

Tools for Innovative Thinking

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The mind is full of ideas from past experiences and from observations gained through conversations, movies, television, etc. While you may chose to rely on your subconscious mind to access these ideas, why not take a more structured approach, using specific tools and techniques?

I recently participated in a webinar by the Leadership Network on “Discoveries about Innovation” in the church. Their definition of innovation was “a change of practice to improve performance; often developed within constraints.” As a church leader, you’re very aware of the constraints that are often placed on you. How can you be innovative under those circumstances?

In her book “The Seeds of Innovation”, Elaine Dundon has created a systems thinking approach to innovation. At first those two thoughts seem contradictory, but in reality it can become a very powerful synergy. For example, here’s a “toolkit” you can dive into when you are faced with a challenge in your ministry.

Rummaging in the Attic – elements of previous solutions or ideas can prove to be very valuable fuel for jump-starting your idea engine. Find old ideas, dust them off, and reconnect them in new ways to your current problem or opportunity.

Cultivating Obsession – a great way to find new ideas it to become obsessed with the challenge that confronts you. It means you have to immerse yourself in the challenge, to seek out all the information you possibly can. Obsession will lead to better insights.

Analyzing Frustrations – one of the most fertile areas for identifying new ideas is discovering what frustrates others about the current problem. Focusing on what is not working will sometimes be the origin of a new breakthrough idea.

Identifying the Gold Standard – no matter what the challenge you are facing, someone else has already been down that road. Seek out these people or organizations that have solved a similar challenge in an outstanding way. Make a list of the elements of the process or program that made it work for them, and relate this list to your situation.

Adopting and Adapting – great ideas already exist all around you. Find them out and adopt them as your own. Look within the category of your opportunity, but also look outside the box. Innovators look beyond the borders of their own situation to find new ideas to adopt and adapt.

Combining Ideas – innovative thinking is a little like a cake you bake: take a little of this, a little of that, put them together and you have a delicious dessert. Creative thinkers are aware of the objects and ideas around them and look for new connections by combining diverse ideas and objects.

Finding Similarities – think of other challenges that might be similar. Draw analogies to similar situations, let your mind wander, and you will most likely discover a new connection from an unlikely source.

Breaking Down the DNA – what if your problem is overwhelming? Break it down into its component parts and focus on it bit by bit. Analyzing every step in the process will allow you to discover new answers.

Listing and Twisting – this is actually a follow-on step from the previous one. Once you have listed the steps in the process, you can “twist” them around to find new ideas.

Become a Visual Thinker – something happens when we move away from a linear process of thinking and start to doodle or draw. I’m a big fan of this method; I have a 4’ x 8’ whiteboard on my office wall that I’m constantly stepping up to and sketching out an idea. It seems that your subconscious mind takes over and new connections begin to appear.

Whether you use a process like the ones above, or just pull up a chair with a cup of coffee in hand to think, the point is that innovation is a process. You know where you are; hopefully you know where you want to be. Let your imagination run wild in the space between, and before long you and your team will have a plan to move forward.

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