



Leading Innovation From
the New Middle George E. L. Barbee

We can't all be Steve Jobs.

Steve Jobs was a genius innovator. He had an uncanny ability to anticipate consumer needs and imagine them before we could see them for ourselves.

It may be hard to fathom reaching Job's stunning level of individual creative insight and success, but there is a new wave of innovation taking place inside many organizations that gives people an opportunity to make important, innovative contributions of their own to business and to society.

My beliefs about innovation have evolved and are now centered on three basic tenets:

1. Most of us can be far more innovative in business than we give ourselves credit for—especially when we realize innovation is a lot broader than just invention.
2. We can quickly learn to more innovatively observe and then transfer these innovations from one category to another.
3. Being more innovative is, in fact, learnable and even self-teachable.

Innovation is more than an “I” thing... it’s a “WE” thing. It is true that we must make a real, conscious effort to improve our own innovation skills. But there are also important changes that we can and should bring about in the organization.

Together, this will allow us to begin leading innovation from the new middle.

It doesn’t matter if the organization is large or small. It doesn’t matter if the organization focuses on products or services. It doesn’t even matter if it is located in the US or in another country. What does matter is a new consciousness around innovation.

That said, I’d like to focus on two holistic keys to innovating:

- The “I” things I can do to improve my personal creativity and innovation.
- The “we” things that I can help bring about in the organization(s) I work for.

To truly innovate, you need to examine your personal habits, values, and goals, and make a concerted effort to not only become more innovative personally, but to put it into practice organizationally.

Practice Your Observation Skills and Transfer Them

It's no surprise that most successful innovators have a keen sense of observation. You can, too.

It's fairly easy to find examples where an innovation in one place has inspired innovation in another. The hospitality industry, for instance, is famous for continually innovating and reinventing itself. Finer hotels will typically stage an experience for its guests. Each lobby at a Ritz-Carlton, for example, is designed to create a distinct impression, and staff are purposefully trained to provide a specific experience for its high-end customers. If a guest asks where the pool is, he or she is accompanied, not just directed, to the pool, or point of resolution. The employee "owns" the issue.

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Similarly, when you walk through the door at the McLean Hardware in McLean, Virginia, a representative will greet you, make sure any questions you have are being addressed, and accompany you to the section of the store where the product you are looking for is located. The hardware employee will engage you in dialogue to be sure he or she understands your need or project and might even offer a few handy tips. If it is very specialized, the employee may ask a colleague to join in the conversation to be sure you get the best advice possible.

Late in my own career, I began testing a hypothesis about how I observed innovation and realized that I had been doing it all along—I just didn't write anything down. Once I made it a point to write down my observations, I found that they came even easier. They got better, deeper, more imaginative. It was a personal revelation and one that I decided to try on my first group of MBA students at Darden. Remarkably, within two to three weeks, nearly all of the students' abilities to make and record their observations improved. I could see their growing self-confidence in stretching themselves—especially when I had them bring their observations to class to share with everyone. By the end of each school term, virtually 100% “got it.” Year after year.

What was even more impressive? Certain students began making connections from these observations to their own powers of innovation. We would use these “transfers” of observation in class. The students learned from one another—not just from me. And they understood that it’s one thing to have the skill to observe innovation, but having the skill to transfer it from one category, industry, or situation to another takes everything to a whole new level.

The takeaway? Make it a point to observe the innovation around you. Take time out to put yourself in “receive” mode and to simply observe. Look around. Notice what is already innovative. And take notes and keep a list of any innovations you’ve observed. Try to do this at least once per day. Review your list each week. You should notice that the quality of your observations improves over time.

Having the ability to observe and transfer observations into meaningful actions means you have acquired an invaluable skill. Both are important for “leading innovation from the new middle” and for improving innovation effectiveness.

If you can involve others, like a peer, partner, or co-worker, you can compare notes, challenge and inspire one another, and begin to build a network of innovative thinkers.

Respect Absurd Ideas

If we hear an absurd idea, we often have one of two reactions: first, it's a stupid idea so we dismiss it and go onto another idea or topic, or second, it's so far out there that it frees up other thinking and ideation. It is now less risky to bring out other unusual ideas.

Absurd ideas need to be treasured and coddled. They need to be protected and respected. Creating an acceptable environment for an absurd idea often frees people up and allows them to take risks. They can have greater confidence in their own thinking and ideas.

For example, when I was at Wilkinson Sword, which makes shaving products, we debated back and forth after our initial finding that consumers could not rationalize how they were able to get “a closer shave” without nicking themselves. As simple as it sounds, more close yet comfortable was a paradox because consumers had yet to experience it, and it sounded patently absurd.

More often than not, true innovation uproots traditional mindsets—and that can cause revolutions in categories. This is part of the paradox.

Can we easily imagine a camera without film? Can we imagine having the instantaneous ability to capture an image or an event and then erase it if we don't like it? Years ago, this might have seemed like an absurd idea—something we may have read about in a science fiction novel, perhaps. Yet today, most people carry a smartphone able to snap photos, record videos and voice memos, remind us of important appointments, play our favorite songs, check email, text friends, connect through Face-time with our children and grandchildren, find good restaurants, pay bills, read books and magazines, check the weather, navigate, and much, much more.

Absurd ideas are worth exploring and can lead to great things. Don't be too quick to judge or dismiss what might seem like a crazy idea. Write it down before you cast it aside—that idea could be the seed of innovation. Encourage and protect the absurd idea.

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Extend Beyond Experiences

Why is it we can go to one restaurant and pay \$30 for a filet mignon and to another and pay \$60 for the same cut? And, after the latter restaurant, declare it was a good deal and a great experience?

It is beyond the product or service itself. Perhaps it's the atmosphere or the view, or the service with an engaging and attentive waiter. It may be the fine china, glassware, and white tablecloth, or the presentation of the food itself. It's often the staging of a total experience.

Think about the Walt Disney Company. It has expanded the concept of amusement park rides and attractions to include accommodations, fun for parents as well as children, clean facilities, attractive, smiling people—all of which adds up to a total experience—and an upcharge of 300 to 400% percent. “But worth it!” you'll likely say after you visit.

Not long ago, an average child's birthday party cost the price of a box of Betty Crocker cake mix and an egg—say around \$2.50. Today, parents are purchasing “Build-a-Bear” and “American Girl” parties that can easily run \$600 or more, packaged with lunch or tea, including instructions on how to write a thank you note. It's all part of the experience, and many are willing to pay for it.

Travelers themselves can arrange a trip to Africa over the Internet for under \$10,000 by booking flights, renting equipment, and securing lodging by themselves. Or people can use a travel agent to arrange first class accommodations and food, professional safaris that assure prime animal viewing and photography opportunities, and private flights to assure efficient transportation between camps. \$25,000 to \$40,000 per couple may seem steep, yet for a once in a lifetime experience, it can be worth the difference in price. Safety? Meeting locals? Customer service? All part of the price.

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Innovating experiences is one of the innovations of the last decade or two—and our imagination to conceive new experiences is likely to be the only limit for more.

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Build Trust Within the Company

Building trust is, perhaps, at first, a strange characteristic of successful innovation. It is a balance of enthusiasm and positive outlook for new ideas and concepts. At the right time, after investigation, it is also the ability to see the pros and cons of an idea or project. You have to know when to breathe life into a project and when to kill it and work on more promising priority projects. There is a bit of schizophrenia in sustainable innovators—in giving birth to versus deciding when to kill a project.

Build trust with your peers and collaborative team members, with your senior executives and your lower level team members. Build trust and candor with your customers, too. Working collaboratively with customers on their important priorities and future strategies is a gift. They must trust you to share their future.

When Gillette was considering entering the U.S. sunglass business, it wanted to build on its sales, distribution, and merchandising strengths. It evaluated an Australian sunglass company that was the category leader in Australia at the time that had a patented polarized lens.

Gillette chose an executive with a toiletry and cosmetic background to evaluate the acquisition. His approach was to take an objective pros and cons strategic examination of the category while maintaining his trusted reputation for acquisition evaluations.

After a lengthy evaluation, including the study of the dominant Foster Grant company and others in the U.S. market, the executive took an innovative step. With the help of a senior sales executive's referral from Gillette, he would quietly go into a local store with a supply of the Australian sunglasses and personally observe and sell sunglasses for a week. His findings were remarkable.

Very few potential customers paid attention to the polarized lens. In fact, the only serious potential customers for this line of sunglasses first picked them up and looked at themselves in the mirror before further considering purchase.

This confirmed what the executive had been witnessing in his research: it was often a cosmetic purchase. Customers commented that the glasses looked "10 or 15 years behind the times." Even if the lens was polarized, it did not provide any significant differentiation, and very few sunglasses in this proposed acquisition line actually sold.

The final recommendation was to pass on the acquisition. The executive's objective study and trust was reinforced by his spending time selling and observing the actual retail and consumer purchase behavior.

Talk About the Future

It is essential to think about your key customers and what is in store for their future. Think about it from the customer's top executive's perspective. What do they think and worry about? What do they want to talk about?

Make time to talk to top executives with your hypotheses. Compare notes. Listen. Tactfully challenge their thinking. And be sure to support your thoughts on their future with trends you see, read, and think about. Both of you will learn and likely shift from your original views.

Out of these conversations will come insights, and insights will generate innovation. When you talk about the future and possibilities, you are on more equal footing with your customers' senior executives.

It's hard to "out know" senior executives on their existing business. They have all the numbers and internal analysis. But most executives relish the chance to talk about their future, especially with someone who has done his or her homework and is not blinded by internal biases.

Here's an example. We had completed some successful projects with GE and had begun building good senior executive confidence and relationships as the world was opening up after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Interestingly, several of the senior GE executives in their international group, both finance and operations, had been impressed with our globally connected team. They were open to meet and "just talk about the future."

We had done some homework and thinking ourselves and realized that international growth at the time was high on GE's agenda. We had a candid exchange. We talked about our own expansion and challenges and how we had organized ourselves around a few clients like GE to insure that we would not be siloed by country or internal service lines. They liked our frankness and went on to share some of their future strategies.

As the conversation progressed, they inquired about our strengths in China, India, and Mexico. We had ourselves rapidly expanded in the last several years in China. We had been involved with another client in India and knew the head of our office there, so we could speak comfortably

about it. At the time, we were not entirely familiar with our Mexico operations but promised to follow up quickly with an objective assessment.

The future was now. Soon after this meeting, we traveled to China to assess our resources and meet our senior partner. We also reinforced the good relationship with our senior partner in India, and we reached out to Mexico to get to know the senior leadership there.

Within three months, we had projects or GE acquisitions going in all three countries. Within six months, the cover of Fortune magazine had featured GE opening up these and other countries around the world.

Again, be sure to talk about the future. Listen. Challenge. Be candid. And be prepared to shift and act.

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Most Entrepreneurs Are Innovative, But Not All Innovators Are Entrepreneurs

This is fairly straightforward if you think about it. But, why do we sometimes miss the obvious?

Entrepreneurs are starting a business or bringing something new to the marketplace. But many innovative, creative people work for others.

One important point here is that, early on in your career (or if you are somewhat inexperienced), you can learn on someone else's nickel. Learn the basics of business, experiment with your ideas, and contribute. This can be a win-win situation.

While leading innovation teams at Wilkinson, Noxell, Gillette, and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), I realized that we could inspire team members from different functional areas in a company to become more innovative. These areas included marketing, sales, operations, finance, R&D, human resources, and information technology.

We would invite people from different functional areas to be a part of our team and then talk with our customers firsthand. Each team member would pick up on the needs of the client from a different perspective (depending on whether his or her specialty was sales, finance, operations, or IT, for example) and then lend his or her individual skills to construct solutions.

After 12 years working for large companies, I dove into becoming an entrepreneur with two partners who greatly complemented my strengths. We co-founded the Consumer Financial Institute (CFI), which eventually became the largest independent provider of financial planning in the United States. Instead of catering to the wealthy, CFI targeted the middle income family.

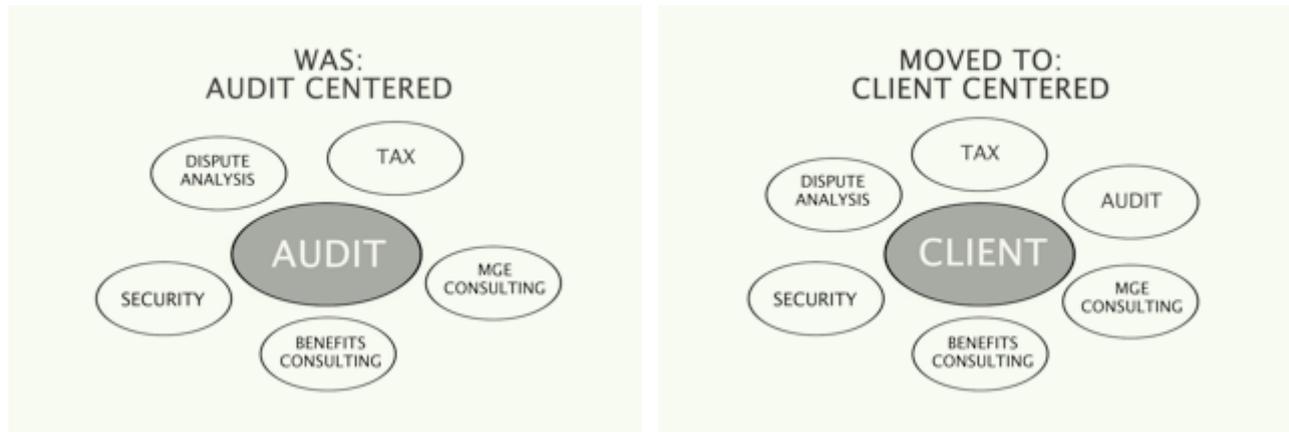
Although our company started small, we realized that most of the skills needed to be innovative were, in fact, common to both those in larger companies as well as those in smaller start-ups.

Regardless of size, though, like-minded innovators can find ways to bridge the disparities often found between small and large companies. Innovation can take place in any size organization. It's not the size as much as the attitude that counts.

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Put the Client in the Middle

By putting the client in the middle, an organization can transform from being a selling organization to a need fulfillment organization. This must be constructed from internal client facing professionals—the new middle. Using a large accounting firm as an illustration of this construct, the diagram shows the transition from an audit-centric organization to a truly objective consulting company built around the client needs:



As the organization becomes more proficient listening to client needs and objectively fulfilling them, another level of opportunity presents itself: the integration of the service providing company around those needs of their customer and customer's customer. Essentially, when the client is purposefully placed in the middle, the culture of the business will change and innovation will follow.

I was fortunate to witness this culture shift at Price Waterhouse (PW) in the 90s when the term "client" was redefined as "any company that paid the firm for any services rendered" (as opposed to only auditing services). Global Client Service Partners began to cultivate client relationships by placing clients in the middle and by focusing on their needs, not just what services the firm had to offer them at the time. This new business model produced enormous global growth and profits for Price Waterhouse and set the historic merger and integration with Coopers & Lybrand in motion to become the PwC powerhouse. Placing the client in the middle is one important key to sustained innovation.

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Set Your Priorities on New Products/Services

Sadly, the “here and now” almost always takes priority over new products. If your desire is to get new products or services to the marketplace, you need someone (or a specific group) solely dedicated to that task. But growing the revenue and profits of an existing business almost always wins the priority challenge. And, unfortunately, innovation often takes a back seat. It shouldn't.

Instead, put innovation in the front seat. Better yet, let innovation do some driving. Don't muddy it with the existing “here and now” business.

One of the truisms of business is the need to separate out, organizationally, the focus on developing new products and services from maintaining existing products and services in an organization.

For entrepreneurs, new development is their primary—sometimes only—focus. It reflects their need for survival. Getting something new to the market place to begin a revenue stream is their driving force.

Larger organizations such as Gillette, PepsiCo, PwC, IBM, and Procter & Gamble have capitalized on making this organizational separation between new and existing products and services.

But the list of organizations who do not separate out new product and service innovation is even longer. They, predominantly, do not experience innovative success.

Innovation is hard. It takes time and creative thought. It takes an experimental philosophy and willingness to take risks and endure failures—and to learn from those failures.

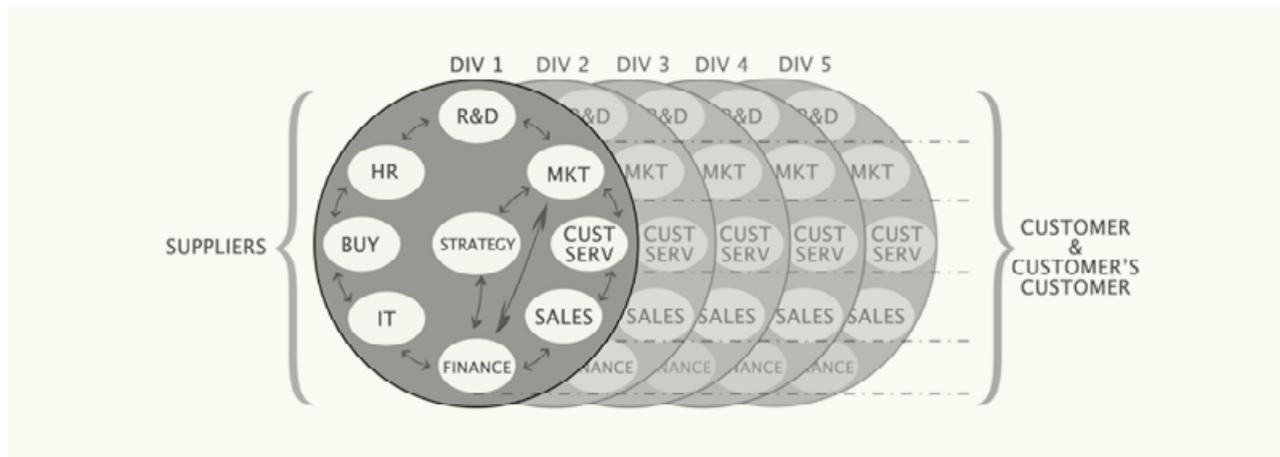
Not everyone is willing to do this. Find or recruit those who are willing, and give them air cover and high level access. Give them enough organizational separation, so they are not bogged down by day-to-day business and the pressures of near-term profits. Successful innovation does take a degree of separation from existing business.

Innovate Through Integration

Innovation can come through many unusual means. Most companies struggle when it comes to working across their organizational silos due to different organizational functions, divisions, and processes. For some companies, problems are compounded if geography plays a role, and there are divisions in other cities or countries.

If you can master communication and integration across silos, you can find a unique way to serve customers and gain a leg up on the competition.

The illustration below shows the many facets of this integration for the service provider across all functions (and multiple divisions if applicable) riveted to the “client” or “customer” and “customer’s customer” needs. If we think of each of these points of contact as a “node,” each of these nodes is a leadership job and opportunity to bring the company closer to a need fulfillment company. This is another look at the “middle.” The middle of a network.



Again, each node is an opportunity to “lead from the middle” and focus on the client’s needs and innovatively grow revenue. Keep in mind that most companies struggle when it comes to working across their organization’s often disconnected divisions, functions, processes, or silos.

An example. In the ’90s, PepsiCo had a reputation of being quite decentralized by division. Measurement and career success intensified the divisional separation, as it was the source for identifying rising star executives. This meant that the Beverage/Pepsi division operated distinctly differently from Frito Lay/Snacks and the Restaurant division, which, at the time, consisted of KFC, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut.

As several new acquisitions (Tropicana and Quaker) added to the complexity of PepsiCo, it became apparent that they needed to alter their singular divisional organization to a strategy and structure that was more integrated. This was accomplished successfully over several years. It allowed more integrated and innovative cooperation among divisions and more coordinated efforts to deal with common customers such as the very large retailers.

The clout that this afforded PepsiCo was immense. They realized they were among the largest product and service providers to many large retailers. At Walmart, for example, PepsiCo’s total divisional sales made them the largest provider. It added to the complexity and challenges to

integrate across divisions, but PepsiCo knew it afforded aspects of competitive uniqueness and power—especially as Category Management came increasingly into play.

Similarly, in the UK, Gillette was one of the largest providers to Boots (the dominant drug chain) of total sales of razor blades, toiletries, pens, appliances, dental products, and batteries.

There is clout in relationships—when effectively combined and integrated. There is also competitive innovation and power through divisional integration. Conversely, disconnect and lack of communication is not at all conducive to innovation in any organization.

If one can master communication and integration across these disparate silos, then unique and innovative ways to serve clients and customers will evolve and give an organization a leg up on its competition. This innovation by integration opportunity becomes even more competitively differentiating when one considers integrating across international boundaries.

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Encourage Access Up and Down the Organization

Understanding this need for “access” is key. Top leadership must have innovative growth and revenue to thrive and survive. Top executives must understand what innovations are coming up in an organization so they are able to act, react, reinforce, and reward innovative risk-taking. Those in the middle must also understand how having access to top executives and management can (and will) affect their ability to innovate and to succeed.

Access to the highest levels within an organization is not only healthy, but essential—and the highest levels in an organization must be aware of what is happening in the midlevel and lower levels of an organization.

Successful innovative entities must have access up and down an organization.

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This critical level of access can be leveraged, of course, through email and other newer technologies that appear on the market practically every day. The effect of developing technologies? They have the ability to greatly flatten increasingly horizontal organizations. Both the top C-level and middle must work differently with clients and customers. However both must continually question and try to predict what the client's real needs are today, what they will be tomorrow—and on into the future.

In the early 1990s, senior leadership at Price Waterhouse saw the need for an innovative alteration in its organizational structure to help accommodate the changing needs of its global clients. PW selected a small group of partners to participate in an experiment designed to work across internal service lines as well as across different countries around the globe. These partners were given full support and backing by senior leadership to overcome any internal resistance to the changes, or to territorial behavior that could potentially derail their attempts to innovate in what was historically known as a decentralized organizational structure.

The initial experiments were successful partly because of the wholehearted support and quick feedback the partners received from top executives in regard to working up and down the organization. The access partners had allowed for fast conflict resolution, and as a result of

the initiatives, PW evolved as one of the most integrated global firms with enhanced global client relationships and revenue. A win-win for PW and for its clients.

Truly encouraging access up and down an organization lays a healthy foundation for innovation, but innovation can be further enhanced by focusing on the client.

Build an Innovative Network

People innovate ideas.

If you can find like-minded people in an organization and build a network with those who think in a creative and innovative manner, your chances for success increase—especially if you focus everyone in the network around the customer, and being uniquely important to them.

Start with a few people you know best. Meet, talk, and share “working with customer” success stories. Plan another meeting, and each of you invite two to three like-minded friends to share customer success stories. Reach out for diverse functional, divisional, and country diversity. Repeat. The innovative network can build geometrically and can change the culture of an organization.

Price Waterhouse comes to mind yet again because it is a proven example of one approach to building an innovative network. In the mid 1990s, a small group of three interested PW partners, each with Fortune 200 multinational client responsibilities, got together over dinner in London. Their like-minded thinking made them realize the needs of their clients would best be filled if a global, coordinated network could be built to work across borders, lines of service, and the seams of their clients' own silos.

The network grew to over a hundred interested partners across the U.S., Europe, Asia, and South America, and each partner had become a node, willing to share and innovate around the needs of their clients. If someone ventured into a new country, there was someone to call for a trusted opinion on how to proceed, and who to rely on. The network became the envy of other partners who had similar responsibilities and was eventually formally recognized as part of the firm's "Global Ambition" to serve global clients across disciplines and across borders. As a result, clients recognized PW to be one of the most integrated global service organizations, and this innovative reputation resulted in literally billions in new revenue for the firm.

In addition to creating more revenue and growth for an organization, becoming skilled at observing and transferring, and building an innovative like-minded network, can lead to career progression.

Career Progression

The T-model schematic below shows how one might move from within his or her current silo of expertise—vertically rising from “doer” to “manager” to “leader,” and then importantly ACROSS other parts of the organization. This across-ness might include other functional areas, divisions, or even international assignments.



As one gains experiences across an organization, one also gains integration skills and an important network of connections that enables him or her to lead differently—more effectively. The across skills in complex organizations are the innovative skills of the future, especially when focused purposefully and successfully on the customer.

Many professionals can likely identify with my students at Darden who came back to get their MBA after working at a job that left them feeling dissatisfied. They were recognized as smart, reliable people who got things done by delegating tasks, directing or supervising, and even motivating others at their former jobs. They were considered doers. Yet many hit a wall and felt stuck. They were not progressing as quickly as they had hoped. By returning to school, they picked up broader management skills that allowed them to work more effectively across organizations and have the ability to integrate skills and ideas across their organizations. For them, additional education opened doors and they experienced meaningful results.

For others, taking a personal and more independent initiative to develop and sharpen their observation and transfer skills, and to create meaningful networks has greatly propelled their upward career progression.

No matter the approach, guided or independent, we all have the ability to learn and progress.

Summary

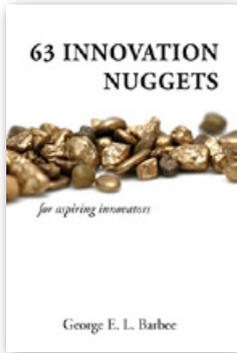
This new wave of innovative genius is within us and within our control. We can encourage access up and down an organization and find ways to put the client in the middle. We can become more observant and learn to transfer our observations, and integrate innovation across different divisions, functions, processes, or silos in an organization. We can build a network.

We are at an exciting time in the realm of possibilities. Technology keeps improving communication, opening doors, helping us work more efficiently, and blurring the lines between silos' real and imagined borders. The need for CEO's to grow revenue internally is creating many innovative career opportunities for younger professionals who can build their innovative confidences in new and different ways.

Some of us may be innately a bit more creative or innovative than others, but I believe (and have witnessed) that anyone—from young professionals to executives—can learn how to become more innovative and change the way we look at ourselves and the world.

It's the opportunity to lead innovation from the “new middle,” and the middle is us. 📍

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | George E. L. Barbee's 45 year business career has taken him to over 40 different countries over four continents. He has founded three successful entrepreneurial companies and has led innovation with several Fortune 100 companies including Gillette, General Electric, PepsiCo, IBM and PriceWaterhouseCoopers. Barbee has written and originated numerous articles, and has appeared multiple times on NBC's *Today Show*, ABC's *Good Morning America*, PBS and CNN. He has also been quoted widely in *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* and other national publications throughout his career.

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