

# Five Principles for Innovation

By Jeff Cowart

Innovation is a continuing big idea for leaders. Search the word in Google and you find 397 million hits. Leaders today are faced with a continuing quest to grow and apply innovation in our respective enterprises.

With that in mind, I thought I might propose some thought stimulators to assist the quest. Below are some of my favorite quotes that I find relevant when thinking about innovation (or just about anything where forward strategy is involved).

- **“The real voyage of discovery comes not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”** – *Marcel Proust*. Innovation, creativity, successful entrepreneurship are all based on cultivating the personal ability to see the current state in new ways and create new paths from what is. In times of radical and rapid change, strong leaders learn to “see”.
- **“Nothing is more dangerous than idea when it’s the only one we have.”** – *Emile Chartier*. To truly drive innovation, and balanced lives, we all need to come to grips with the reality that we tend to fall in love with our own stuff. Powerful ideas come not only from challenging our own myths, habits and practices, but in collaborating with others who have different great stuff.
- **“Simplicity and common sense should characterize planning and strategic direction.”** - *Ingvar Kamrad*. This is how the founder of Ikea framed his retail idea. The foundational idea for Southwest Airlines was sketched out on a cocktail napkin in a San Antonio bar in 1967. As our enterprises create more and more forced structure to evaluate things, don’t forget to hang on to and honor simplicity in big ideas.
- **“Innovation is not the product of logical thought, although the result is tied to logical structure.”** - *Albert Einstein*. I think we all know Einstein’s most famous quote: “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” (There is more to that quote, by the way: “Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”) But, his observation on innovation is also quite powerful. Inspiration and sometimes wild creative imagination are foundational fuel for innovation. But, once selected, ideas require logical structure and systems to succeed.
- **“If you keep on doing what you’ve always done, you’ll keep getting what you’ve always got.”** - *W. L. Bateman*. How many industries in history have we seen radically reshaped because they were unable to frame the future apart from the conventions of their successful past? Successful futures come from leveraging learnings from the past, appropriately contextualizing those learnings to current and future states, and in “having new eyes,” as our old

friend Proust would advise. Innovation cannot be achieved if our vision remains fixed on a world we once knew and loved that looks so inviting in the rearview mirror.

I've spent considerable time over the years helping organizations and leaders create strategies to meet the challenges of shifting landscapes. These are not the only universal truths of innovation and change. But, in my experience they are universal, true, and recurring. And, it never hurts to overlay a little dose of philosophical reflection on the matrix of our ideas.