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The truth about innovation and how to unleash it

Posted: March 11, 2011

President Obama held a 90-minute dinner in Silicon Valley at the home of the venture capitalist John Doerr last month to learn about innovation from some invited guests, including Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook and Steve Jobs of Apple. Little is publicly known about the conversation, but the range of topics included education, workforce development, H-1B work visas and the elimination of the tax that companies must pay to bring overseas cash holdings to the United States. After the dinner, the president's senior adviser Valerie Jarrett was quoted as saying, "Who are the Mark Zuckerbogs of tomorrow? We want to make sure we harness that innovative spirit."

Harness the innovative spirit? That sounds like control and directing the private sector. Doesn't she mean release, prod, unleash, remove obstacles or something that allows the innovative spirit to thrive? Even more to the point, to what does she want to harness this spirit? I assume she does not mean to an anchor, a think tank or a government agency. Innovative spirit will evaporate in thin air if there is no intrinsic drive or purpose to the efforts that evolve out of the spirit.

We don't need another Facebook, which seems to drain productive time rather than increase productivity. Rather, we must find solutions to issues that we as a society need to solve. I like my iPad, but I don't find I am more productive or innovative because of it.

It's not the spirit that needs to be harnessed. Instead, leaders must direct strategic critical priorities so that individuals can apply innovation to alleviate problems. Finding alternative energy sources, protecting the environment, educating youth and adults to become informed citizens and improving our deteriorated infrastructure seem to be where innovation must be applied. The public sector can encourage or direct private innovation into these areas through tax policy and incentive grants. The truth about innovation is that often regulations and penalties stifle it. Eliminating attention deficits by limiting the intrusion of e-mails, Facebook updates or other conveniences might do more to enhance the innovative spirit than almost anything else.

The truth about innovation means companies need to have employees work in a productive manner to change the world, one step at a time. It's a waste to do something efficiently that didn't need to be done in the first place. Instead of harnessing the innovative spirit, consider Peter Drucker's five secrets of a manager who contributes to the success of an organization and society. Someone needs to be: setting objectives, organizing the group, motivating and communicating, measuring performance and developing people. He defined innovation "as the specific instrument of entrepreneurship, the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth."

You cannot do it alone. So as a person who wants to unleash the innovative spirit and accomplish something meaningful, Drucker suggested you ask yourself three questions. What am I doing that does not need to be done? What am I doing that can be done by someone else? What am I doing that only I can do? After you answer these questions, as well as what problem is worth solving, putting together your five-point process will allow you to shake the globe for positive results. Blythe McGarvie of Williamsburg, president of Leadership for International Finance and author of "Shaking the Globe," can be reached at bmgarvie@LIFgroup.com.

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