



Tucker on Innovation

Reporting on best practices, the latest research and upcoming events in the field of innovation, Tucker on Innovation is a free quarterly newsletter for organizational practitioners, thought leaders, and friends of the Global Innovation Movement. Past issues are archived on our website: <http://www.innovationresource.com>. Reprint permission granted upon request to the Editor. Copyright 2008, all rights reserved.

Judy Williams, Editor First Quarter, 2008

Who Should Lead Innovation Nation?

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Like a company in a tough patch, the USA is beset with all sorts of challenges at the moment. A foreign venture has gone poorly. Morale is at a new low. Recession has decreased revenues and forced unprecedented borrowing.

The good news is that the current CEO has announced his retirement. And the search committee is busily trying to recruit a replacement. Who should this organization hire? If you are a registered voter in the US, this is no idle question. You just happen to be on that search committee (along with 201.5 million others).

After careful vetting and a ton of job interviews, the search committee has narrowed it down to three candidates. Their names are: McCain, Clinton and Obama. Which of the three should lead Innovation Nation?

Because you're a subscriber to this newsletter, you know the impact that innovation can have to turn things around.

When A.G. Lafley took the helm of a demoralized Procter & Gamble in 2000, the company was being pummeled by lower-cost house brands and a seeming inability to come up with new product ideas. Lafley implemented a systematic innovation process, celebrated creativity on the company's intranet site, and forced his people to look outside for good ideas.

Steve Jobs led an innovation turnaround when he was reinstated chairman of Apple. "We are going to innovate our way out of this situation," he declared, and proceeded to do just that.

Jobs took out print ads that featured black and white portraits of famous innovators such as Ghandi, Jim Henson and Miles Davis, adding two words beside Apple's distinct logo: "Think Different." He did this to send a message to Apple's customers and network of code-writers and supporters. He did it for Apple employees. He did it to restore their confidence that the company would survive, and to remind them of Apple's heritage of ingenuity.

The USA needs a similar jolt. So: which of the three would make the best Innovator in Chief? Let's look.

Candidate Clinton actually has an Innovation Agenda on her website, and

"No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

– Albert Einstein

"Everyone is born a genius, but the process of living de-geniuses them."

– Buckminster Fuller

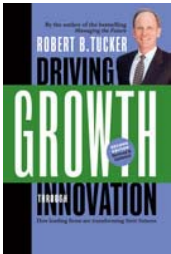
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even used the phrase "innovation nation" in an early debate. She is aware that "other nations are increasingly investing in their innovation infrastructure, positioning themselves to challenge our leadership." Hillary wants to increase investment in biotechnology in order to fuel 21st century industry. She calls for establishing a \$50 billion Strategic Energy Fund, setting aside 8 percent of federal research agency budgets for discretionary funding of high-risk research, and directing federal agencies to award prizes in order to accomplish specific innovation goals.

Candidate McCain mostly speaks about innovation in the context of breaking America's critical dependence on foreign oil. The Arizona senator would rely upon the profit motive to attract venture capital to solve America's energy and environmental challenges. "America, relying as always on the industry and imagination of a free people, and the power and innovation of free markets, is capable of overcoming any challenge from within and without our borders. Our enemies believe we're too weak to overcome our dependence on foreign oil. Even some of our allies think we're no longer the world's most visionary, most capable country or committed to the advancement of mankind. I think we know better than that. I think we know who we are and what we can do. Now, let's remind the world."

Finally Candidate Obama, like McCain, doesn't define a specific innovation agenda, but like Clinton, has a raft of proposals to spur innovation including doubling federal funding for basic research, making the R&D tax credit permanent to create high-paying, secure jobs, and "help pioneer the first wave of green technologies that will be in high demand throughout the world."

In reviewing the candidates' web sites for clues about their proposals and philosophies on innovation, I conclude that none of the three really understand the potential of innovation to revitalize America. Innovation is much more than a set of policies and budget allotments, although it is refreshing to see that at least two of the candidates may have been influenced by the work of the Council on Competitiveness.

I believe our entrepreneurs have the potential to spawn a new wave of prosperity and that government's role is to support industry. Successive waves of innovation - from rural electrification during the 1930s all the way to the internet, broadband and tech boom of the 1990s - produced waves of new prosperity. Clinton reminds us in her Innovation Agenda that spending on defense sprouted innovations such as GPS and the internet, not just new weapons of mass destruction.

Of the three, I believe Barack Obama is the candidate best suited to lead the turnaround. He may not "get" innovation in the way those of us in the Innovation Movement understand it. Yet he is still evolving. My observation of his campaign suggests that what he has put together is what Peter Senge calls a "learning organization." His operation continues to learn in the midst of the storm, and gets better as it goes along. He and his team continue to take in new information, and adapt accordingly - all difficult things to do in coordinated fashion, but all essential aptitudes of 21st century leadership.

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My hope is that Obama, if elected, will embrace the corporate community, and learn from it how even large organizations, under the right leaders, can make great progress, contribute to stakeholders and be socially responsible. In my 20 years serving the corporate world, I find scores of talented people who have a lot to give back to the country that has given them so much. If only they are asked.

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