Where to focus your improvement efforts

Guest contributor Chris Kurjan of Innovation Delivery provides some food for thought…

With my experience of innovation in product and service development over the last 20 years I often find myself at the crossroads of enthusiasm and cynicism. I have an enthusiasm to share my creative practices and facilitation expertise with individuals and groups, where I concentrate on three things to create and move new concepts forward:

– opening our minds to broaden our solution pool

– experimenting and prototyping in small steps toward an ever-more real concept

– and opening others' minds to the new idea, as funders, consumers or partners.

But along the path, obstacles appear; and now that I've given Dave Owens's new book *"Creative People Must Be Stopped!: 6 Ways We Kill Innovation"* a read, I have a sturdy framework for thinking about these barriers. Your team will need to address each of the six constraint areas to provide a foundation for innovation. We have more control of those on the left, and less of those on the right.
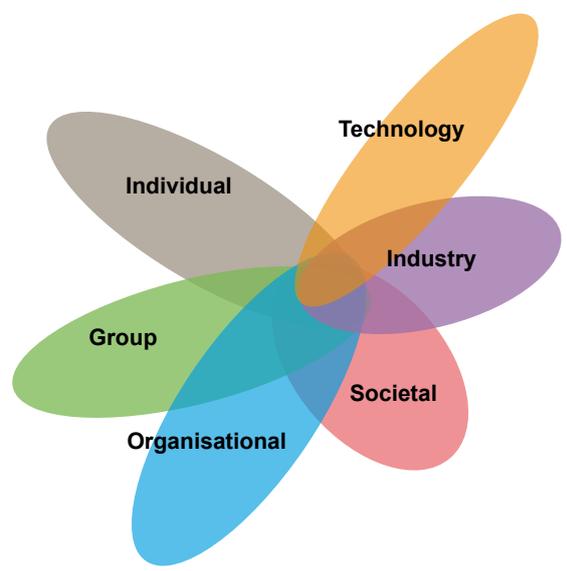
Use this framework to decide where to focus your improvement efforts, picking two or three areas to dig in.

- **INDIVIDUAL:** Do individuals need their own creative practices refreshed? Are they skilled at cross-pollination? gathering deep insights from users, customers and stakeholders? researching the competitive landscape? turning such inputs into a range of solutions, then prototyping and evaluating them? [It was an individual with strong skills that pushed the innovation of the 3M Post-It notes.]

- **GROUP:** Does the group need to better understand what skills and perspectives each will bring to the work… and then agree their innovation process and how their goals and activities will change during the different stages of development? Can your teams benefit from working together rather than blocking each other? [The highest-performing innovation groups, such as those at IDEO, an innovation consulting firm, have strong cultures of openness to ideas, tools to prototype, and spaces that encourage play, big thinking and communication.]

- **ORGANISATION:** Is the organisation structured to take appropriate advantage of new ideas? Do different groups, like Marketing and Technology, know how to work well together? Does everyone understand the company strategy? Are there resources available? Is the organisation flexible enough to change? [Xerox PARC's new computer concepts in California were eventually developed by Apple and Microsoft instead because Xerox's East Coast headquarters didn't see their organisation as one aimed at document management, beyond document copying.]

- **INDUSTRY:** Do you have a strong grasp of what is possible at this time in your industry? The competitive landscape, regulation, changes in practices, potential partnerships, the ability of consumers to understand and adopt your product or service at this time? [Think about the earliest digital cameras that produced poor quality images and cost $1000. They were eventually able to mature because the industry around them provided other needed components in the photography experience, such as printers and image editing capabilities.]

- **SOCIETAL:** Do your concepts work within societal boundaries – legal, cultural, ethical? Do they reflect the ideals and aspirations of the society? Does your team know how to communicate how the new product or service fits people? [Consider that the Segway, intended to revolutionise urban transport, suffered from the constraints of existing infrastructure and of looking too different. And, as another example, that human cloning has been declared unethical.]

- **TECHNOLOGY:** Are the potential products and services feasible given the current level of technology and the time and effort it will take to get where you (or your partners) need to be? Can you work within the physical, time and environmental boundaries? [An aspiring U.S. presidential candidate recently proposed a moon base for 2020. While feasible at some point, the 2020 deadline probably isn't.]

Not only can you grapple with these questions for your own organisation, but you can turn them towards your potential partners, suppliers and business customers, to understand their ability to absorb your innovation. If you're looking for some structure and recommendations for how to strengthen your organisation's ability to develop and market innovative products and services, check into creativepeoplemustbestopped.com: Take the survey to consider your focus. Innovation Delivery are here to help as well.

Chris Kurjan, Innovation Delivery
Dublin and West Coast, U.S.
www.innovationdelivery.com