LEADING TRANSFORMATION #36:
STEPS TO INNOVATION

As a reminder, CREATIVE LEADERSHIP is creating value by leading people in the implementation of new ideas. CREATIVITY is typically used to refer to the act of producing new ideas, approaches or actions. INNOVATION is the process of both generating and applying such creative ideas in some specific context. Theodore Levitt summed it up well in his statement: "Creativity is thinking up new things. Innovation is doing new things”

We have looked at certain elements of Creativity—Characteristics of Creative Leaders, Hindrances to Creativity, Enhancers of Creativity, etc. Let us now turn to INNOVATION. What are the essential steps to promoting innovation?

1. ASK NEW QUESTIONS
With every situation there are expected questions and answers that keep repeating themselves. Unless new questions are asked, there cannot be new answers. Sometimes the new questions are taboos. It is for this reason that in most cases the first step in innovation is the breaking of taboos.

There needs to be questions asked about the “elephant” in the room that no one feels safe or comfortable to talk about.

2. ARREST CONVENTIONAL ANSWERS
Innovation calls for conventional answers to be ruled out as options. This may for a moment result in a sense of “lost-ness” or even hopelessness. In the long run it will pay off. When people are prevented from reverting to traditional responses or solutions, they are then forced to think about new answers. This is what births innovation.

3. ACCESS NEW ALTERNATIVES
The next step in innovation is to explore all the possible “what ifs.”
At this stage, people should not be scolded or shut down for thinking about wild options. Thinking outside the box is the only requirement. The answers should all be entertained.

4. ACKNOWLEDGE BEST ALTERNATIVES
When enough alternatives have been explored, it is then necessary to rate them in terms of their perceived effectiveness.
The best options should be identified and placed on a priority list.

5. ACTIVATE A BEST ALTERNATIVE
In most cases there is not one magic alternative that is obviously superior to all the others. Many factors have to be weighed—feasibility, cost, benefits, risks, advantages, etc.
Beginning the process of exploring alternatives with agreed upon criteria helps with objective decision making when emotions become prominent. Emotions become pronounced when the price to be paid becomes obvious to people. When the criteria have been agreed on, then it is easier to make the tough decision in choosing a best alternative when emotions are high.

6. ASSESS AND ADJUST
It is best to choose one alternative rather than continue to entertain a list of possibilities. Choosing an alternative implies an initial loss of other appealing options. But this decision allows for ongoing evaluation and improvement of the alternative, which ultimately holds the promise for minimizing the negatives whilst increasing the gains.

7. AFFIRM
When the alternative is working, celebration is necessary. All alternatives have their critiques who will keep reminding everyone of the limitations of the chosen alternative.
To succeed, it is important to demonstrate that the chosen alternative is working and can even get better. This releases energy for a much needed yet often neglected aspect of innovation; the pursuit excellence.

8. ACCELERATE MULTIPLICATION
Once the alternative is proven, it can be shared for broad application. This is the stage of multiplication.

The alternative should invite ongoing evaluation without compromising on focus. The bad news for innovation is that the celebrated alternative will need to be changed someday. It could be sooner than later. There are only two friends of innovation—effectiveness and excellence. These two remain the permanent elements pursued by innovators.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:
A. What is an example of a lingering problem in your institution?
B. What are the usual responses or solutions to this problem?
C. Why have they not worked well?
D. How would you apply the 8 Steps of Innovation to explore new solutions?
E. How would you implement the new solution so that it promotes effectiveness?