunately, that: "Most barriers to creative thinking are self-imposed. You can't expect to 'think outside the box' if you constantly put yourself back in the box!" (p.22)

She identifies 'three' obstacles to creative thinking. These are: hesitancy to try new things, sticking to the 'right way' and the obsessive desire to control ourselves and others. The author contends that although every human being is naturally creative, this talent is often blocked mainly through self-judgement and the conditioning of other people.

Another requirement for nurturing 'creative thinking' is to 'be curious'. Dundon asserts that the primary basis for creativity is a curious mind. "Without curiosity", she argues, "a person has great difficulty discovering new ideas" (p. 29). She holds that in order to be curious, one has to € ask have probing an open question (pp. 29-32), 'gain a broader perspective' (pp. 32-37) and (pp. 740).

Further, 'creative thinking' requires the would-be innovator to have the ability to rediscover new connections'. According to Dundon, creative thinkers combine and recombine different ideas or concepts to make new connections. She says that new connections' can be 'discovered' through the use of 'the imagination' (pp.42-44), 'diverse stimuli' (pp.44-49) and 'creative-connections master tools' (pp.49-61).

The second 'seed' is 'Strategic Thinking'. Whereas 'creativity' is generally considered to be the foundation of innovation, 'strategy' is that which helps to connect 'creativity' with value. A strategic idea, according to Dundon, is the best or most valuable idea for handling a challenge at hand. The author recommends that everyone in an organization should participate in 'strategic thinking' by 'seeing the BIG picture' (pp.69-85), 'looking to the future' (pp.86-108) and 'doing the Extraordinary' (pp. 109-126).

One of the tools for seeing the BIG picture is the Nine-Step Innovation Process already referred to above. To begin this process, one has first to understand fully the challenge at hand. This includes gathering information about the challenge from as many angles as possible. It may also be helpful to gather information by looking beyond the specific task and seeing the bigger picture. "Often we get so focused on our little tasks, on our piece of the world, that we forget about how our actions will ultimately affect others", notes Dundon (p.69).

Other key elements of 'seeing the BIG Picture', according to the author, include: 'systems thinking' (pp.70-73), 'clarifying the real problem' (pp.73-76) and 'setting innovation goalposts' (pp. 76-85). Dundon identifies six 'BIG Picture' criteria which state that the idea must 'be simple' (p.79), 'support

the overall business strategy' (p.79), 'be distinctly new and better' (pp.80-82), 'be proven' (pp.82-83), 'be profitable' (pp.83-84) and 'be quickly and easily implemented' (p.84).

Another way of participating in 'Strategic Thinking' is by 'looking to the future'. This is mainly concerned with the second stage in the Nine-Step Innovation Process — Imagination — which involves gathering as many stimuli ^{as} possible so as to maximize chances of making 'new connections'. Imagination essentially involves 'seeking stimuli' (pp.89-98), 'uncovering insights' (pp.98-100) and 'identifying ideas' (pp. 100-108).

'Doing the Extraordinary' is another technique of 'Strategic Thinking'. In today's world with more demanding customers, citizens, and employees 'ordinary' is no longer good enough. In order to shift from the 'ordinary' into the new extraordinary, one may consider using any or some of the following strategies: target the most profitable customer' (pp. 110-111), 'offer something distinctly and better' (pp. 111- 112), 'set your innovation priorities' (pp. 112-115), make sure it is easy' (115-116), 'pick up the pace' (pp. 117-119), 'systemize with modules (pp. 119-120)', 'profit from the power of branding' (pp. 121-122), 'add credibility' (pp. 122-124) and 'create magnet networks' (pp. 124-126).

Although it is important to understand the dynamics of 'creative' and 'strategic' thinking, it is equally important to apprehend how the 'human side' of innovation can affect the outcome of any innovative effort. This is the focal area of the third and last 'seed' of innovation — 'Transformational Thinking'. By understanding and attending to the personal dynamics behind identifying ideas and gathering support for these ideas, the chance of actually implementing them can be enhanced.

In order to effectively take part in 'Transformational Thinking', the would-be innovator should strive to 'seek greater awareness' (pp. 129-143), 'ignite passion' (pp. 144-156) and 'take action' (pp. 157-172). Seeking greater awareness entails seeking greater awareness of 'self' (pp. 129-133), 'team' (pp.133-138) and 'organization' (pp. 138-143). The essence of this is that we can benefit from greater awareness of ourselves and our surroundings to enable us to capitalize on more opportunities for innovation. Dundon recommends that in order to be a great innovator, one must first be aware of oneself and the immediate surroundings.

Like 'seeking greater awareness', another technique of participating in 'transformational thinking' - 'igniting passion' has to be considered at an individual (pp. 149-151) as well as team level (1)6.151-153). Then, one has also to consider a 'passionate physical environment' (pp.153-156).

The other critical component of 'Transformational Thinking' relates to 'taking action' which has already been referred to, here and there, in this review. It suffices to state that ideas without action have limited value. Probably, this is the most valuable message to all readers. We all have ideas, but most of these ideas remain and die 'in our heads'! They are never let out to the practical world. This book poses a challenge to every human being. Innovation is the key for today and tomorrow, and for all of us.

Although the author of this book appears to have some inclination towards the 'business' world, as reflected in frequent references to concepts such as 'marketplace' (pp.3, 7, 11, 13) 'profitability' (pp.83, 110-111, 121-122) and 'business' (p. 14), our considered view is that 'innovation' is relevant also to other spheres of life. We need innovations, for instance, in our political systems as well as in other leadership and governance systems.

Nevertheless, this is a very commendable literary work that may be useful to every person. It is, consequently, recommended that a course on 'Innovation Management' be taught in all universities and other higher education institutions to prepare a 'thinking' population of tomorrow.