

Be Solutionary, Not Revolutionary

BY SCOTT BELSKY

New ideas only become really useful when someone works out the details.

IT IS INVIGORATING to accomplish a huge project. When we sit down with a blank canvas or clean sheet of paper, we have the tendency to think big. We tend to ask ourselves, “What can I think of that is new, surprising, and transformational?”

However, some of the greatest advancements across industries were not singular achievements but rather incremental improvements. Even bold ideas such as online music stores, departures in architecture, and new genres of music were the result of new ideas refined over time. The iPod was not the first MP3 player. Google was not the first search engine. And the list goes on...

While logic should encourage us to improve what is around us, we still tend to think of innovation as creating something new. Creative minds have the tendency to lose interest after the first generation of a new idea. Marginal improvements are, frankly, less interesting for the cutting-edge creative mind. Nonetheless, incremental improvements often make up the difference between success and failure.

Consider, for example, the whole idea of building steel bridges. Someone had to be the first to do it. Bridge designer and builder James B. Eads ushered in the serious use of steel in bridges with the Mississippi river crossing in St. Louis that bears his name. When it opened in 1874, the Eads Bridge was the longest arch bridge in the world, made possible because he had chosen steel. But things haven't just stood still since then.

Today designers and builders continue to push the envelope, using steel in creative ways to build truly remarkable, sophisticated structures. The Blennerhassett Island Bridge, which crosses the Ohio River near Parkersburg, W.Va., is one such high-tech project. Completed in 2008, it was built on the steel bridge legacy started by Eads, but also incorporated new technology in its design and construction.

For example, it uses a networked tied-arch center span. Engineers surveyed the bridge as it was being built, plugged the data into a 3D finite element model of the bridge, checked actual stresses in the members, and refined the construction process based on that. It may not be as radical as using steel for the first time, but we sure have come a long way since then.

Especially productive creative teams are able to find excitement in solving problems both big and small, and in varying stages. It's these accrued solutions that make up the distance between a new idea being created, and actually being adopted.

Leaders who focus on incremental progress—being “solutionary” rather than revolutionary—are the ones that truly push ideas to full fruition. Such behavior takes a tremendous amount of discipline. But with conviction and clearly defined goals, creative energy can be channeled to refine a good idea enough to make a great impact. **MSC**



Construction of the Eads Bridge crossing the Mississippi River at St. Louis, Mo., around 1874.



Constructing the networked, tied-arch span of the Blennerhassett Island Bridge over the Ohio River in 2007.

This article is based on research by Scott Belsky and the Behance team. Belsky is the founder of Behance, a company that develops products and services that boost productivity in the creative professional community. Behance runs the Behance Creative Network (behance.net), the 99% productivity thinktank (the99percent.com), the Action Method project management application (actionmethod.com), and the Creative Jobs List.

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