

Six Myth-Busters of Innovation-Producing Conversations

Over the years of our research and practice in fostering the creation of innovative solutions to complex problems, we have noticed that there persist myths about how innovation happens. We have dived deeply into how innovation is produced during conversations and discovered that the myths are not only wrong but are often the OPPOSITE of what our scientific research has demonstrated. This research is based on observing then intervening in controlled ways during hundreds of innovation team meetings across a wide swath of industries and innovation-producing online conversations conducted through crowdsourcing events on a range of critically important strategic and socially impactful topics. Below we briefly present each myth we have encountered in discussions with practitioners and researchers, and then briefly present our findings to counter this myth. Please check out our websites for the books, practitioner articles, and academic papers for more in-depth information on each myth-buster.

Myth 1: Successful innovation-producing conversations are only those which produce completely disruptive solutions that cause major shift in industries and technologies

What's Real: Innovation is relative so don't get hung up on getting solutions that boil the ocean and send us to Mars. To be innovative, solutions must only be immediately feasible and novel to the organization or community needing the solution. If they're too far afield they'll be too hard to implement; but if there's no novelty, then nothing new is gained. Innovation-producing conversations balance novelty with feasibility without constraining the parties in either way.

Myth 2: The more concrete and clear the problem statement, the more innovative the solutions that are generated

What's Real: Innovation-producing conversations start when managers or sponsors or team leaders task the open crowd (or team) with *open* problem statements. A problem statement is open when it defines the problem broadly, requires that solutions are produced by integrating multiple perspectives, recognizes the deeply complex nature of the problem, and expects that there will be multiple different solutions which may work. An open problem statement fosters innovation-producing conversations because it encourages participants to be inclusive of different viewpoints and be humble in knowing that no one participant will have the answer – that it will “take a village” to solve the problem. In the process of conversing, participants will often reframe the problem in different, alternative ways. Oftentimes, it is through the act of reshaping the problem that innovative solutions emerge.

Myth 3: The best ideas are ones that people bring to the conversation

What's Real: Innovation-producing conversations are not built from individual ideas, despite what the brainstorming proponents suggest. Instead, conversations are needed in which problem-related knowledge is shared, such as facts, personal experiences with the problem, knowledge of how others have solved the solution or framed the problem, metaphors, alternative criteria for knowing if a solution will work, contradictions among the criteria, etc. While seeds of solution ideas can be shared of course, it is only by integrating the diverse problem-related knowledge presented that the best innovative solutions are generated.

Myth 4. Innovations emerge from conversations amongst innovators

What's Real: the ordinary people or engaged stakeholders who help redefine the problem, stimulate others by presenting example solutions, or highlight the tradeoffs that need to be balanced in order to produce innovative solutions. It is the diversity of language, experience, knowledge, facts, and perspectives brought to the conversation that creates the innovation, the wider the participation of diversity, the better. Everyone with a small piece of knowledge about

the problem has a role to play to engage in innovation-producing conversations and making innovation happen.

Myth 5. Innovation conversations require extensive same-time/same-place commitment by a few innovators

What's Real: We find that, during online innovation-producing conversations, each participant offers *less than 2 posts*! This means that old myths about getting people in the same room for long periods of time to “hammer out a solution” are wrong. Instead, encouraging lots of participants to offer what they can offer is not only sufficient, but preferred, because it enables the secret sauce. The secret sauce is in the diversity of language, experience, knowledge, facts, perspective that is brought to the conversation; if any one person or a small group spends too much time, they may mold the conversation in a narrow way. The secret sauce is also to enable the innovation conversation online. Such online conversation occurs when comments can be made by people at their own time and gives others time to digest the knowledge shared online at their own pace before they make their comment to continue the conversation.

Myth 6. Kudos from others encourage others to offer great ideas.

What's Real: We find that social cues like kudos, may *hurt* innovation-producing conversations! They encourage people to sing to the choir when what is needed is new, divergent, unexpected, and not necessarily socially acceptable facts and experiences shared. They suck up the little time that people spend reading what others' have written or focusing on the elements of conversation that are germane to innovation. They create an expectation that there is a right and wrong way to look at the problem statement. They narrow the path going forward rather than offering new knowledge that brings the conversation closer to emergence of innovative solutions.

Together we call these six myth busters of how to construct innovation-producing conversations using the acronym, IPSOSS (*Innovation Producing Sauce*):

I: What is innovation is relative, not absolute.

P: Problem statements must be open not well-defined

S: Sharing problem-related knowledge is more important than brainstorming ideas

O: Ordinary diverse people need to be engaged to share their problem-related knowledge

S: Short bursts of engagement of many participants is better than lengthy conversations among a few

S: Social cues shared in conversations may be harmful, not helpful, as they deplete innovation bandwidth.

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Further reading:

Majchrzak, A., Bogers, M. L. A. M., Chesbrough, H., & Holgersson, M. (2023). Creating and Capturing Value from Open Innovation: Humans, Firms, Platforms, and Ecosystems. *California Management Review*, 65(2), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00081256231158830>

Majchrzak, A., & Malhotra, A. (2020). *Unleashing the Crowd: Collaborative Solutions for Wicked Business and Societal Problems*. New York: Palgrave Publications.