

Can the ability to innovate be taught?

“Absolutely!” David Silverstein says.

As founder, president and CEO of **Breakthrough Management Group International (BMGI)** in Longmont, Colorado, Silverstein knows whereof he speaks. Founded in 1999 as a Six Sigma training and consulting firm, BMGI has broadened over the years to include other methodologies in the training mix it offers to its clients, including a focus on innovation. Silverstein’s own innovation is a new book on that very subject.

Titled *The Innovator’s Toolkit: 50+ Techniques for Predictable and Sustainable Organic Growth* and co-authored by Philip Samuel and Neil DeCarlo, the book is an outgrowth of Silverstein and his company’s work with clients, ranging from Fortune 500 corporations to niche manufacturers.

Silverstein says he frequently heard lamentations that, for all the talk about the need for companies to be more innovative, nobody was telling them how to do it.

“The book is very much built on the need we saw in our clients’ [operations] for methodical approaches to innovation,” he says. “If you want to grow a company and you’re not going to rely on just the founder for innovation, then you need to take systematic approaches to innovation. A systematic approach can be managed for predictable results. A founder or other innately creative people can certainly deliver results, but you can’t count on [them]. Sometimes it will [work], sometimes it won’t.”

Many large companies simply buy innovations through acquisitions, since small companies tend to be more innovative than large ones. But Silverstein contends that companies of any size can realize at least some measure of organic growth by adopting systematic approaches to innovation.

Silverstein explains that one important element of innovation is coming to understand what the marketplace wants. “The days of just asking customers what they want are over,” he says. “That’s way too simplistic. You usually don’t get the right answers anyway, because customers don’t really know what they want. They may know what their problems are, but they can’t describe the solution. That’s where innovation comes in.”

He gives the example of a company that manufactures lawn mowers. When it asked customers what they wanted in a lawn mower, the company got suggestions like better fuel efficiency, reduced noise and less maintenance. But when the company asked why the customer uses a lawn mower at all, the answer (‘to keep the grass short and the lawn looking good’) led the company to develop a genetically engineered strain of grass seed that stops growing at a certain height.

“Until they had the right tools to prompt them to ask the right questions, they kept trying to figure out how to build a better lawn mower, not how to really meet the needs of the market,” Silverstein says, adding, “You have to be willing to cannibalize your own business, which means that perhaps the lawn mower company won’t be making lawn mowers at all, if they really get it right.”

He acknowledges that a creative person might eventually have arrived at the same solution. “But that’s not something predictable that you can build a business model around,” he says. “You need tools and technique to harness the creative powers the common people have if you want a big company to develop a predictable, sustainable innovative culture. Innovation is not just a bunch of smart, creative people sitting around a room brainstorming.”

An excerpt from Silverstein’s book tells the story of Thomas Edison, who was known throughout history as an inventor. But Edison mostly developed basic discoveries into better solutions for commercialization. Often credited with inventing the light bulb, Edison really conducted extensive experimentation and analysis to find the optimal conditions under which the tungsten wire in a bulb would glow without interruption. While Edison did his own share of exploration, his basic strength and passion was in taking what was already known and refining it until he could solve some problem.

So what’s the biggest barrier to innovation?

“Leadership,” Silverstein says. “If you do not have leadership that is open to looking at new ways of doing things, the rest of the population of the company is going to be useless. You need open-minded leadership.” **CEO**

INNOVATOR INNOVATION CREATION

STORY BY **DAVID CONRADS**



SEEING THE LIGHT

In the 1700s customers told candle companies they wanted brighter, longer-lasting candles that produced less smoke and soot (or “performance expectations”). They also asked for better-smelling candles in different colors (or “perception expectations”). When the light bulb came along, it really didn’t matter how well a company could make a candle. These solutions didn’t satisfy the outcome expectations as well as the light bulb did.

Innovation comes from finding ways to generate creative responses to customer needs; it takes tools, not just brainstorming.