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The One Word We Must Accept to Enable Innovation

I am working on the outfitting of a room here at the FNBB headquarters that will be a place individuals and small groups can use to come up with creative ideas, solve problems or just have fun. I am calling it the Thinking Room and we will put that moniker right above the entry door. It's not the Innovation Room, because there are more steps involved in getting an idea to become an innovation. This room will have the ability to be set up for group brainstorming, small group interaction or a place for someone to get out of their office to think.

Thinking is not a valued activity for most organizations. Suppose you were here at the FNBB offices and our CEO was taking you around our building so you could meet our amazing staff. As you walk past my office, you glance inside and I am sitting in my chair with my feet up on the desk, I am leaning back with my hands behind my head and my eyes are closed. I will posit that I am in deep thought, coming up with ideas or being creative in my head. But to you, it looks like I am taking a nap! You might even say to the CEO, "It looks like David had a late night, get the man some coffee!" You get the point; the appearance of someone who is "not working" or "goofing off" is a strong demotivator to creativity and thinking. And trust me, we should be encouraging thinking. So the FNBB Thinking Room is a place where an individual or group of employees can reserve and if they are in there, there is no confusion about the purpose for their activities within.

Working closely with the Marketing Department, the Thinking Room is taking shape. We are at the point where we are looking at adding some graphics to the walls befitting the warm, inviting nature the room should engender. One wall has two large whiteboards, perfect for capturing a brainstorming session. In the space above those boards, I decided I wanted a quote. But what quote? There are certainly a lot to choose from, here are some options I considered:

"If I had asked the public what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse"

Henry Ford, (a classic)

"The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results"

Albert Einstein

"I skate to where the puck is going, not where it has been"

Hockey great Wayne Gretsky

"The Stone Age didn't end because they ran out of stones"

Unknown Author

I could keep going on and on. So many great creativity and innovation quotes are out there to inspire us to action. I even created an original one:

"Innovation is Creativity, Expressed, Manufactured and Consumed"

David Peterson

OK, that one doesn't seem to be as free flowing; no "ah ha" moment for you? It was created in response of a challenge to create a definition of innovation in 6 words or less, thus its pithy nature. But what it means is that coming up with new

ideas (Creativity) is the absolute essence of innovation ... but not the end of the process. There are lots of creative ideas that never get put into practice. To move an idea from creativity to innovation, you have to capture the idea, i.e.; write it down (Expressed), be able to build it, regardless if it's a device or procedure (Manufactured) and there must be users that can put the device or procedure into use (Consumed). Only when all of those are present does an innovation happen. And yet, as important as I feel that concept is, it's not the quote that will be on the wall above my white boards. It's this one:

"There is no innovation and creativity without failure"

Brené Brown, Professor of Social Research, University of Houston and bestselling author.

Does the fact that I want that specific quote to be memorialized on the Thinking Room wall surprise you? Why would we create this incredible room focused on thinking and creativity and then put a quote with the word FAILURE on the wall? Because that word, failure, is the single biggest hurdle that we bankers face if we are going to get serious about innovation. As an industry, we are nothing if not dedicated to not making mistakes. It makes sense, we are dealing with people's money, it's important to be "right" in executing transactions on behalf of our customers. But when it comes to innovation, what we want is to have people come up with ideas, get creative and show that we can "*skate to the puck*" AS LONG AS we never make a mistake. Can't have any failures. And therein lies the rub; it is an oxymoron to expect that we can have an innovation initiative, have that initiative pay off with amazing ideas for the future of providing financial services and yet, never have a failure. It simply cannot be done.

What we have to do is not fight against failure but embrace it. A failure is an opportunity for us to learn, to pivot and advance to a new innovation, to persist with innovation powered by failure not ending innovation because of it. And yet, in hundreds of ways, some even oblivious to us, we send out the signals that creativity is not welcomed. It's how we respond to someone who throws out an idea, a crazy idea (the best kind) and our initial reaction is negative. We scowl or scrunch up our face. We might actually verbalize that the idea is crazy or some derivation, and not in a positive way. We *teach* our direct reports to follow procedures and not to challenge the status quo. And then we wonder why no one offers up suggestions or ideas on how or where we can innovate.

Here are a couple of additional quotes regarding innovation and failure for your consideration:

"When looking to innovate—fail forward.

Innovation can be a chaotic process, embrace it and learn from your failures"

Luke Wester, Digital Marketing Strategist

"There's always an element of chance and you must be willing to live with that element.

If you insist on certainty, you will paralyze yourself"

J. Paul Getty

"If I have a thousand ideas and only one turns out to be good, I am satisfied"

Alfred Nobel.

I really resonate with that last quote. Innovation starts with creativity. Creativity requires ideas. Lots and lots of ideas. I remember reading that a study found that it takes perhaps as many as 100 ideas to get a single "good" idea. So rather than squelching ideas, we need to them to come, fast and furious. One of my biggest challenges as a strategic planning / workshop facilitator is getting senior executives to look and act in a way that encourages the free flow of ideas. Because at the end of the day, when people don't feel "safe" in offering up ideas, we self-edit, pull our hand down, effectively shutting down our creativity engine out of a fear of failure. And when that happens substantively across the entire enterprise, then the innovation initiative dies.

Creating a culture of innovation is hard, there are many barriers to overcome. But as senior leaders, we can certainly moderate our own behavior to ensure that we are not one of those barriers. Start by looking at what you say and do when "crazy" ideas are presented. Prepare in advance for how you would respond in that situation. Here's a suggestion, instead of saying, "That's a crazy idea" or "Well, I am really not sure how that would work", try, "Wow, that idea really gets me thinking!" That is an encouraging response without in any way weighing in on the suitability of the idea. Come

up with ways that are appropriate to your organization's culture that encourages creativity and thinking. Then follow up to capture the ideas, strategically look at those that move your innovation plans forward and execute them. Then wash, rinse, repeat. Over time, everyone will get on board with innovation, especially if you make it a part of each employees annual review.

And if you need any ideas on creating your own "Thinking Room", give me a call. I have lots of crazy ideas to share.