
The Innovation Dilemma

This article focuses on Red Rooster Consulting's Strategic Planning services and client successes related to innovation.

Each of our client companies is different, but there is one thing they all have in common...**The challenge of needing to innovate beyond their current services and products in order to grow.** As we create strategic plans with companies, the conversation on innovation goes like this – “We need to innovate in order to grow, but what does innovation mean to us? How far should we go and at what cost? How do we manage innovation? What do we choose to innovate?”

Most of the time, our clients have clear ideas of what new product feature, solution or service to create. What they don't have is agreement among the leadership team on which idea to pursue and this is driven by many things: differing ideas of what innovation means, differing appetites for risk, and differing acceptance levels of the future changes in their markets. In order to move forward, they must effectively work through these issues.

First, Leadership must **define innovation**. One of our companies established three agreed definitions of innovation and created strategies for each—new products for current markets; current products for adjacent markets; continuous improvement on current products. To ensure integrity on achieving their Vision, they decided that anything outside of these three definitions would take them outside of their core competencies and not be successful.

Second, to **address the differing appetites for risk**, each leader should be given the time to individually answer the following questions about a specific innovation idea: Am I risk avoidant or risk oriented? What are the things that could go wrong that I want my leader colleagues to consider? What are the things that could go well that I want my colleagues to consider? For one of our

client companies, we moved them away from the planning table and had them stand as I scribed their responses. It was mandatory that each leader share her/his viewpoint. Similarities and differences (there were more differences than similarities) surfaced. We adjourned the session and the next day started with revisiting the Vision statement and answering the question, “If we pursue this innovation, will it take us closer or farther from the achievement of our Vision?” Ultimately, with eyes wide open, the team picked one significant innovation that all agreed if successful would ensure the desired growth of the company

Finally, **the possible future needs to be acknowledged**. A client of ours had products that were soon to be obsolete in terms of their physical dimensions. To accept this was hard and required the sharing of future scenarios, research, forecasting and analytics that told the brutal truth. In their strategic planning, it was agreed that they would change the dimensions of their current product. For those in manufacturing, you know that something like this has many ramifications. However, strategic planning is about choosing what to say YES to and what to say NO to and this is the hard job of leadership.

For more information on Red Rooster Consulting’s Strategic Planning Services, contact Rosemary DiMonte at rosemary@redrooster.net

The CEO’s Role in Strategic Planning

It’s not the CEO’s job to have all the answers when it comes to setting strategy for the business. The entire leadership team owns that responsibility. However, it is the CEO’s job to play an important leadership role in the strategic planning process. So, what does this include?

Communication: Once the decision is made to create a strategic plan, the CEO needs to communicate the reason why, the desired outcome and the process that will be followed. The team of leaders who will sit at the planning table must understand the expectation of them in terms of their role and time commitment.

Throughout the process, the CEO should maintain steady communication on progress and continue to confirm the necessity and importance of the process.

Collaboration: Observation of the leadership team during the process needs to be keen and constant. Suggesting or requesting that leaders team up and explore issues where needed encourages collaboration. If the CEO notices a leader checking out, circling the wagons, or excluding others from conversation, it's time to step in and facilitate exchange and participation.

Conflict Resolution: There may be a need to pull a leader aside and share observations if the CEO senses conflict or friction between leaders during strategic planning. Strategic Planning is about making choices and deciding what to say YES to and what to say NO to. That dynamic can elevate sensitive issues between leaders. Ignoring conflict and hoping it will be worked out is not the best approach.

Cadence: Once the strategic plan is launched, the CEO takes on a stewardship role to ensure execution as the plan moves forward. This can include requiring that strategic plan updates be woven into leadership meeting agendas and dedicated reviews take place on a monthly or quarterly basis. Regular review and discussion of the strategic plan ensures it doesn't end up "on the shelf."

Commitment Integrity: It's the CEO's responsibility to provide focus and reinforcement of the strategic plan and maintain commitment integrity to strategies when distractors jump onto the path. Referencing the strategic plan's critical cornerstones as change occurs and strategies flex to meet ever evolving needs is the job of the CEO and leadership. Using the Vision as a decision filter when new opportunities or threats present by asking, "If we do this will it help or hinder the achievement of our strategy?" is the job of the CEO.

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CEOs Share New and Surprising Learnings from 2020

By Rosemary M. DiMonte, Principal and Founder

A *sometimes-missed* opportunity for high level leaders is to take a routine inventory of what they have learned that is new and surprising. If ever there was a year for a learning opportunity, it was 2020. I am proud to say that our client leaders are in the habit of taking stock of their learnings often and thoughtfully.

For this newsletter, I reached out to a cross-section of 15 plus CEOs and Presidents in our portfolio of clients and asked them to share **what they had learned in 2020 that was new and surprising to them**. These leaders are experienced executives in small, mid-market and big companies, so I was very interested to hear what a year of a pandemic, economic crisis, natural disasters and social and political unrest had taught them. Their companies are in North America, The United Kingdom and Europe and represent manufacturing, environmental services, transportation, content (television and publishing), staffing and other. Revenues range from \$25M to \$1B and employees from less than 100 to 13,000.

Despite the differences in industry, size or location of their businesses, there were many similarities in their responses. This goes to show us that for executives leading is leading and learning is learning no matter what the scale or focus of your business may be.

However, there were some learnings that were shared that were not thematic across the 15, and I'm sharing these because they are salient.

Question: I think we can all agree that this year has been unlike others preceding it. As an experienced leader of a significant organization, what did you learn this past year that was new and surprising?

One of our CEOs shared the following unique responses. Based on how well I know my other clients, my guess is that the others would raise their hands and say these learnings apply to them, too.

- “I was pleased to see the entire company community (employees and suppliers) embrace the responsibility for **staying safe and taking care of each other**. We have had great compliance with our new standards in terms of masking, social distancing, etc. and the workforce seems to appreciate the commitment being made by the business and their colleagues to assure a safe, clean, working environment.
- As a supplier to essential industries, our people have embraced the responsibility to continue working when friends and family members were likely receiving similar pay to stay home; their **sense of responsibility to the business** and our customers is inspiring.
- On the topic of Innovation, it has been tremendously **difficult to collaborate with customers in a virtual setting** and new product development, launches, etc. are being delayed across the customer base.”

The following 7 themes of **new and important** learnings surfaced across the responses.

1. **Meeting virtually** is a new, efficient way of working that we will probably continue post-pandemic.
2. **Connection** in the workplace with other people is a critical benefit to my teammates and employees and without it they feel something necessary is missing.
3. **Being a courageous leader** and confidently, calmly making bold, strategic decisions under pressure was required.
4. **Flexibility** has always been something we’ve talked about, but we have really had to DO IT in 2020 and I’m surprised how agile our business can be when there’s no other option.
5. The **resiliency** of my people is impressive.

6. The importance of turning on my **emotional intelligence** and attending to people's needs to feel cared for, supported and understood is necessary.
7. **My leadership team** is more capable than I imagined.

Leader Spotlight

Todd Milliner is CEO and Executive Co-Producer of Hazy Mills Productions, which he co-founded with Sean Hayes in 2004. He is an award-winning producer and writer who has produced over 400 episodes of television, two dozen stage productions and in 2018, his first feature film. On the writing side, his credits include "Grimm" and "Roanoke" for NBC and "WHAT NEWS" for TBS. He also co-wrote the Emmy Award-winning 64th Annual Tony Awards.



Milliner hails from Chicago, where he performed and taught at the World Famous Second City Theater for five years. In addition to his work at Second City, he spent ten years in leadership development with SBC, Trans Union and HSBC, during which he created a leadership curriculum based on the principles of improvisation taught across the country. Todd has written and produced award-winning branded content for Orbitz, Clark Pest Control, TBS and TNT. He has written and directed eight original sketch shows for Celebration Theatre where he is also on the board. Todd is an Ovation Award-winning producer of "The Color Purple" and "Take Me Out." He is currently developing his first Broadway play.

RR: What did you want to be when you grew up?

TM: I honestly had such an admiration for so many of my teachers that I thought that was a logical career for me. I was going to teach and coach sports. I thought as long as I could afford a nice apartment and a jeep, I'd be fine.

RR: Your career history is a unique one. You were a high-level leader in corporate America and now you are a leading television producer in Hollywood. What's the difference between leading in a corporate setting versus a production company?

TM: It's wildly similar, actually. I believe the same skills I used as a leader in corporate America translate directly into my current industry. I think the names change, but the game stays the same.

RR: All leaders need to be effective at partnering, how do you and your producing partner Sean Hayes make it work?

TM: We try to spend time apart! Isn't that the way any relationship succeeds? Actually, our partnership is fairly unique as he has an entirely separate career. The key to our success is open and honest communication. It may have taken a while to get there and we've continually worked on it.

RR: There's a lot of work that goes into actually getting a show on the air and with that, plenty of disappointments. How do you keep the team motivated?

TM: Most folks who get in this business have an understanding of the difficulty and we try to celebrate all milestones. We've been lucky enough to have successes along the way and we make sure we take the time to recognize those, understand what contributed to those successes and most importantly learn from the ones that don't go the distance.

RR: What is your favorite aspect of your job?

TM: Everyday I play in the land of make believe. I used to do that often in the corporate world, but it was far less appreciated. I get to reach into the deepest parts of my mind and create a world or a character that someday can be realized through cinema. I think my second favorite part of my job has to be the variety. We've made comedies and drama and games and documentaries and films... even some commercials. I don't think I've had a sick day in 16 years. I truly love what I do.

RR: Innovation is important for all of our clients, what could corporate companies learn from Hollywood companies to make them better at innovation?

TM: Wow. I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer this question. I think one thing Hollywood has taught me is to constantly be innovating. We never rest or rely too heavily on what has worked for us in the past. Conversely, we sold Grimm five times. Just because something isn't right for a network one year, doesn't mean it won't be right the next.