



The Innovators

Conversations

on the Cutting Edge

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Interview with Charlie Prather Author, speaker, consultant



Charlie's first book, [Blueprints for Innovation](#), was published by The American Management Association in 1995. His second book, [A Manager's Guide to Fostering Creativity & Innovation in Teams](#) was published by McGraw Hill in 2009. He is Senior Fellow of the Robert H. Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland, College Park. Charlie is a frequent keynote speaker and conference presenter. He is President of Bottom Line Innovation Associates, helping organizations develop Innovation as a core competency. Previously, Charlie served with DuPont and was founding manager of the DuPont Center for Creativity and Innovation. Charlie can be reached at Charlie@bottomlineinnovation.com

Interview conducted by Doug Berger, INNOVATE doug@innovate1st.com

Doug: Having just written your 2nd book on innovation, please step back and share your thinking on innovation and how it has evolved.

Charlie: I can start by recalling when I was a research manager at DuPont. We would take people offsite to resort locations, feed them nice food and let them play golf. And then, essentially we would say, "We've been nice to you. Now it's your turn to be nice to us. We've got these critical problems to solve and we need highly innovative ideas. Go be creative." Usually, we got nothing that we couldn't have gotten by staying home. At that point in time we didn't have the tools and the process for helping to ideate or make money out of ideas. So one step in my movement was recognizing that exhorting people to innovate didn't work. Through the DuPont Center for Creativity and Innovation, we found those tools and brought them into the company. That was a big step forward.

Companies now have many tools and process. So most recently, I've begun to realize that what really makes innovation work is top leadership commitment and personal involvement. There just isn't any substitute for that. Leaders need to be full players. In the book, I've got story after story of opportunities when executives attended the beginning of a meeting, said all the right words and then just went away. Innovation has to be important enough that the executive wants to spend his or her personal time on it. If it's not that important don't do it.

Doug: A trigger then, to having an executive lead innovation in a different way is that there needs to be a critical issue with which they are personally involved.

Charlie: Yes, that's an important trigger. When an executive gets the same old answers to the same old problems all the time, he or she might realize that they need a new direction in thinking, and they've got to lead that. As it turns out, being a leader of change is really a key point. Leaders need to take personal responsibility. If they expect their organization to be more innovative, it's going to take a concerted effort on their part to lead that way. There also needs to be a constancy of commitment. One of the real problems that occur in American business today is that senior leaders are moved around often. Innovation projects can take longer than the leader's lifespan within one particular assignment. The constancy of commitment on the part of upper level leadership needs to be provided. Otherwise, the new leader starts over again to put their personal stamp on efforts already underway and that slows everything down.

Doug: Dealing with innovation at an organizational level poses a different kind of challenge because an organization is not merely a series of projects. What are you finding works when a leader sets out to influence a larger system, of which they don't have full control?

Charlie: That's a really important question and an issue. One of the things we found is that it's the people at the lower levels who experience the results of a good or sadly, a poor environment. I liken it to taking an airplane trip, flying over New York City at 30,000 feet. When you look down, it looks pretty neat. When you are at street level you get a different view and see more of the problems. If you ask leaders what the environment is like and I've done this, they say, "It looks great." They don't have a thing to say that could be improved because they don't experience the consequences. However, if you ask the people doing the work, you get a whole new set of answers. The picture of the environment always gets better the higher up the organization you go. Every single time. It works to start with a leader's awareness that there is a gap in what we see, which is colored by our position in the organization.

Doug: How are people in the middle able to affect the larger organization?

Charlie: Almost nothing speaks better than success. For example, when a manager and his or her people have successes with innovation, they need to point it out so that the larger organization can take note.

Doug: Let's talk about the environment leaders need to create in which new ideas can come up from the organization, be properly considered and then implemented.

Charlie: That's a very critical point and something about which I'm passionate. Creating the environment itself is probably the single most important dimension that leaders can do well or poorly, when it comes to innovation. A welcoming environment can begin when the leader has an issue that needs to be solved and he or she puts that out as a request for ideas. Idea management systems can be effective when the issues are really keeping a senior manager awake at night and there are no easy answers. There are computerized idea management systems that do help that along. You can have the germ of an idea that gets built on by someone else. You can see other people's ideas to build upon.

Doug: You're saying that if you want to stimulate innovation, then you need to put on the table for your organization critical problems for which there are no easy answers.

Charlie: For me, that's the heart of it. It's about solving critical challenges in ways that you just wouldn't have had you kept thinking in the same old ways. Building in a level of dissatisfaction with the status quo makes people want to move. This can be built into that approach of putting on the table problems for which we don't have any easy solutions. At the same time, they are specific enough that we can audit and measure progress. For example, something like world hunger would be far too big and far too nebulous a problem to tackle. However, how to penetrate market X with our product Y to a greater degree within six months, could be specific enough to audit and measure.

Many companies have safety as a core value and there is something to be learned from that about a sustaining culture of innovation. Safety becomes a core value because of 3 things: 1) There is a reward and recognition structure. 2) There is a removal of taboo behavior. People who break safety rules ultimately lose their jobs if they keep it up. 3) There are the repetitive events where you constantly hear about safety. Let's take that and now think about how that might work for innovation.

Suppose you want to have innovation (like safety) as a corporate value. How might we have a reward and recognition system installed in support of that? Giving money is not the answer. What kind of taboo behaviors that work against innovation must we remove from the organization? This one is especially difficult because it causes pain and many leaders avoid the conflict that this usually requires. What kind of repetitive events might we institute? Like regular safety meetings, you might allocate 10 minutes of every staff meeting to some innovation topic or some creativity thinking tool, or something about innovation to keep it in front of people just like safety messages. How about Innovation Posters? The safety model is a good one to emulate as you consider what to do in these three areas.

Doug: There's the aspect of safety that's very easy to spot. You are working in an area and not wearing a hard hat. That's very visible to people. With innovation, many taboo behaviors are not readily visible.

Charlie: You're exactly right. Let me give you an example. One of the biggest taboos around innovation is when a boss takes someone's idea and presents it to senior leadership as his or her own, without attribution. This is very difficult to make visible. Other taboo behaviors are giving automatic or public "No's" to new ideas. Ideas are our babies and if your idea has been shot down in public, you're just going to shut up. When an atmosphere is so poisoned that you choose not to share your ideas, then no one can use the benefit of your creativity to make things better. I ask leaders to say three good things about every new idea before you say anything that might be considered questionable or negative. Another taboo is stopping with the first good idea. The best ideas come after we have run out of ideas and we have forced ourselves to break through the patterns that keep us in the box.

Doug: We've been talking about triggers for innovation, setting up the environment and creating a self sustaining culture. What else would you like to address?

Charlie: Every time I think about this, the thing I come back to is this - make sure that there is a champion of innovation in the upper levels of leadership. And by "champion of innovation" what I mean is someone who understands its value and its importance and its critical nature. When you have a good idea to turn into a product or service, if the upper level leadership doesn't champion it, it's going to be awfully hard for it to see the light of day.

Ideas have a shelf life, so innovation is a now thing, not a tomorrow thing. And like prepared foods, they go stale after awhile if nobody wants them.

One of my clients had the good fortune of having a leader who saw the value in all of this. He was the production manager for five plastics plants. He decided that nobody reporting to him would get promoted unless they became a facilitator of innovative thinking sessions. That's what made it take off for this organization.

Doug: What are some of the key ideas that we haven't yet touched on from your new book?

Charlie: The book is, "A Manager's Guide to Fostering Innovation and Creativity in Teams." With a team focus, it is critical to resource to win vs. resource not to lose. A mistake is to start an effort and under-resource it so that it doesn't die, but it doesn't live either. I've seen some projects with people allocated only 1 day every two weeks. Well, what can you do one day every two weeks? Nothing, except guarantee that it isn't going to work. It is much better to take limited resources and focus on one or perhaps two initiatives in order for it to win.

I'll ask my participants in workshops or keynote addresses to raise their hand if they think that people are their most valuable resource. Everybody raises their hand. And then I'll say, "Well, that's not true at all. That's just a myth." What is true is that the right people in the right jobs are your most valuable resource. Jobs are about solving problems. There is a diversity of ways that people go about solving problems. How you go about doing that is a reflection of your style of problem solving. Are you a person who likes to start things or are you a person who likes to finish things? Are you an agent of change or agent of stability? The agents of change like to create new opportunities. The agents of stability like to make things work. For example, if you have a product that's going to require FDA approval, you don't want to put a high innovator team member on that. What you need is the person who likes detail and enjoys doing that kind of job.

Finally, there is coaching for innovation. How does one coach for innovation? How does one become a coach leader? Jack Johnson wrote that chapter in the book and is an expert in that area. And we find, over and over again, that people who position themselves and behave as coach leaders are able to create innovative behavior that out strips anything they could have possibly wanted without that kind of behavior. In our opinion, a coach leader doesn't solve the problem for the people. They coach their people to find solutions that work and that are effective. They give them the resources. They give them the direction that might be needed, but they don't do the work and solve it for them. And they get out of the way and then celebrate success. That sounds very, very simple. However, when you read some of the stories in the book, you begin to see how that works for the people who are described as true coach leaders.

The bottom line for me is first, personal and consistent Involvement, Involvement, and Involvement by leaders at all levels. Second, the organization needs trained facilitators using effective thinking tools within a structured process for solving difficult problems that have no easy solutions.

