



Puhujien Foorumi

Kesäkuu 2006

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Nigel May Barlow

Re-think: The New Leadership Agenda

Innovation is high on most company's wish lists, but it's harder to put into practice than most realise or acknowledge. Nigel May Barlow, author, speaker, and professional re-thinking describes why – and what to do about it.

'One month in a job and you go blind' was a statement recently made to me by a client in the engineering industry. It's so easy to be overshadowed by today's demands, business and thinking-as-usual, whereas innovation depends on thinking as unusual.

To re-think is to come up with different and better solutions to familiar problems, and it often involves the mindset of the outsider, or what I call 'open page thinking'. Branson started Virgin Atlantic with no experience of running an airline. But he did have the fresh, uncluttered perception of a beginner based on his own experience of being a dissatisfied customer of air travel. To infuse a more open attitude into a fairly mature industry, he's made a habit of hiring people who do not have a background in the airline business. Except the pilots, of course.

Differentiation is a perennial theme that all companies wrestle with. Working across business sectors, I'm struck by how the majority are trying to differentiate – in exactly the same way as their competitors. The same list of corporate values (there seem to be only eight of these in



Nigel May Barlow is an agent provocateur and creative speaker who has worked with many of the world's leading organizations.

[Find out more about Nigel Barlow - click here.](#)



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the Western world), visiting seminars and reading books about the same 'secrets' (sic) of leadership, customer focus and competitive advantage. Time for a re-think! Here are some themes on thinking differently I work on with my clients.

You can't outsource thinking

Differentiate – by being different

Successful, no frills SouthWest Airlines were arguing with one of their competitors, Northwest, about who was the best choice for customers. They chose to put the following notice in the American papers:

"After lengthy deliberation at the highest executive level and extensive consultation with our legal department, we have arrived at an official response to Northwest Airlines' claim to be the number one in customer satisfaction: Liar, Liar – Pants on fire!"

Now this is hardly enough to build a business strategy around, but it couldn't have been mistaken for Lufthansa or BA, could it? As one of SWA's values is 'fun', this demonstrates a bold commitment to it.

Practical re-think: Do your vision, mission, value statements, and even your website look like everybody else's? What would they look like if you allowed more of your uniqueness and true difference into the picture?

Be a creator – not a critic

We all know that little voice inside that whispers, 'what you are creating is not good!' I call this, 'yes-but thinking'.

Count how many times today you yes-but the ideas of others – your partner, children, colleagues, or a new notion you read in the press. Typically, you may say or think, 'With respect...' 'I hear what you say, but...' 'The problem with that is...' And so on.

The antidote is to train your first reflex to be 'why not?' or 'what if?' Explore, extend, and play with new ideas – yours or those of other's – before you condemn.



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Practical re-think: You are either a creator or a critic - there's no middle ground. Just switch off that little voice that's holding you back. Ban yes-butting at your meetings for a month and see how innovation flourishes!

Commodity hell – or value heaven?

You don't need to guess which direction most of your customers will want to push you towards! While so many suppliers profess the aim of becoming 'the preferred partner', not enough focus is put on courting, seducing and drawing onto the dance floor the shy, distant or unwilling customer. At arm's length, you are always drifting towards commodity hell because that is the gravitational pull on most products over time. Seek out and learn how to sell the most important intangible for your balance sheet – value – and you are set to take back control of the conversation. Away from price: the China price, the procurement price, but always the lower price!

Practical re-think: Train 'black belts' in value calculating, value stories and value selling. It's arguably the only priority for your front line salesforce.

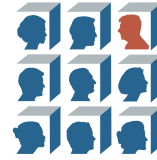
Think both/and – not either/or

Successful re-thinkers are those who think in a both/and way:

- Quality and price.
- Speed and consistency.
- Obsession with the measurables and valuing the intangibles.

Management writer Kjell Nordstrom talks about organizations being either sexy or fit; my experience is that in B2B you have to be both. And perhaps the biggest both/and re-think is that if you want your customers to be loyal to you, you have to be loyal to them.

Practical re-think: Take one specific aspect of your business – finance, marketing, manufacturing – and identify where you could most usefully think both/and. This is a more balanced scorecard – in the brain!



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What “war for talent”?

There's too much belief that talent is a finite resource and that you have to buy the best to succeed. However, there's emerging research that shows that buying 'big hitters' from another industry or company is often not a good investment. People underestimate the problems of cultural fit, or indeed whether the new player still has the hunger that brought them initial success.

Most businesses 'don't know what they know' about their existing talent pool, demonstrating a lack of leadership on the talent agenda.

Here's leadership in one line: leaders overestimate the power of what they say and underestimate the power of what they do – unlike Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of GE, who says: “I spend 40 percent of my time on people issues.” It's not surprising that a recent Business Week article commented that GE's greatest product was leaders!

Practical re-think: You are your diary. How are you going to spend more time, effort and resources on becoming a connoisseur at both spotting and developing talent?

Finally, have a more personal re-think...

More work life imbalance please!

There are two aspects of the much discussed 'work-life balance' that need re-thinking. Firstly, the expression itself implies that work is somehow not life. This is a particularly virulent strain of either/or thinking. Next, the very notion of 'balancing' sounds like hard work, as indeed walking a tightrope is. However, there is a third position: one that allows you to put more play into your work, and more purpose and meaning into your home life. The most fulfilled people I know are those who have dissolved the boundaries between love, work and play.

Practical re-think: Rediscover your 'sleeping fantasy', whether it's playing a musical instrument, photography or dancing, and begin it this week. A feeling of balance will follow.



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Final thought

Should you re-think everything? No – you'd go crazy!
But when you need to re-think, it's the mindset of the creator ('why not?') rather than the critic ('yes, but') that you have to prefer. Only new thinking can unlock the 'nova' in innovation. Today, try to overhear yourself saying something new or different. If you can, you're on the path to becoming a successful re-thinker.