



The Art of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America's Leading Design Firm

By Thomas Kelley
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There are dozens of excellent books that discuss innovation. *The Art of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America's Leading Design Firm* should be considered one. Unlike almost all other authors of worthy books on the same subject, Kelley does not organize his material in terms of a sequence of specific "lessons"...nor does he inundate his reader with checklists, "executive summaries," bullet points, do's and don'ts, "key points", etc. Rather, Kelley shares "stories" based on real-world situations in which he and his IDEO associates solved various problems when completing industrial design assignments for their clients. "We've linked those organizational achievements to specific methodologies and tools you can use to build innovation into your own organization... [However, IDEO's] 'secret formula' is actually not very formulaic. It is a blend of methodologies, work practices, culture, and infrastructure. Methodology alone is not enough." One of the greatest benefits of the book is derived from direct access to that "blend" when activated.

It is extremely difficult to overcome what James O'Toole characterizes, in *Leading Change*, as "the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom." He and Kelley seem to be kindred spirits: Both fully understand how and why truly innovative thinking encounters so much resistance within organizations. Whereas O'Toole suggests all manner of strategies to overcome that resistance, Kelley concentrates on the combination ("blend") of ingredients which, when integrated and then applied with both rigor and passion, may produce what Steven Jobs once referred to as "insanely great." What both O'Toole and Kelley have in mind is creating and sustaining an innovative culture, one from within which "insanely great" ideas can result in breakthrough products and (yes) services.

"Loosely described," Kelley shares IDEO's five-step methodology: Understand the market, the client, the technology, and the perceived constraints on the given problem; observe real people in real-life situations; literally visualize new-to-the-world concepts and the customers who will use them; evaluate and refine the prototypes in a series of quick iterations; and finally, implement the new concept for commercialization. With regard to the last "step," as Bennis explains in *Organizing Genius*, Apple executives immediately recognized the commercial opportunities for PARC's technology. Larry Tesler (who later left PARC for Apple) noted that Jobs and companions "wanted to get it out to the world." But first, obviously, create that "it."

Kelley and his associates at IDEO have won numerous awards for designing all manner of innovative products such as the Apple mouse, the Palm Pilot, a one-piece fishing mechanism for children, the in-vehicle beverage holder, toothpaste tubes that don't "gunk up" in the cap area, "mud-free" water bottles for mountain bikers, a small digital camera for the handspring Visor, and the Sun Tracker Beach Chair.

The book focuses on (a) the physical environment in which those at IDEO interact and (b) the nature and extent of that interaction, principally the brainstorming sessions. In the Foreword, Tom Peters explained why Kelley's is a marvelous book: "It carefully walks us through each stage of the IDEO innovation process—from creating hot teams (IDEO is perpetually on 'boil') to learning to see through the customer's eyes (forget focus groups!), brainstorming (trust me, nobody but nobody does it better) to rapid prototyping (and nobody, but nobody does it better...)." Whatever your current situation, whatever the size and nature of your organization, surely you and it need to avoid or escape from "the ideology of comfort and the tyranny of custom." Granted, you may never be involved in the creation of an "insanely great" product but Kelley can at least help you to gain "the true spirit of innovation" in your life. ❖