

The Mindset of a Leader

By

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The creation of Technical Textile Technology has been an exciting event for everyone at the magazine. There have been plenty of ideas and strategy with the objective to produce a first-rate magazine covering specialty fibers, textiles and nonwoven fabrics for use in technical applications. The goal is to produce a magazine that fills a void in the North American market for businesses who, earned their spurs and are now looking to direct their energy and resources for improved growth in the future. With this in mind, a few words about innovation to set the stage for what will lead our industry in the future...as it has in the past

Companies seeking to access or expand in this market can be either a leader or follower. The leader achieves growth and makes profits. The follower often obtains neither. They simply add one more supplier, generally driving down prices, failing to make even modest gains. Therefore, technical achievement and product differentiation is critical to establishing a sustainable market position. As Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of GE said recently “Innovation and technology will let companies differentiate themselves in this economy.”

Advancing technology typically comes in small steps, but sometimes its sweeping improvements causing breakthrough or disruptive change triggering customers to incorporate new technology, at such a rapid pace, it abruptly overruns the established products and markets. These technologies are generally a way to approach and create a solution by making wholesale and fundamental change, which will result in the interruption and displacement of existing materials and products.

Breakthrough technologies, which disrupt the status quo are known to all of us. Included are products such as Polaroid instant photography, when it was offered as a replacement for 35mm film. Instant photography and 35mm film was replaced when digital cameras came along using no film at all. Manufacturers of fuel cells are developing new technology to supplant the internal combustion engine. Many recall when the rotary-dial telephone displaced the touch-tone telephone. In the fibers industry, petroleum based melt-spun fibers have made gains against natural fibers over the last 50 years. Now, the question is how significant will be the impact of the new melt-spun fibers composed entirely of raw materials originating from agricultural feedstock? In recent years we have seen fiberglass and carbon fibers and composites positively impact our market as a replacement for metal. Also, Ballistic fibers and yarns for personal protection and high-temperature textiles for fire protection applications. All have been disruptive compared to the materials preceding them and all with a common pattern; building on prior knowledge and/or technology. The digital camera and the rotary telephone did not occur in a vacuum. They were invented as an improvement, as were synthetic fibers over

natural fibers. All were the result of innovative thinking, funded and created in a planned activity and not the result of a chance happening.

So, how does your company become innovative? Leaders execute based on an agreed upon plan with strategy, funded basic and applied research and product development, in addition to a sense of where they want to go and single-mindedly focused on the path to get there. These organizations understand how important it is to bring innovation and new products to market. It's their lifeblood. They know that copying competition only leads to wasted money, failure and misery.

Innovation doesn't have to be in the form of dramatic breakthrough products, such as those described above, but the mark must be set high, otherwise there is no chance of moving from the status quo. For growth in this marketplace, we all need to come to grips with a competitive market and look beyond the immediate business environment. It requires planning the next generation product to weather the forces, which enviably challenge growth and profits in every market sector. Always has...always will! So, if you're company is either a partial or full participant in the industrial market or perhaps not at all, the key is to keep re-inventing yourself and your product offerings.

As the father of innovation, Professor Joseph A. Schumpeter of Harvard asserted a full century ago; "profits come from innovation". If this is so, then innovation has to be the ultimate "creative destruction" of existing technology.

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