



JAMES O'LOGHLIN

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INNOVATION  
IS A STATE OF  
MIND

SIMPLE STRATEGIES TO BE MORE  
INNOVATIVE IN WHAT YOU DO

WILEY



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James O’Loughlin is an author, speaker, comedian and broadcaster. After finishing university he began work as a corporate lawyer, but soon realised he’d made a mistake and moved into criminal law, which he practised for six years. At the same time he was performing stand-up comedy, appearing regularly on television and radio, and doing shows all over the country.

James started working for ABC local radio in 2001 and hosted the NSW and ACT evening show from 2002 to 2007. From 2009 to 2014 he hosted the national Sunday evening show.

Between 2005 and 2011 James hosted more than 300 episodes of *The New Inventors* on ABC TV.

He now speaks to and works with organisations to help them to become more innovative.

James has written six previous books, including *Umm... A Complete Guide to Public Speaking*, *How to Balance Your Life* and two novels for children, *The Adventures of*

*Sir Roderick the Not-Very Brave* and *Daisy Malone and the Blue Glowing Stone*.

He lives in Sydney with his wife and three daughters.

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# PREFACE

In 2004 the ABC decided to reboot *The Inventors*, a television show that had run from 1970 to 1982, and call it *The New Inventors*. The concept was simple. Each week, three inventors would bring their invention into the studio, explain what it was and demonstrate how it worked. Three judges would pass comment, and a host would try to make it all run smoothly.

I was presenting an evening radio show for the ABC at the time and was asked to audition for the role of host. I was pretty motivated, both because I liked the idea of working with lots of people who had created something entirely new, and also because we had just bought a house and become the proud owners of a large mortgage. I was lucky enough to get the job and over the next eight years met and worked with over a thousand Australian inventors and innovators who had thought of, and created, all sorts of things—from a fence that collapses itself onto the ground when there’s a flood so it doesn’t get damaged, to a system that allows deaf students to instantly read what their teacher is saying in the classroom, to a house gutter that empties itself of leaves, to an outdoor café table that auto-adjusts to any uneven surface so its legs don’t wobble, to a wood substitute made from plastic waste... and hundreds more.

Each week before the show we would have a long rehearsal in which we worked out the best way to show viewers how the inventions worked. I used every spare moment to quiz the inventors about how they had come up with their ideas, developed them and turned them into reality. I did this both because I wanted to discover interesting information that we could use on the show, but also because I was becomingly increasingly curious about how people come up with new and better ways of doing things.

I wanted to find out how inventors and innovators differed from the rest of us. They lived in the same world as the rest of us, yet somehow they seemed to see opportunities that the rest of missed, and then take advantage of those opportunities. How did they do it? Was innovation a talent that only some people were born with, or was it something we could all learn to do?

What was their point of difference? Were innovators more intelligent than me? More creative? Did they have a special, extra bit of brain that I lacked? Because if they did, that would let me off the hook. If, to be an innovator, you had to be born with some talent that I didn't have, then I wouldn't have to beat myself up for not dreaming up a great innovation. Instead, I could just tell myself I wasn't built that way, just as I excused myself from being a great basketball player because I wasn't six foot six. It wasn't my fault.

After *The New Inventors* had been running a few years, I thought I'd worked it out. How were innovators different from the rest of us? As far as I could tell, the answer was that they weren't.

As far as I could see, inventors and innovators *weren't* a special breed of super-human, brilliant, ultra-creative genius. Some of them *were* very smart, but many of the people who had invented really clever things didn't seem to me to be any smarter or more creative than average. They

included all sorts of people from all walks of life: builders, nurses, businesspeople, truck drivers, bank managers, tradespeople, students, farmers and many more.

So, I wondered, if it wasn't always some sort of super intelligence and creativity that distinguished inventors and innovators from the rest of us, what was it? How were they able to look at the same world as the rest of us, yet see the possibility of something better?

I began to look closer, and to ask more questions:

- How did innovators identify areas in which there might be an opportunity for innovation?
- Was there some sort of a process that innovators went through to come up with ideas, or did they just hope for a blinding flash of inspiration?
- Did successful innovators have only good ideas? Or did they have *lots* of ideas, some of which were good and some of which weren't? If the latter, how did they separate the good ideas from the not-so-good ones?
- How did they find the determination to go through all the many and difficult stages it took to turn an idea into reality?
- And how did they do it all without going broke?

Before hosting *The New Inventors* I had facilitated and MC'ed events for many organisations. After the show started, I began to get asked to speak on innovation and work with organisations to help them to become more innovative. After doing this for a while, a new set of questions presented themselves:

- Why did so many organisations start out being innovative but then, once they reached a certain size, find innovation more difficult?
- Why did the management of so many organisations continually emphasise the importance of innovation,

and yet not encourage and harvest new ideas from the people who knew their business better than anyone—their staff?

- ▣ Why did so many employees seem to think that innovation was someone else's job, rather than their own?
- ▣ How could an organisation create and maintain a culture that encouraged *everyone* to be innovative, and to be always looking for ways to improve what they did?
- ▣ How could management ensure they got access to all the ideas their people had, find the best ones and then implement them in their business?

*The New Inventors* ran for eight years and ended in 2011. In that time we did over 300 episodes and worked with more than 1000 inventors and innovators. My fascination never dimmed, and neither did my curiosity. As time went on, I began to see patterns: things that many inventors and innovators did that helped them to form their idea and then to develop it.

When I worked with organisations, I noticed that many of them treated innovation as an event, rather than as an essential and ingrained part of their everyday business. For example, they would run an innovation competition where they encouraged everyone to think up an idea to improve the business. It would last for a month, and then it would end.

I also noticed that everyone, from prime ministers and CEOs down, talked about the importance of innovation. The word popped up in many companies' values and mission statements, and many industry conferences and events were themed around innovation. But while there was a near universal acceptance of the *importance* of



innovation, it was far less common for anyone to tell you how to actually do it.

The emphasis seemed to be primarily on motivation ('We need to be innovative!') rather than on method ('This is *how* you can be more innovative').

That was understandable. It's easy to tell people that it's important to be innovative. It's a lot more difficult to explain how innovation actually happens. In fact, the idea of a process for innovation—a set of steps that a person or an organisation could follow to create innovation—seems like a contradiction in terms. Didn't innovation occur when people were thinking and operating *outside* systems and processes?

But, I thought, wouldn't it be good if there *was* a process for innovation. Wouldn't it be great if there *were* a set of steps that anyone could follow that would increase the chances that they would come up with a better way of doing things.

I spent my time on *The New Inventors* looking for patterns and common steps that innovators took to identify problems and opportunities, to come up with ideas and to develop those ideas. I was looking for a process for innovation.

So how does that apply to you?

At work, most of us move through our day without constantly being on the lookout for opportunities to be innovative. We spend most of our time simply doing our jobs, rather than thinking about ways in which we could do them *better*. Often, we're not even sure if we are supposed to be innovative. Some companies have innovation departments, so doesn't that mean innovation is *their* job?

Often we assume that the way we do things now is the way they have to be done. We get so used to doing things one way that we forget to think about whether there might be another, better way of doing them. The status quo is a bit like a beanbag. It's comfortable, it's cosy and once you

relax into it, it can be hard to find the energy to get yourself out again.

But (unlike most beanbags) the status quo is booby-trapped. While it feels like it will last forever, it won't.

The one constant throughout human history is change. Think about how much your job, your organisation and your industry have changed over the past twenty years, or even the past ten. All of those changes occurred as a result of innovation, and it's not going to stop. So if you think the status quo is here to stay, think again. Whether we like it or not, change is coming and we need to be ready. Now, more than ever before, we need to be innovative.

This book is broadly divided into two parts. The first section sets out a process that will help you be more innovative in what you do. It outlines some methods that will help you to look at everything you do with fresh eyes, identify opportunities for innovation and then take advantage of those opportunities. I also discuss how you can use your ideas and find out which ones are going to work.

The second section focuses on how organisations, big and small, can create a culture that encourages *everyone* to be innovative. It explains how management can ensure that everyone in an organisation sees innovation as part of their job. It outlines a process that will help management to access everyone's ideas to improve the organisation, find the best ones, and then develop and implement them.

The most important starting point, however, is not to let yourself think that innovation is beyond you, or beyond anyone you work with. Innovation isn't something that only some of us can do. It's something we can all do. It's not a gift. Innovation is a state of mind.

# INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS INNOVATION AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

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There are many definitions of innovation. A simple one is this: innovation is thinking of, and then implementing, a better way of doing things. An innovation doesn't have to be something completely new and different. It can be any sort of incremental improvement. It doesn't have to be a new product, or even a new feature of a product. It can be any small advance made to any part of an organisation that makes it better. If you work out a way to make a process or system more efficient, that's innovation. For example, if a process takes a person five minutes to complete, and you work out a way for them to do the same task in four minutes, that's an innovation.

Some people intimidate themselves by thinking that an innovation has to be something *amazing*, like the next smartphone. It doesn't. You are being innovative any time you improve, in some small way, any aspect of the way you do things. A tiny incremental improvement to one part of your business can, over time, create substantial benefits. You don't have to *re-invent* everything. You just need to

look out for opportunities to make things a little better. If you keep making small incremental improvements, benefits will follow.

An innovator is someone who introduces a new idea, method or product. You might be thinking, 'Well, that's not me'. Yes, it is. If you ever thought up a game to play when you were a kid, if you have made up a story for your kids, or have written a story (or even part of a story), or improvised an original way to fix something in your home, or come up with a way to improve something you do at work, then you have been an innovator.

Here's a (not very impressive) example of me being innovative. My wife and I used to have a cat who loved sleeping in our bed. I didn't like it much because she snored. The cat, I mean. So I started shutting our bedroom door at night. In response, the cat would jump out the window, run around the outside of the house and then climb in our window. So I decided to shut her in the kitchen/eating area at the back of the house with a cushion to sleep on and no windows open wide enough for her to get out. The entrance to the kitchen was a sliding door. The cat was so keen to get to our bed that she would press her body against the door and slowly slide it open. Tracey was an innovative and determined cat. In response, my innovation, thought up at two o'clock one morning after she had woken me for the third time, was to shove a chopstick between the sliding door and the wall, thus jamming it shut. It wasn't brilliant, but it was an original idea, and it worked.

Innovation has been enormously important in human history. Look around you. Everything you can see that is human-made is a product of human innovation: the chair you are sitting on, your coffee mug, the electric light, your phone, your clothes, this book—they all exist as a result of human innovation.

Innovation is the force that has driven human progress. It is our point of difference as a species. Penguins are doing pretty much what they did a million years ago. They may have evolved a bit, but they haven't innovated much. They still catch fish, raise their kids and try to keep warm the way their ancestors did. Humans, on the other hand, keep warm in very different ways. First we shivered, then we discovered fire and clothes, then we invented houses and fireplaces and insulation and gas and electrical heating.

A word about the difference between innovation and invention. An invention is the creation of a product or the introduction of a process for the first time, whereas innovation can be any sort of incremental improvement to a product or process. For example, the wheel is an invention. If, shortly after its invention, someone noticed that people were getting bored with plain grey wheels and started painting them with red and yellow stripes, that would be an innovation.

Almost every invention has been followed by innovations that improve it. For example, cars today are a lot better than they were fifty years ago. So are sound systems, running shoes and toasters. None of them changed dramatically in a year or two. Rather, a series of incremental innovations have meant that today's versions perform substantially better than their predecessors. Every time I buy a computer it is a bit thinner and lighter than my previous one. Each laptop is only a marginal improvement on the last one, but when I compare the one I have now with the one I had twelve years ago, there is a huge difference.

Humans have gone from using rudimentary stone tools to relying on smartphones, home delivery pizza and coffee machines in only a few thousand years. Whereas our ancestors worried about getting eaten by tigers, we worry about traffic jams, poor mobile coverage and paying electricity bills. Life isn't perfect these days but, thanks to