



By Richard D. Czerniawski

GET CRAZY TO INNOVATE

Many politicians and media pundits are characterizing a current nominee to a seat on the Federal Reserve Board of Governors as “crazy.” Her sin is challenging the conventional wisdom about productivity and how to increase it. I do not weigh in on whether she is correct in her theory or not but bringing into focus what happens when someone goes against orthodoxy. Businesses and brands need fresh ideas to make necessary changes and fuel growth, yet they can be scary because eminence-based thinkers label them and those proposing ideas as crazy. No one in her/his right mind wants to be perceived as being “crazy.”

Arthur Schopenhauer, the German Philosopher, best captures what happens when others confront people with a truth—which, in my estimation, could be a new way of thinking: “All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident.” Truth is in the perception of the beholder. So are the value of ideas.

If we hold to the same “truths” based upon habit, lack of intellectual rigor, eminence-based thinking and practices—whatever—we create barriers to innovation. We need to challenge the status quo if we are going to create change for the better. We ought to make it a practice to seek ideas that others might consider “crazy.” So, how might we deal with “crazy?”

The first way to open up yourself and others to the fresh and novel is to be a defender of the truth. Skip the knee-jerk reaction to scream, “nay!” Take the position of a defense attorney. Think through whether an unusual idea, point-of-view, or proposal has (some) merit as opposed to merely dismissing it and the person who is proposing it. Identify and argue for where it might make sense. If something gets in the way of revealing its merit, adapt as appropriate to do what it takes to improve the likelihood that it will work.

Another way to give new thinking an opportunity to breathe is to be a provocateur. Propose an even crazier idea that will stretch people's minds far beyond the original controversial idea. Just about anything that departs from conventional wisdom is judged to be far, far out. By proposing something even further out will get people to be more accepting of the original idea.

The third way—among many others I’m sure, is an exercise I often employed in workshops to get marketers to think out of the box. I learned it from reading Roger von Oech’s books on boosting creativity. Simply stated, it's to propose an idea that would get you fired. Now, nobody wants to get fired nor to get you or, hopefully, me, fired. The proposed, outrageous idea is only the first part of

the exercise to get people to think outside of the proverbial box.

The second part is for colleagues to follow-up with the statement, “what s/he really means is ...” and reframe the idea. For example, let’s assume we are addressing poor profit margins. Someone might propose for her/his wild idea, "let's ship air instead of the product." Indeed, a ridiculous statement. Now someone, who doesn't want to see the person who proposed the idea fired states, “what s/he really means is we should reformulate with less costly ingredients that deliver the same outcomes to cut costs.” Another answer might be to reduce the weight of contents, or reduce packaging materials, or find a partner who can produce the product more efficiently, or utilize the experiences of health care practitioners with their patients to petition for a new indication, etc. There are many options.

If productivity or business or brands are stagnant, we will need to think and act differently to restore growth. As Einstein stated and frequently quoted, "The definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over again and expect different results." That's truly insane. And as the character Rocky Balboa, played by Sylvester Stallone, says in the movie Creed II, "If you need to make changes, you need change things in a big way.” Crazy thinking and ideas may provide you with that big way to make the changes you need or desire.

One other thought, crazy is not the thing or idea but going forward without testing and iterating your way to success! Get crazy, but act sanely.

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