

Welcome to the ninth edition of Jennifer Selby Long's *Traveling Light*. *Traveling Light* is a newsletter exploring how those blessed with the talent and opportunity to lead can be more effective and lighten the load inherent in their lives, based on the work of executive coach and management consultant Jennifer Selby Long. Copyright 2008 Jennifer Selby Long. All rights reserved.

### **How to Build an Innovative Culture so You Can Leave Your Competition in the Dust**

Earlier this week, Kirk and I spent time with my sister and her family near Portland. What on earth does this have to do with innovative companies? Read on.

On Sunday, my nephew, Logan, was busily working on a homework assignment with his friends Ryan and Dillon. It was amazing what these three sixth-graders were doing. They created a video about the Himalayas, complete with slides culled from the internet, homemade cardboard mountains, a painted-foam demonstration of how the mountains were formed, an action sequence involving India moving through the ocean to join the Asian continent, detailed explanations about the earth's crust, and the grand finale – Indian music played in unison on a cello, electric guitar, and trumpet. O.k., it was an, um, *unusual* way to score the piece, but I had to admire their boldness in charting new musical terrain.

It was amazing how much innovative thought these three kids put into their creation and in bringing it to the market (the market in this case being their teacher, Mr. Lee).

Even more amazing was the all-out fanatical mobilization of eight adults (all of the kids' parents, plus Kirk and myself) to execute the project after it hit an enormous speed bump. After spending hours trying to get their video on to a DVD for the class, Logan asked for help. Many hours later, the various parents who had tried to figure it out threw in the towel, got a little sleep, and went to work.

Since they were unable to transfer the video to DVD, my sister gave up her computer for the day (the one she needs for her business, by the way), so Logan could take it to class to play the video.

The kids tried to get the volume high enough for Mr. Lee to hear, but he couldn't hear it, and admonished them for wasting 30 minutes of class time. Believe me, I had a few choice words to describe Mr. Lee at that point, none of which can be printed in this newsletter.

He did, however, give them one more night to fix the problem.

That evening, as the tension mounted, it was an all-out technical SWOT team attack. Luckily for my family, I married an IT guy.

Even though Kirk doesn't do much hands-on work with computers these days, he dove in and started problem-solving, eventually finding an obscure program that was out on the internet, which he downloaded and used to transfer the video to DVD. He is now the family hero.

In all, we estimated that the kids spent 15 hours creating the video and at least four more trying to transfer it to a DVD, and the adults spent a whopping 18 hours bringing the creation to life, while also pursuing their other work responsibilities, the ones associated with our jobs, that is. We were tempted to send Mr. Lee an invoice.

Now, here's the connection with innovative companies. Doesn't this make you wonder how the naturally creative and innovative processes of children, and the rabid enthusiasm of parents to support their kids' innovation, turn into the idea-crushing, soul-smashing bureaucracy of the workplace?

The pithy answer is that companies and markets are bigger and a lot more complicated, and adults don't care about their own ideas as much as their kids' ideas, and there's some truth in all that.

However, some companies do manage to pull off significant innovation, much to their advantage. It comes down to a dozen factors that are directly correlated with innovation. Some of them are obvious, while others are surprising. They are:

1. Support and encouragement of taking risks rather than maintaining the status quo. In the words of Guy Kawasaki, "Don't worry, be crappy."
2. A corporate leadership team that plans for most of the company's growth through the development of *new* products and services, and is diligent in ensuring that the best ideas are exploited and less promising ideas killed early on.
3. Inspirational leadership with an inspirational vision.
4. High trust relationships, relatively free of interpersonal conflict.
5. Investment in and encouragement of skill development at all levels.
6. Substantial, sustained information sharing, which creates well informed employees. These employees can apply their extensive knowledge of customer desires, the company's goals and strategies, and competitive threats to improve their own work, as well as offer innovative solutions beyond their own immediate area of responsibility.
7. Family friendly or "life friendly" work practices. Some examples are flexible office hours, child care, part-time arrangements, or telecommuting. Take note: this one I found through quite a bit of research, not through my direct experience, and it amazed me that it was directly correlated with innovation. I had always seen this as an all-around good idea for attracting and retaining employees, but did not realize that it is directly correlated with innovation success. Go figure. I learn something new every day.
8. Demonstrable valuing of differences. This includes the traditional dimensions such as gender, race, physical disability, etc. as well as the less visible dimensions, such as different ways of thinking or approaching the work to be done, different personal values, religious or spiritual beliefs, different lifestyles, etc.
9. Semi- or fully autonomous teams, who are free to solve most problems and make decisions on their own or by working directly with other teams -- without escalating to management for approval. This can and should include decisions about which of their creative ideas to further explore and which to kill off.
10. Direct employee involvement in innovation via routine team briefings with feedback, and involvement in the decisions on how work is organized and outcomes improved.
11. Goals relevant to innovation such as increase in number of new services launched, success rate of innovative products and services, decrease in non-value-added work due to process innovation, better speed to market, etc., and a means of measuring progress toward them.
12. Adequate resources to exploit ideas. Some examples include hiring temporary staff to cover some routine day-to-day functions while key team members dedicate themselves to bringing up a new business, funding market research for new ideas, and hiring process engineers to teach employees how to map and improve their work processes so they can free up more time to pursue new ideas.

As I look back on Logan's project, I see a lot of these.

The kids never questioned the necessity of going through many creative ideas and rejecting them before landing on the winner.

I must begrudgingly admit that Mr. Lee is excellent at pushing the kids to grow through the development of something new on their part rather than rote memorization, and he invests an incredible amount of time encouraging the development of their skills.

The kids and parents have gotten to know one another well, and enjoy a high level of trust with relatively little interpersonal conflict, and they accept their children's individual personalities as they are, quirks and all.

The kids had to work as an autonomous team, working through conflicts and making decisions without escalating to Mr. Lee.

And the list goes on.

In a way, what it takes for a company to innovate is not so different from what it takes for a kid to innovate, after all. It just takes a lot more discipline, focus, change management, and people skills.

The kids took their DVD to class the next day, and played it for Mr. Lee. They got an A+.

For more on the secrets of innovative companies, go to [http://www.selbygroup.com/docs/Selby\\_Whitepaper\\_on\\_Building\\_Innovative\\_Cultures\\_2\\_.pdf](http://www.selbygroup.com/docs/Selby_Whitepaper_on_Building_Innovative_Cultures_2_.pdf).

## News

I'm going on vacation in Spain! Yippee! Kirk and I will be there in May. Tentatively, we've set the dates at May 8 – 26. During that time, Janet will check my emails and voicemails regularly and will contact me in the event of an emergency. However, if you're my client, you're not likely to have an emergency because you're managing your organization more strategically (right?), so I plan to kick back and enjoy the sun, the culture, and of course, the sangria. And if you really, *really* need me, you'll be able to find me, but my response times will not be as fast as usual, and my cell phone won't even work in some parts of the countryside, so please plan accordingly.

For the folks at Cisco, my Cisco ID will soon be up and running again. However, it will be the worst way to reach me, because I'm often out of my office with only my Blackberry, and for security reasons you all understand (several of you, in fact, set the policy!), I can't point my Cisco ID to my Selby Group ID. This means I'll only see your emails when I'm in my office using my VPN connection. Bottom line: unless your email or OL request can wait a day or more, send it to [jennifer.selby@selbygroup.com](mailto:jennifer.selby@selbygroup.com).

*And three cheerful reminders:*

TOMORROW! Those of you who've wanted to apply your Myers-Briggs learning at home will enjoy *Opposites Attract -- And Live to Tell About It*, a panel of Type-savvy couples sharing the secrets of how they use psychological Type in their relationships. February 9, 2008, 9:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. at the Hilton Garden Inn, 2000 Bridgepointe Circle, San Mateo. BAAPT charges practically nothing this year: \$25 per guest, including a continental breakfast.

I'll be teaching *Coaching for Performance* in the UC-Berkeley Extension Business Management program March 15 and 22. With a little bit of pride, I'm thrilled to report that I am one of the highest-rated instructors in the entire UC-Berkeley Extension program, based on a comparison of 49,000 feedback forms obtained from thousands of classes. The Coaching class will be held at the downtown San Francisco campus at 425 Market Street. There will be very little theory and tons of practice. These courses typically have an enrollment of 12 students or less, so you will get plenty of coaching from a master coach. If you want to immediately be a better coach and manager of coaching resources, go to <http://www.unex.berkeley.edu/cat/course76.html>.



This is the last quarter for Selby Group's Private Coaching program for individuals who want to invest in their own development -- with their own funds, not their employer's ([http://www.selbygroup.com/coaching\\_individual.html](http://www.selbygroup.com/coaching_individual.html)). After March 31, it's gone. Current and past private coaching clients will be able to continue their programs after March 31, but we won't take any more new clients after Q1 is over.

Contact us for further information at: [lighten@selbygroup.com](mailto:lighten@selbygroup.com).

To subscribe, go to [www.selbygroup.com](http://www.selbygroup.com) and click on the Free Newsletter link.

Past copies of this newsletter are archived on our web site: [www.selbygroup.com](http://www.selbygroup.com).

© 2008 Jennifer Selby. All rights reserved.

Please share the contents of this newsletter with anyone at all. I ask only that you maintain the copyright and attribution.

Jennifer Selby Long  
Selby Group