

THE UN-COMFORT ZONE

With Robert Wilson

BUCK THE STATUS QUO SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO KISS "TRADITION" GOOD-BYE

When we attend the movies we frequently engage in a willing suspension of disbelief, which enables us to accept implausible scenarios, and enjoy the show. It keeps us from yelling, "No way!" at the screen when revolvers fire more than six shots, when car thieves find the keys under the sun visor, and when a paperclip can pick any lock.

Some people, however, don't leave that ability at the theater door.

Innovators willingly suspend disbelief - all the time. It enables them to imagine airplanes and telephones or Game Boys and Super Soakers. It frees them from the boundaries that contain most of us, so they can pursue ideas that others think are preposterous. As M. C. Escher, the artist famous for his drawings of impossible structures, put it, "Only those who attempt the absurd will achieve the impossible."

One of the cardinal characteristics of creative thinkers is their willingness to abandon the traditional ways of viewing things. They question authority and challenge the status quo. They ask questions, like: Why does it have to be this way? Why can't it be that way?

Some who have gone against the prevailing beliefs, have done so at their own demise. Galileo famously went against the Catholic Church by defending the theory that the earth revolves around the sun instead of vice versa. He was tortured and sentenced to life in prison for his differing views.

Sometimes it's necessary to go against the status quo. John Palumbo, whose company BigHeads Network which takes the concept of the creative mastermind group to a whole new level, explains, "You can't always rely on those predictable sources for ideas and inspiration." To make his point he offers this statement from Henry Ford, "If I had

asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse."

However, innovators cannot always ignore the status quo. Change Management expert, Michaelene Conner, says, "The whole world has a problem with reframing especially when their ideas are tied into established beliefs, behaviors and assumptions. Culturally speaking. If you travel the road of adversity in a culture that is not aligned with your way of thinking... bottom line culture always wins." To illustrate her point, she says that when he introduced the light bulb in 1879, "Thomas Edison thought that there would be a negative initial reaction to his device because it was so foreign to most people's lives or frame of reference for how they did things. To lessen the shock of his radical innovation, he designed the light bulb to resemble as closely as possible the gas lights of the period."

Unfortunately, some companies protect the status quo to their own detriment. Paul Paetz, CEO of Innovative Disruption, Inc., offers this example: "Kodak invented the digital camera in 1975, but decided it wasn't good enough to commercialize and that it would undermine their film, paper and chemistry businesses. So, they did nothing with it, allowing Sony to be first to market with a digital camera in 1981." Today Kodak is facing bankruptcy.

Legend has it that Frank Gordy and Fred Smith were both told by professors that their chosen businesses would not work. Gordy's prof at Georgia

Tech told him that he was too stupid to even run a hot dog stand. So, Frank dropped out of school, and opened a hot dog stand across the street from Tech which eventually became The Varsity, the world's largest Drive-In restaurant. Smith, founder of Federal Express, wrote a paper for an economics class at Yale describing an overnight air delivery service for which he received a "C."

In 1972, looking for a competitive edge against market leader McDonalds, Burger King went against common industry wisdom. The number two burger franchise incorporated a labor-intensive program of allowing people to choose how their burger was prepared. This defied the whole fast food concept that meals must be prepared assembly-line style according to one universally appealing recipe. Burger King's "Have It Your Way" was a hit, and forced the entire industry to follow suit.

Challenging the status quo isn't all about science and business; it even works in fields as rigid as religion. My friend, Lisa Leeper, told me, "John Eldredge, of *Ransomed Heart*, recast completely for me what it means to be a Christian by putting it all in terms of a relationship with a loving God who's romancing me, rather than me trying to appease a forbidding, disappointed judge."

I love the story of Billy Beane, General Manager of the Oakland Athletics, who went against the grain in sports. It is told in detail in the

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book and movie titled, Moneyball. Beane did not have the budget to recruit top players for his team. So, he used player statistics to acquire team members rather than the traditional method of subjective scouting. It enabled him to get talented, yet undervalued players, and build a winning team.

The good news is that new products are introduced to the market every year by small business owners who are not content with the way things are. Jake Rothschild, of Ohmgbrands, was told that it was impossible to create a non-dairy ice cream with the pleasing texture of the real thing. Unwilling to accept that, he experimented for five years. Using a combination of almond milk, coconut milk, avocado and plantain, he came up with a formula that he calls Joyscream. It's a success. I tasted Joyscream; and it really does have the taste and texture of ice cream.

Just because things are going well, doesn't mean you shouldn't question authority or challenge the status quo. There's always room for improvement - whether it is in business or your personal life - asking questions may enlighten you to problems before they occur. Speaker bureau owner, Andrea Gold says, "Status quo living does not allow for challenging one's beliefs and habits."

Robert Evans Wilson, Jr. is an author, humorist and innovation consultant. He works with companies that want to be more competitive and with people who want to think like innovators. Robert is also the author of the humorous children's book: *The Annoying Ghost Kid*. For more information on Robert, please visit www.jumpstartyourmeeting.com