



**The i-zone experience**

## Innovation Zone Case Studies

There's a lovely bit early on in the first episode of the final Blackadder series – the one set during the First World War. Blackadder has been set a Top Top Secret mission to find someone who can paint a motivating cover for the magazine, 'King & Country.' As this is a possible route out of the trenches for a short period of time, he has a go at painting himself. His results aren't up to much. Neither are those of his batman, Baldrick. Blackadder is bemoaning the situation when George, the rather jolly but apparently incompetent Lieutenant, played by Hugh Lawrie, very reluctantly shows some of his paintings. He refers to them as 'embarrassing daubs, really' and of course they are anything but! Blackadder admonishes George for not admitting to his talent a little earlier.

“One doesn't like to blow one's trumpet!” George replies hesitantly.

“You might at least have told us you've got a trumpet!” says Blackadder petulantly.

Well, this is my trumpet – or at least the first instalment! I have tried to capture the spirit and the action in some of the assignments that I have undertaken. Indeed, you may recognise something that we have done together – I always keep the identity of the business hidden, of course. Rather than just tell the story, I have tried to extract the key learning points as well. I have then posed a series of questions that you might ask yourself from time to time and indicated the Case Study that might provide some food for thought.

Whether you read this cover-to-cover or just use it as something to dip into every now and again, I hope that you will find it enjoyable and stimulating. I also hope that it succeeds in its primary aim of demonstrating the breadth and depth of the Innovation Zone capability.

**Alisdair Wiseman – The Innovation Zone.**

## Key questions that you might want to answer

The Question.....	The Case Study
How can I get people committed to change? .....	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,12
How can I ensure that this project succeeds? .....	4,7,8,10,12
How can I find new strategic space? .....	1,5,10
How can I leapfrog the competition? .....	1,5,10,11,12,13
How can I get the most out of the senior team? .....	2,3,9
How can I get some momentum behind this process? .....	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13
How can I get the most out of this session? .....	1,2,4,5,6,7,8,9,11,12,13
How can I find a better way of doing this? .....	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11,12,13
How can I get the most out of my people? .....	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,13
How can I create an environment where innovation can flourish? .....	1,3,5,6,8,11,13
How can I prepare my people for the forthcoming changes? .....	1,2,4,6,7,8
How can I develop stronger relationships amongst the team? .....	1,2,3,5,6,8,9
How can I ensure that I am leading the innovation process properly? .....	1,3,5
How can I measure the innovation capability of my people? .....	1,5
How can I unlock the enormous capability that lies in my people? .....	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,13

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## IZ01 Getting innovation onto everyone's agenda

This global multinational manufactures iron castings. One of the main difficulties they face is that many other people can manufacture these castings as well. In fact, they were experiencing intense competitive pressure from imports where the labour content of the product cost was 10% of that incurred in Europe. These same companies were copying their products. Their margins and their competitive position were being eroded at an alarming rate. They quickly realised that they would need to innovate their way out of the situation. They needed patentable new products that delivered real benefits to their customers. And, as they reviewed their product development pipeline, they realised that current activity alone could deliver an additional £3 million to the bottom line in the relatively short term. However, they also realised that innovation was not high enough up everyone's agenda. Indeed, some aspects of the current business environment were actively standing in the way of innovation. They knew that they had to get innovation right up at the top of everyone's agenda.

Our initial intervention involved three distinct activities. First, we conducted the ICQ (Innovation Culture Quotient) survey to determine the extent to which the current environment promoted innovation. This demonstrated that they fell into the 'cautiously innovative' category, with scores only just above the mid-point on all of the key indicators of an innovative culture.

Then we conducted the I2Q (Individual Innovation Quotient) survey to get some insight into the innovation capability that was locked up in the people in the Sales, Marketing and Product Development people. This indicated that there was indeed a substantial capability. However, given the environment within which they were working, the opportunity to exercise this capability was constrained.

Finally, we ran a two-day, residential and highly interactive workshop for the entire group of 24 people. There were mixed nationalities so we had simultaneous translation to take into account.



We spent the first morning reviewing all the current innovation activity in the group. The next 24 hours were spent mastering Rapid Innovation™ so that everyone was able to hone their innovation capability and learn some new tools. We spent the final afternoon taking a second look at the current innovation activity, in light of what we had covered on Rapid Innovation™ to see if we could develop some new perspectives.

The response to the entire intervention was wholeheartedly positive. People developed a wider and common understanding of current activity and the different ways of working. The two nationalities, operating on different sides of the English Channel, came to know each other much better and developed a common language for innovation. In overall terms, we established the foundations for all the important work that was to follow.

This process demonstrated many things:

- People are already very creative – we just need to find productive channels for them to exercise this capability.
- It's not enough to have creative people – we need an innovative environment as well.
- If we are going to reverse a trend that began some time ago, we need to invest some serious time and effort – a quick off-site meeting will not suffice.
- Having a common language for innovation really makes a difference.

So why don't you think about getting innovation on everyone's agenda?

## IZ02 Getting beyond old rivalries

The new General Manager sensed the tension immediately. Two days in his new job and already the turf wars and inter-departmental rivalries had become transparent. A couple more days spent finding his feet and talking to people made it clear that he had inherited a talented group of people that just didn't get on. On a good day, different members of the management team would just ignore each other – and on a bad... This was going to be hard enough during the quieter period in the year. However, once the Christmas rush began, these difficulties would undoubtedly increase exponentially. Time to act.

He brought me up to speed with the situation as he saw it and then described his ambitions for the team and for the business. We agreed that I should spend some time with each member of the team and then devise a programme for some sort of team-building event.

As I spoke to everybody, I was able to confirm the GM's original diagnosis – talented people that didn't get on. A difficult place to start a teambuilding process from, you might think. I was happy enough though – I knew it could have been worse!

We were due to have three days together in the depths of Derbyshire. We agreed that the objectives for the session should be to increase the effectiveness of the management team; and to develop a strong sense of shared accountability and ownership. I devised a programme that combined a series of key business issues with a number of short sharp team exercises – nothing too strenuous or adventurous but enough to test their ability to work together and to highlight productive and destructive behaviours. The culmination was to be the creation of a 30-minute video, starring everyone in the team, with the title, "Why this is a great place to be!" The three days fairly flew by. Whether it was the change of venue, the change of GM, or just a change in the weather – I really don't know. However, almost from the start, there was a palpable change in the atmosphere,



and it just continued to get better. The business sessions exposed real issues and some strong solutions. The team exercises exposed good behaviours and bad. And the team continued to learn and grow with everything they tackled. They were a totally different group by the end of the session.

What did we all learn from our three days in Dovedale?

- There's good in everyone – sometimes we just need to find a new way of looking at things to see it.
- Given a shared desire and commitment, there are many ways of getting round deep-rooted interpersonal difficulties.
- Every team has the potential for greatness – it just needs to be liberated and cultivated.
- When people face new, shared challenges together, they work together to succeed.



## IZ03 Changing the way we do things

For the sake of the story, let's call him Paul. Paul sat on the Board of this multi-national financial services business. He was a powerful character and he knew it. He arrived before everyone else, went directly to his corner office, closed the door, worked all day (and often well into the night), and then left after everyone else had already gone home. He emerged for the usual bio-breaks – as they called them in this organisation – but rarely interacted with anyone on the way there or the way back. And if he wanted food or refreshments, well, that's what PA's were for!

That was where we started! We had been called in to help this part of the business introduce a new culture. Ordinarily, we get to do this under the banner of some form of change programme. Not in this case though. They just wanted to change the culture – nothing more, nothing less.

So, we went straight for it. There were five key questions:

- What was the current culture like?
- What did the senior people want it to become?
- How big a gap existed?
- How might we fill the gap? And,
- How badly did they want to succeed?

In many ways, the last question was the first question. If we got the wrong answer to that one, we didn't need to ask the others. However, from very early on, we got a very strong feeling about their desire to succeed. There were a series of fundamental problems in the business and a change of culture was what was needed to provide the basis for sustainable improvement. So, we set about answering the other four questions. Answers to the first came through a combination



of interviews with a wide (and deep) cross-section of people in the organisation and a good deal of observation. We needed to understand current behaviour – not just what people told us was happening but what we could see for ourselves. This generated a huge amount of information from which we were able to deduce the rules that drove behaviour. They did not make very attractive reading:

- Senior people know best.
- People are just a means to an end.
- Failure is punished.
- Blame is more important than resolution.

And so the list went on. In parallel, we ran a series of workshops with the senior team to understand what the ‘ideal’ might look like. It was in stark contrast to what their current behaviours were generating. They wanted it to be a place where:

- Everyone has a contribution to make.
- People and the outcome are important.
- Failure is welcomed as an opportunity to learn.
- Resolution is more important.

The third question on the size of the gap sort of answered itself. That made the answer to the fourth question much more challenging. When it came down to it, the only option was to convert a collective desire to introduce a different culture into a personal desire to behave differently.

It took time, and a lot of serious one-to-one’s, but we got there. We selected the key behaviours, one at a time, and worked on them constantly and consistently until the new behaviour became a habit – then we moved on to the next one. And the outcome? Well, for the sake of the story, let’s call him Paul.

Paul sat on the Board of this multinational financial services business. He was a powerful character but he didn’t flaunt it.

Sure, he often arrived before everyone else – he was a morning person after all. And he occasionally left after everyone else. But when he arrived, he breezed into the office, greeting people on the way to his corner office. He left his door open – you never knew who might drop in! He stopped to chat to his PA when she arrived. He declined the offer of coffee and walked to the machine himself. He always took a slightly different route to the coffee machine, engaging with one set of people on the way there and another on the way back. He ate in the restaurant and, on the odd occasion, he was caught humming, in public!

Using words to describe the transformation sells Paul, and his colleagues, short. They began to behave in a completely different way. The ‘old’ Paul was still there – and appeared when the situation required it. But the ‘new’ Paul was a better person to have around. And all sorts of other things started to happen as a direct result. Staff retention rocketed, productivity increased, revenue began to climb and profitability improved. Sure, there were other things going on in the business that were impacting upon these indicators – but everyone knew how important the culture change was.

A success story in anybody’s book! So, what can we learn from this?

- We need to work in an innovation-friendly environment if we want innovation to flourish.
- We need to develop a deep understanding of the current culture if we are going to change it.
- The emotional aspect of environment – how people feel – is far and away the most important element.
- Creating the right emotional environment is about changing the behaviour of key people in the organisation.

So, a salutary tale for anyone in a position of influence in the organisation. Take heed!

## IZ04 Ensuring projects succeed

Projects are ubiquitous. For many of us, they represent the majority of what we do. This is certainly the case within the IT Function of most businesses. The new IT Director for this multinational reinsurance business was a convert – he had experienced first-hand just how powerful having a structured approach to project management could be. He assessed the situation in his new company very quickly on arrival. No common approach, no common language, no common disciplines. The results were inevitable: projects that were unclear, poorly prioritised, late, over-budget, unfinished, and not performing to the original requirement. In short, IT was in the doghouse! There was a pressing need to respond. He knew that a single approach to mobilising and managing projects would not resolve all the outstanding issues – but, equally, he knew that it would focus everyone’s attention and get the change process started in a practical way.

What we did was practical and straightforward. Our no-nonsense approach to project management was reviewed by a team from within the IT Function. They indicated the modifications that were needed to ensure that it could work effectively in their environment – this helped to internalise the approach from the outset. We then ran a series of one-day workshops, using real business projects, to demonstrate how to go about mobilisation. The proposition was that if we get off to a good start, we greatly increase our chances of a successful outcome. Everyone in the IT Function attended. We made sure that each day was enjoyable as well as productive – a sure way to ensure adoption.

The outcome was as inevitable as the solution. People talk a common projects language. Projects are clearly defined at the outset. People are clear about their contributions. Account is taken of other projects that are running concurrently. Monitoring progress has become a simple task. People talk about success much more frequently than they deal with failure. In short, IT has



become a fully-fledged member of the organisation with an image to match.

The key learning points from this case study are obvious:

- Adopting a single approach to mobilising and managing projects is essential.
- Modifying whatever approach you select to make it specific to your environment is practically useful and emotionally imperative.
- Making training enjoyable as well as productive greatly increases the chances of adoption and sustained use.
- Using real business projects as the cornerstone of the training process brings a strong dose of reality and eases adoption.
- Giving everyone a first-hand insight into the approach, rather than just training Project Managers, pays real dividends.

Are projects a substantial part of what you do?

## IZ05 Finding new ways to run promotions

The Circulation Director of this leading Regional Newspaper was rightly very proud of the reputation that his team had achieved. They were seen, both within their Group, and more widely by the industry, to be the leaders in their field – running promotions to raise interest in, and awareness of, their titles and to increase sales. (Allan would have put those two things the other way round, I think!)

The sales promotions that he and his team had developed were groundbreaking, distinctive and, most importantly, successful. They had won awards for their ingenuity. And perhaps the greatest accolade of all was that their competitors were copying them. A strong story so far. You're waiting for the 'but' – so here it is. On their own admission, they too were copying their past successes. They had started rerunning some of their previous promotions and, as we all know, they were having less impact the second time round. Allan was keen to explore new territory, to maintain the sale of his newspapers and the leading position of his team.

So, what did we do? First of all, everyone in his team did the I2Q survey which, of course, indicated that there is indeed a wealth of creative talent there waiting to be used. True, different people majored in different aspects of the individual innovation quotient – but isn't that the nature of any team.

Allan subjected himself to the ILQ (Innovation Leadership Quotient) survey. This is based around 14 key behaviours that characterise outstanding leaders of the innovation process – and in fact outstanding leaders period. He selected four of his team to complete the survey for him. They were to be completely honest in their feedback! At the same time, he completed the survey himself.

This gave us the opportunity to compare his own perception of his behaviour with that of his



team. Clearly, I cannot share any of the specifics. However, in general, there was a strong degree of consistency.

It pointed out those behaviours where both he and his team felt he was already doing a great job. It also pointed out those behaviours that Allan knows he has to work harder at – as confirmed by his team. Most importantly, it indicated one particular behaviour where Allan felt he was good but where his team thought he was dreadful! This sort of situation is probably the most productive sort of output from the ILQ because this is the ‘blissful ignorance’ situation that often lies at the bottom of so many difficulties.

Finally, we ran a day on Rapid Innovation™ using the real business issue as the basis of mastering a quick and yet powerful way of generating new ideas on any challenge. It was a wonderful day! It is hard to describe how it feels to be in the same room as people when they are hatching brand new ideas that you just know are going to change the world! The energy. The excitement. The sense of wonder. It’s just all too much.

One the most productive sessions of the day was early on when we looked at rule-breaking as a source of innovation. As they reeled off the rules that surround promotions, you could just see and hear the penny dropping. They were just dying to get in there and break some of those rules!

The outcome of our time together is probably already self-evident. Everyone went away enthused to get back to the job of dreaming up top-notch promotions. They realised that many of the constraints that they were taking for granted were completely up for grabs. It became obvious how little time they spent working together on this shared imperative. And they had generated loads of new ideas that they could get started on straight away.

The lessons are probably self-evident as well:

- There is an enormous creative capability in everyone – we just need to let it out every now and again.
- The leadership role is key – it is probably the single most important factor in letting that latent talent for creativity to get out.

- Both innovation capability and innovation leadership can be measured, albeit in a fairly subjective fashion. What counts is not the absolute outcome, but the relatives that make it up.
- There are great ideas everywhere – we just need to tune in and receive them.
- Once implemented, new ideas can easily become the foundation for a new competitive position, for new strategic space.

There is always an opportunity for people who share a common purpose to work more collaboratively and get better results.



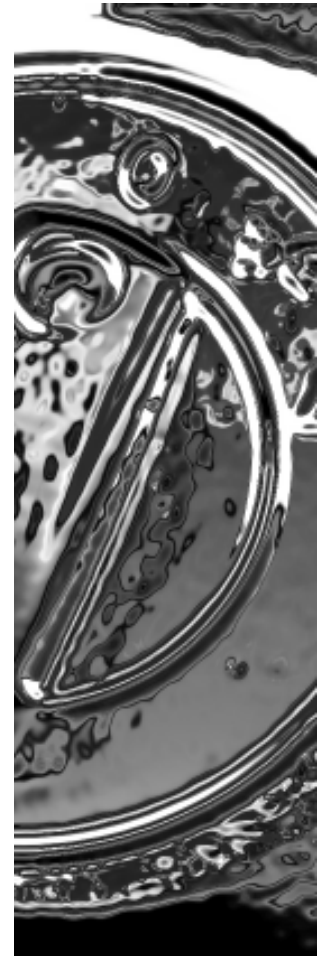
## IZ06 Mixing business and pleasure

“Our aim is to put more oomph! into the business.” The MD of this Consumer Healthcare company interrupted the proceedings, dropped his bombshell and then lent back in his chair waiting for a reaction from the rest of his team. There was a short silence – the reflective sort – and then the first person said, “You’re right! That is indeed what our aim is.” Unanimous agreement followed quickly.

We had been working on the business plan for the next three years. We had already agreed the management team’s overall aim and then moved on to other parts of the plan. The first cut was ‘to lead the company in the achievement of our annual goals.’ Factually accurate, but perhaps a little light on the inspirational front. So, the MD’s intervention was welcome and timely.

We built on the change and quickly brought the session to a close. The next step was to find a way of sharing the business plan with the rest of the people in the UK. They decided that the Annual Conference, always held in the early part of December, was going to be the best platform. This event was typically a time of celebration as well as an opportunity to work. Not surprisingly, the attendees always looked forward to going to it.

We quickly agreed that the larger audience should do some of the things that the Management Team had done – in particular, the vision collage. This was the process of creating a picture of what the future might look like, and feel like, as a result of achieving all the things that the plan set out to do. Straightforward with a team of eight – somewhat trickier with a group of 80-plus. We also agreed that we needed to get the larger audience to ask and answer some pretty challenging questions. This would be tricky in a different way. Undaunted, I set about creating a programme for the Annual Conference that covered the business issues but did so in a way that did not seem like work.



And it all worked out extremely well on the day. The people participated vigorously in all of the business sessions and yet we still found time to play as well. There is little doubt that this hybrid process brought the business plan to life for everyone. They worked without realising that they were working. And they created strong positive associations with everything we covered that day. We really did manage to mix business and pleasure.

The key learning points that emerged from this were:

- It is not only possible, but often more productive, to mix business and pleasure;
- We can get a large group to participate meaningfully in the strategic process;
- It is important, and entirely feasible, to find ways of associating strong positive emotions with key business issues;
- Creating excitement leads to greater commitment;
- Saying what we actually mean, in Plain English, gives greater strength any statement of strategic intent.

Some things to bear in mind when you are next sharing strategy with a larger audience.

## IZ07 Getting people excited about change

This major Food-manufacturing Group established its intention to implement SAP across its 18 subsidiaries over a period of some three years – an ambitious undertaking. Early on, the handpicked central team realised that this was going to be a major change programme. It wasn't just that they were implementing brand new, company-wide computer systems. They were going to have to change the way that most people worked, throughout the entire organisation. And this in an environment that, historically, was characterised by highly independent and fully autonomous operating units. They realised that they could not just get started and hope that things would turn out well. They needed to put some hard work into preparing everyone for the major changes that lay ahead – they wanted people to be excited about the change rather than nervous or even downright resistant.

We sat down and looked at what needed to be done. We realised that there were two key components to getting people on board. First, the key people needed to have a deep understanding of what was intended, why it was happening, and how the new systems would work. Secondly, these same people would need to develop a real commitment to the changes – it was going to be important that they felt a strong desire to make it happen. Characteristically, this business had been very good at covering the first base but had generally ignored the second. The central team realised that this was probably the cause of a lot of the difficulties that had beset similar changes in the past – and they were determined that this time things would be different.

So, we developed a programme of three workshops which were to be run at two-weekly intervals. Initially, the intention was to get the senior team on board and then get them to run the same workshops with their own people, thus establishing their leadership role early on. And the first workshop addressed what was intended and why it had to happen now. The second workshop offered the opportunity to look at the systems in some detail. So far, so good – familiar ground.



It was the third workshop that broke new ground. It was aimed at helping those involved expose and come to terms with the personal implications of the change process. We made it acceptable – indeed, we insisted – that people should ask what was in it for them. We asked how they wanted to be perceived as they implemented SAP. We got them to imagine what a great place it would be if everything went well – and conversely, but quickly – we asked them to think about the consequences of failure.

Some of the first companies to go through the implementation process opted to use the workshops as they had been intended – senior team first and then cascade to everyone else. Others decided that it would be better to get all the key individuals involved from the outset. Both approaches worked well. The key thing was that everyone gained not only a rational understanding of what was going to happen but also an emotional commitment to making it succeed.

This is one of those stories that really does have a happy ending. Sure, they still have some distance to travel. However, the Group is more than half way through the process and has many successful implementations to look back on. I handed the programme over to people in the Central Team once we were happy that it worked – and they have taken all the subsequent companies through it.

As always, there are a series of key learning points that we can extract from this experience:

- It is indeed possible to get people excited about change.
- If we can get people excited about change, we substantially increase our chances of a successful outcome.
- Getting people excited is a combination of developing a rational understanding and an emotional commitment – it is not enough to focus purely on the rational perspective and hope that everything else will follow.
- This process takes time – we need to invest sufficient time up front to build this excitement.
- Leaving a short period for reflection between each of the workshops meant that we did not overwhelm people – they had the chance to puzzle things through, integrate, and develop a better perspective.

So, if you are contemplating a major change in your organisation, take the time to get your people excited about it first.

## IZ08 Finding new ways of working

Let's start this story at the end. Here's what we learnt from running two-day team workshops for three brand new teams:

- Everyone has something to contribute – even a 'failing' can be a source of strength.
- We don't need to wait for ages to get outstanding teams – we can accelerate the process successfully.
- We can develop sufficient trust in two days to talk about things that are usually off-agenda.
- We may all be creatures of habit, but we can all learn new ways of working, in very short periods of time.
- Combining serious work and great fun gets better results!

So, what about the story? If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well! Taking this adage well and truly to heart, my client decided to buck the industry trend and go for a radically different way of organising the services that his function provided to the rest of the business. Tony set up three new teams, each with a very clear focus. As the majority of the work was project-based, and the load was liable to substantial fluctuation, he wanted to establish the highest level of flexibility.

Staffing turned out to be the key. The teams had three different components. First, there was a core of permanent staff who had, or were developing, the key skills that the business would need into the medium term. Then there was a group of contract staff, hired for the duration of a specific project, but treated in every way as though they were permanent staff. Finally, he infused one of the teams with some very high-level expertise. The result was three very strong teams – on paper! They had, however, spent very little time working together. That was where The Innovation



Zone came in. The brief was to help each team take an accelerated ride up the learning curve so that they could hit the ground running in the shortest possible time – the project deadlines didn't go on hold as Tony got his teams in place!

Preparation came in two forms. I conducted one-to-one's with each of the people in the three teams – managers, permies (as they were called) and the contractors. The broad conclusion was that everyone approved of the principle and the direction but many were a little unclear about the detail and the practicalities. The other aspect of preparation was personality profiling. HR carried out the Myers Briggs Indicator of Type analysis with each person.

We then designed a programme for the two-day team workshops. It was a game of two halves, with some excitement thrown in throughout to maintain energy and interest. The first half looked at the core purpose of the team, the key tasks that they had to deliver, indicators of success and the specific actions that needed to be undertaken. This confirmed why the team existed. The second half looked at the people side of things. We looked at the Myers Briggs analysis and drew some conclusions about the balance of each team. Each team member prepared, and shared, a Personal Inventory – the strengths and blindspots that they brought to the team. And we did a series of short, sharp team exercises throughout the two days so that we could learn from each one and get used to applying that learning immediately.

The results were outstanding. The feedback immediately after the event was very positive:

- For something I was dreading, I had a thoroughly enjoyable time.
- It wasn't until afterwards that I realised that we had opened an avenue for us to be able to talk about subjects that normally go unsaid.
- The balance of the workshop was just about spot on - nice blend between serious and more light-hearted tasks.
- A fun 2 days but challenging at times.
- Great opportunity to meet team members informally - it would have taken weeks in the office.
- Very intense, but rewarding.

And when all the teams got together six weeks after the team workshops, the enthusiasm for the process was still as strong – that’s a result in my book!

The link to innovation may seem a little tenuous to some. It is, however, strong for me. If innovation is introducing something new, that’s exactly what each of these teams was doing. Developing new ways of working, new ways of communicating with each other, new ways of dealing with familiar situations, and new applications for old skills. And an enjoyable and productive time was had by all.

## IZ09 Mobilising a new senior team

This is a highly successful, very profitable, family owned and run business. In fact, you probably consume their products on a daily basis. The time came when the family decided to pull back a little from the day-to-day running of the business, leaving one of their number to lead the Operations Board. This was an opportunity to turn a fresh page and to put a new stamp on the way that the new Board operated. There was one internal promotion, two external appointments, and three members of the previous Board. They had no experience of working together as a team. Yet they had ambitious plans for the future – so it was imperative that they quickly established the measure of each other and got on with the task in hand.

We began with a two-day workshop in the Lake District of the United Kingdom. It was summertime, the weather was marvellous and the location was idyllic – a great place to start! Teambuilding was the order of the day – and yet we chose not to take the obvious route of undertaking overt teambuilding exercises. Instead, we worked together on some key business issues. What was the role of the Operations Board in the new set of circumstances? How did we wish to be perceived by the rest of the business? How would we work together to make the most of the collective talents in the team? These were some of the questions that we asked and answered. Individuals addressed the questions rather than thought about teambuilding. I facilitated the discussion, challenging here, pointing up unhelpful behaviour there, summarising the key points, and so on. Without consciously working on it, we were nonetheless, going through the process of building a stronger team.

As we progressed, greater levels of trust developed so that, by the start of the second day, we were able to look at Personal Maps. Each individual compiled two lists: the good things, and the not-so-good things, that they brought to the team. On completion, each person then had to present their lists to their colleagues who then had the opportunity to comment, complement, add, change





and delete. You will realise that trust had to have been established in order for there to be any productive level of disclosure. It worked a treat. Everyone struggled with the complements, of course – but the earlier practice helped greatly.

The end of the second day saw us agreeing how to take the process forward. And, subsequently, we worked together a number more times, focusing latterly on the Three-Year Plan. It was great to see the team come together. They were always going to, of course. However, I would like to think that my intervention speeded them on their way.

We can draw a series of lessons from this:

- The best way to build a team is to have them work on important business issues – this eliminates any difficulty associated with context and reality.
- It is trust that sets outstanding teams apart from the rest – any teambuilding process must aim to develop strong relationships, based on trust, if it is to have any long-term dividend.
- Teambuilding is not a one-stop shop. It is an ongoing process and there is little doubt that an external facilitator can continue to add value over a series of interventions.
- Having a number of teambuilding events means that people have the chance to assimilate what happens at each one, reflect, and then make the most of subsequent activities.
- Being in a nice place helps the process – but it is not a pre-requisite.

Food for thought if you are about to mobilise a new team or, indeed, reinvent an existing one.

## IZ10 Pulling rabbits out of hats

Five months had passed since the first meeting. My client had won the business but there was mounting confusion and frustration. Confusion on the part of the people in my client's organisation – a leading provider of outsourced customer service solutions – because they hadn't tied down precisely what their customer wanted. Frustration on the part of their customer – one of the world's major automotive manufacturers – because he couldn't get anyone to truly understand what he was getting at and it was just so clear to him. Time was marching on but progress wasn't.

“This is a job for Alisdair!” And with that one short comment, this dynamic MD set in train a series of events. She contacted the people in the automotive organisation and told them that she was inviting a specialist in the field of innovation along to facilitate the next meeting. She phoned me to explain the situation and mentioned, in passing, that she had told her customer that I would find a solution. No pressure there then!

I got a short briefing and that was the last we spoke of the situation until about 10 minutes before the automotive man arrived. She trusted me to get it sorted – again, no pressure there! Oh, and did I mention that we only had 2 hours?

That meant that we had to hit the ground running and then maintain that initial pace. Without any explanation, I put up a Flash Card with a penguin on it and said, “What are all the things that that makes you think of?” Loads of suggestions flowed rapidly. I then showed a Card of a man being x-rayed and asked the same question. Again, a series of associations came in quick succession. “OK. Connect the two of them!” I instructed without pausing for breath. “What?” they said. “Go on,” I said, “Find some connections between the penguin and the man being x-



rayed!” “Ah-ha!” they said. “Customs suspected the man of smuggling penguins, so they x-rayed him to see if he had eaten one!” “Darwin’s great, great grandson is investigating an alternative theory on evolution. He thinks that homo sapiens is descended from penguins and he is x-raying this man to find skeletal similarities!”

And so the connections flowed in quick succession as well. Five minutes gone and we had already broken with traditional patterns of thinking and running meetings. I then posed a series of questions that we needed to ask and answer. We started with, “What’s the challenge?” I can’t tell you the answer to that one because it would give the game away and this is leading edge stuff!

The next question was, “What’s the killer question – K? for short?” A K? is an open question that presumes many answers. It is also a personal one – How can I or we....? And it’s got loads of energy associated with it – How can we absolutely ensure that...? We wrote the K? on a post-it note and put it in a very visible place on the table. We then moved on to ask and answer all the subsidiary questions in quick order. No discussion or debate, just answers, recorded on different coloured post-it notes and slapped onto the table.

An hour later, I called a halt. “Well, the answer’s in there somewhere!” I reminded everyone of the killer question, split them into two groups and then gave them 10 minutes to come up with the best solution. Competition often brings out the best in situations like this! Within minutes, slightly different concepts were emerging from the two teams. And 10 minutes later, they were ready to share the fruits of their labours. Both had workable solutions. We consolidated the best bits of both, agreed the next steps and broke for lunch with 5 minutes to spare. (I know the maths doesn’t add up – we stopped for a coffee break in the middle!)

I’m sorry I can’t share the solution with you – it’s still under wraps.

Client? Delighted! Customer? Delighted! Me? Pleased and quietly amazed – we did it!

There were many learning points that emerged from this process. Here are some of the more important ones:

- It only takes a few minutes to create real momentum.
- It is both easy and essential to break from accustomed patterns of thought and behaviour.
- The answer is indeed out there somewhere if we can find a way of 'seeing' it.
- Converting a challenge into a Killer Question increases the chances of finding that solution.
- It is important to separate debate from idea generation – they are very different processes.
- It's amazing what can be achieved in a very short space of time, if everyone is committed.
- Identifying, in advance, the critical questions that need to be asked and answered pays dividends.

So, there you have it! They all got the solutions they were looking for and I lived to tell the tale. A successful outcome in anybody's book.

## IZ11 Giving meetings a long-overdue makeover

The Quarterly Review Meeting was “Death by PowerPoint!” Same place, same time, same people, same agenda, same style – in fact, same everything. It was a ritual in every sense of the word – a procedure regularly (and mindlessly) followed. It was totally predictable. Attendees arrived on autopilot, stayed on autopilot and left on autopilot. And as such, it was totally sterile and unproductive. Time for a change!

So, I got a call from the CEO – could I meet up with Steve and Donna, the two people responsible for this meeting? Within a couple of days, we sat down to look at how we could give this session a complete makeover. We had a free rein, but we had to keep in mind the fact that the meeting was with a major, prestige customer and that there were certain objectives that did need to be achieved.

We began by deconstructing the meeting. What was its purpose? Who were the attendees and what did we know – I mean really know – about them? What sort of information was being shared? How much discussion normally took place? How did people behave in the meeting? What rules governed everyone’s behaviour? You name it – we looked at it.

Then, we inverted practically everything and reconstructed the Quarterly Review Meeting. 75 slides became 5 slides. The slides were presented on A2 display boards rather than through a projector. We changed the seating plan. We looked at different things that they could do between being greeted in reception and arriving in the room where the meeting was going to take place. We turned the 80:20 information:discussion ratio on its head. We thought about little intermissions that we could introduce to raise the energy at strategic points. And we had a great time doing it! In the event, Steve and Donna went with less than 25% of all the ideas that we developed together – and even that was enough to blow the customers’ minds!



They were all fairly buzzing with excitement at the end of the meeting. They had covered ten times more ground than previous meetings and yet still managed to finish early. Their American CEO had, coincidentally, decided to come along to this particular meeting and he emerged with a broad smile, declaring that this is the model that would be adopted in the States. And the people from the customer were already organising the date for the next meeting! A resounding success all round. And they still had the other 75% of the ideas to use in subsequent meetings – after all, we didn't want the new Quarterly Review Meeting to turn into the old one after a couple of occasions.

So what can we glean from this object lesson in innovation? Well, in overall terms, the most important single learning point is that if we really want to make a meeting productive, we need to make it an experience! And this means paying as much, if not more, attention to how the meeting is staged as we do to the information that is to be covered. There is a multitude of different ways of doing this but they all come down to two things: changing the mix and taking some risks.

There's a little postscript to this case study. Steve got in touch a few months later and this was his update.

His first point was that the Quarterly Review Meetings are now much less painful to prepare and much more enjoyable to attend, for everyone involved.

Steve has produced a monthly paper-based summary of the latest developments. This means that participants are already fairly well acquainted with the latest developments by the time they get to the meeting and can thus devote more time to discussion and debate and even less time to information sharing. A wider audience gets access to this summary so that more searching questions are beginning to surface.

Steve's CEO had decided not to attend the last meeting as she was entirely happy that things would go well – remember that this particular customer is the jewel in the crown.

Three of the most influential people in the customer business decided to attend the last meeting because they had heard from their people that it so good – these individuals had never previously attended a Quarterly Review Meeting. This gave Steve

access to the decision-makers in a way that he had not experienced before.

At this most recent meeting, one of these three individuals had one of those Eureka! moments. “That’s what I have been trying to tell people in the field for ages!” he yelled at one point. “Now I have the data to demonstrate my point.” One more happy customer!

And the last meeting was wrapped up in a little over an hour – where the meetings used to take over three.

Looks like they are going from strength to strength. Just goes to show what a little innovation can achieve! Let’s face it, we all spend way too much time in unproductive meetings. Isn’t it time that you gave one of your meetings a makeover?

## IZ12 Overhauling your sales process

“We’ve looked at all 14 proposals.” My heart sank – 14 proposals! “It’s clear that you can all do the job. So, this is what we want to do: we’re going to invite you all in for 30 minutes each on the same day to see who we feel we can work with.”

This was not at all what I had expected from this business – one of the largest motor vehicle manufacturers in the world. And this was a major piece of work that I was bidding for.

I had already looked at a couple of dealerships, drawn some conclusions and worked out how I might assist them to achieve their stated aims. I didn’t expect plain sailing from there – but I equally didn’t expect to be one of 14 contenders with only 30 minutes to make my mark.

I put the phone down and started thinking. No ordinary approach was going to do the business here. I had to stand out from the crowd – yet, deviating from the norm had to be a high-risk strategy. And of course, this all came at a time when I really could have done with the assignment – it never rains but it pours!

I had to do two things inside 30 minutes: demonstrate real distinction and show that I was someone they could really feel comfortable working with.

I decided quickly to throw caution to the wind. There was no point in just presenting the approach – they had already seen that and that was just a little too obvious. The only way they would find out if they liked working with me was to work with them! So I hatched my plan, did my prep and then set off for the client on the allotted day.

On arrival, I was ushered into an empty Board Room – a huge and rather daunting room with





crystal glasses and a decanter on a grand sideboard. A couple of minutes later, the first person arrived. I introduced myself with a bright breezy smile and shook hands. He went and sat at the back of the room.

“Why not sit a little closer?” I suggested helpfully.

“Its alright – I’m quite happy back here!” And so the gauntlet was thrown down. The rest of the people filed in and joined the Purchasing man at the back.

“Ready to roll?” I asked.

“Yes – the floor’s yours.” The language reassured me because it suggested theatre – and that was exactly what I had prepared for them.

“Great!” I said. “Can you all stand up, come down to the front and form a semi-circle.” It was phrased as a request but the tone was that of a command – I didn’t want them declining!

“Thanks!” I produced a light plastic football from a Tesco carrier bag and smiled broadly. “Now then, I’m going to throw the ball to you and when I say ‘Catch!’ I want you to head it back to me. And when I say ‘Head!’ I want you to catch it and throw it back to me. Without waiting for approval, I threw the ball to the Purchasing guy and yelled ‘Catch!’ He caught it and we all laughed together. I played with them for less than 2 minutes but already the mood had changed. As they sat down, I mentioned how important it is to have fun at work – part of my proposition – and then we got on with the rest of the ‘show’.

“Let’s just assume that you have already awarded the assignment to me and this is an early working meeting. I would like you to play a group of disgruntled Dealer Principles – OK?” Warm smiles all round – they were happy to do this because they are normally on the receiving end! “We’re going to look at the gap between where we are and where we want to be and then float some ideas about how we might fill the gap.” We were minutes into this part of the session when they all

abandoned the personae that they had adopted for the pitch and began ‘playing’ for real. Needless to say, we had a very productive 15 minutes. I summarised the output, confirmed that this is what I am like to work with, promised to forward the output to them within 24 hours and left with four minutes to spare.

I did ‘nervous anticipation’ for the next two days before getting the telephone call that confirmed that I had won the assignment – almost £750,000! And the spooky thing was that I was standing in one of their dealerships at the moment the call came through on my mobile, getting my car back from a routine service!

So, what does this story tell us about the sales process? Well:

- We have to stand out from the crowd if we’re going to win the sale.
- Standing out takes courage and increases the risk but clearly has its rewards.
- It’s alright to break the rules as long as we stay the right side of the line.
- Changing the mix is a key part of standing out – and it doesn’t need to be as extreme as my example.
- And once again, it is amazing just how much can be achieved in a very short period of time.

So, the next time you have an important sale to win, perhaps you might throw caution to the wind and decide to stand out from the crowd.

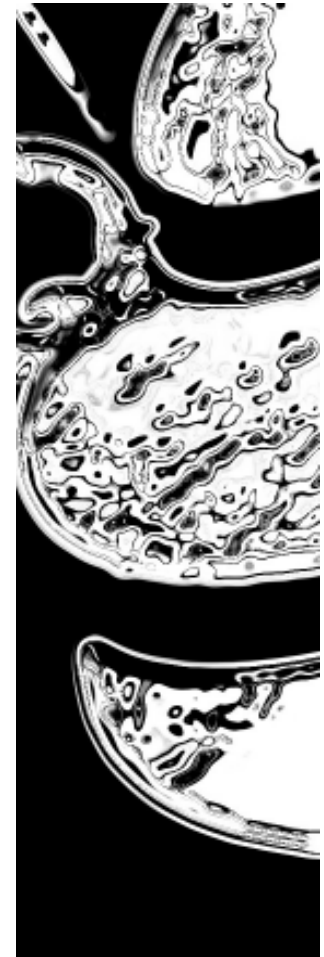
## IZ13 Getting up close and personal

Our goal was to find novel ways of personalising the product offering. The strategic imperative was to gain real competitive advantage in a really tough marketplace. The group consisted of bright young marketeers and their boss, each bursting with enthusiasm and already on with the job. The location was a charming (which is code for cramped and basic) little youth hostel deep in the Surrey countryside.

I split the group into two teams, disregarding hierarchy, and explained that they were going to work in parallel, and in competition, on the same job. There would be really desirable prizes for the team that was judged to have developed the most effective personalisation solutions at the end of the session.

The process we used was mix'n'match. We began by listing all the dimensions of the current product that we felt we could personalise. We followed this up with a second list: all the personalisation tactics that we could think of. For both lists, we used simple brainstorming to extract all the ideas that were already in people's minds and then lateral thinking to add a little spice to the mix. Each dimension was noted on a blue card and each tactic on a yellow card.

Once we had created all our raw material, we set about developing the personalisation solutions that we were sought. This was the simple part – and the fun part. All the blue cards were turned face down on one area of the table – all the yellow cards in a different area. People in each team took turns to expose one blue card and one yellow card and everyone tried to find connections between the two. Sometimes, this led to immediate



ideas – other times, the connections proved a little harder to find. Either way, the energy and enthusiasm was palpable – the pace fast and furious. As soon as the flow of ideas slowed, they turned the cards back over, mixed them up, and chose again.

When both teams had a good pool of possibilities, I set them their final challenge: select the two ‘best’ ideas and make a business case for each. I invited Rod to be judge and jury. The two teams presented. Rod listened, considered and offered his judgement. One team did indeed win, just like the real world. Unlike the real world, the prizes weren’t particularly desirable. However, both teams won because, in a little under three hours they had:

- Developed four outstanding solutions for personalising their product offering;
- Created an enormous pool of ideas to fall back on should the initial solutions not succeed;
- Gained experience of a robust process that they could use again in the future;
- Emerged with a deeper innovation capability; and
- Experienced, once again, what it’s like to operate in an Innovation Oasis™.

There is much that we can learn about creating an Innovation Oasis™ from this situation. In my view, the five key learning points were:

- Ensure there is a compelling imperative for the work in hand – this keeps everyone focused;
- Introduce friendly competition – this adds real edge to any team process;
- Participate as equals – this creates an environment where all ideas are valid;
- Structure what you’re doing – but be prepared to go with the flow; and
- Combine work and play – this delivers better results in a shorter period of time.

So, the next time you need to generate some ideas, spend a little time creating an Innovation Oasis™ first.