

# Are You Promoting or Bursting the Innovation Bubble?

Leaders remain responsible for inspiration of staff, membership

By Linda Talley

**I**n order to create innovation in your workplace, you have to be innovative. Albert Einstein told us that problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.

Yet every day we seem to want to keep doing things the same old way. You are bored to tears driving the same way to work every day yet you keep doing it. Mr. Einstein also said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again

and expecting different results. This applies to innovation. You want your staff to be innovative, creative, and inspirational yet what are you doing to be the exemplar and to help them achieve this?

Key insight: the spoken and non-spoken word controls communication; communication controls innovation; innovation controls business.

With this in mind, what steps do you take each day to inspire yourself to be innovative? I remember asking my mother, many years ago, why she told me not to start smoking and yet she continued to smoke. Her response to me was to do as she said and not as she did. This was very confusing for me because it caused severe cognitive dissonance for me. Here was my role model, my exemplar giving me mixed messages about a critical social issue that left me frustrated and perplexed.

How many times do you leave your staff members frustrated and perplexed

by your mixed or double messages? You want them to be innovative yet it's the same old meeting agenda every week where little gets done; it's the same internal politics that leave someone bloody and bruised; it's the same old "stinky" dead deer lying under the conference table that no one will talk about. This breeds contempt and not innovation because effective communication is hampered, dampened or simply eliminated. If you see an increase in memos or emails vs. face to face encounters, invisible barriers to effective communication are rising and innovation is declining. What can you, as the exemplar, do to eliminate barriers and increase innovation?

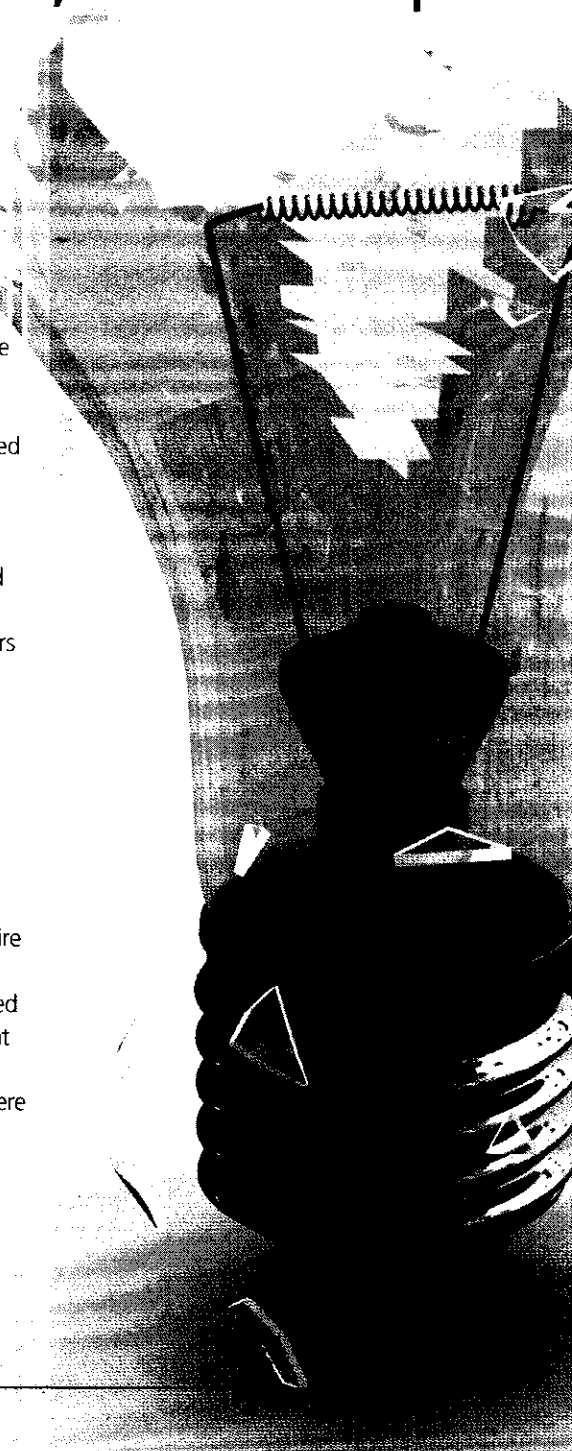
Change your communication—particularly your nonverbal communication.

## What Postures Promote or Impede Innovation?

### The Office Visit

How often have you wanted to inspire or motivate a staff member by going to their office and talking? I once shadowed an executive who wanted to do just that but he used postures that didn't inspire innovation, they suppressed it. What were those?

He went to the person's office to talk and didn't enter, he simply crossed his arms over his chest, leaned against the door jam and crossed one leg over the other. In this position, he asked the staff member what he could do to help



him come up with a new marketing idea for the product launch. I watched as this person visibly shrunk away from the boss. The leader's nonverbal communication shouted defensiveness and possessiveness, created a cognitive disconnect with the staff member which essentially shut down all the grey cells involved with innovation because they were tied up with the disconnect. The leader's nonverbal communication burst the innovation bubble for this staffer.

When we got back to my client's office, I asked him how he thought the meeting went with the staff person. He thought it went well and asked if I did too. I said "no" and explained the nonverbal communication of the staff person as he sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest as the leader was talking. I also mentioned the minimal eye contact coming from the staffer and the fidgeting leg I could see as his body moved rhythmically with the leg's beat. The leader had not noticed that his body language had negatively impacted the staff member so that the staffer became defensive.

**Key insight:** If someone is focusing on being defensive, their prehistoric brain is engaged and they won't be thinking creatively or innovatively except about how to escape this uncomfortable encounter.

**The fix:** When meeting with a staff member in their office, enter their space, ask if you can pull up a chair and sit at a 45-degree angle to them with no barriers between the two of you. Lean forward, keep your palms facing up and be the coach. Ask how you can help them. Ask them what they need from you. Ask him, "if you had all the money in the world and all the love, what idea would you come up with for this project?" Here you are using the spoken and the non-spoken word to create innovation.

### The Staff Meeting

How often have you asked your staff to come up with innovative ideas for or during a staff meeting? Does it produce the results you want? Many times meeting leaders use mixed or double messages where they say one thing and mean another.

At a staff meeting, I observed the leader calling for new and innovative ideas for a promotional membership campaign. What was particularly chilling was to watch the faces and body language of the staff members who initiated an idea and got "shot down" by the leader. What was the most chilling was that there was no verbal communication involved, it was all nonverbal. As a staff member mentioned an idea, the leader would lean back in her chair, cross her arms, roll her eyes and then look out the window. You could see the pain in the body language of the staff member who presented the idea. Two more people attempted an idea and received similar nonverbal responses and that ended the communication of new and innovative ideas. No one said a word. The leader kept asking why no one else had any more ideas as if someone in the room would be willing to step up to be shot down nonverbally.

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When I spoke to the meeting leader later, I asked her why she thought no one had any more ideas. She told me that she didn't think they had done their homework for this meeting. I then pointed out her nonverbal communication to the staff that I had observed and she was incredulous—never believing that she would do that, yet that is what she subconsciously did. She had burst the innovation bubble of her staff members at this meeting and blamed them for the lack of innovation rather than examining the cause of the bubble burst.

**The fix:** Get rid of the big conference table. Use small tables on rollers to

place laptops or writing materials. This eliminates the barriers to effective communication. Make certain everyone has a chair with arms and on rollers—and the chairs are all the same. Here you are leveling the playing field. Creativity and innovation are easier to come by when there's no pressure to perform. Ask any college football team on Saturday afternoons in the fall if they would agree! It's much easier to be innovative when you are in your comfort zone.

Think about and always be cognizant of what your nonverbal communication is saying to the other person. Our bodies leak our emotions through our body language and even though your head may be saying "yes" to someone's idea, your body could be shouting "no!" As the leader of the meeting, sit upright in your chair, arms on the arm rests with eyes focused on the speaker. Sit with your hand clasped together in your lap or on your rolling table. This shows humility as you listen to the speaker's idea. It's positive positioning and the other person picks up on this, feels inspired and might even be more creative right there on the spot. Ask all the members of your team to look at the speaker as s/he presents the idea. No stare down contests, no looking out the window, just simple eye contact that shows interest and warmth. This builds a connection with the speaker from all members at the meeting, adds warmth to the interaction and inspires the speaker to do more. This is a key step to birthing and nurturing innovation.

As the leader, it is up to you to be an innovative and inspiring exemplar. What you do to either promote or burst the bubble of innovation will be copied by the people around you. Make certain your example through verbal and nonverbal communication sets the standard high for your organization in order to achieve the results you desire.

Remember: the spoken and non-spoken word controls communication; communication controls innovation; innovation controls business. ♦

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