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Blue-sky thinking helps break the barriers for change

Achieving what we once thought was impossible starts with asking new, bold questions and broadening

There is an old saying – “Sure, that will happen when pigs fly” – meaning that something is so ambitious or unreasonable that it will never happen.

There was a time when most of society thought that no human would ever break the four-minute mile, walk on the moon or score a perfect 10 in gymnastics. We all know these things, which seemed impossible at one point, are now in the history books today. Barriers were broken and, as a result of bold “blue-sky” thinking by a few courageous individuals, new heights in human accomplishment were achieved.

The power of “what if”

Blue-sky thinking asks, “what if?” It sees what could be. It eliminates barriers and unlocks possibilities. Blue-sky thinking thinks beyond current conventional wisdom to create something new. Something better. “What if?” thinking has given us the smartphone, an app for almost everything, Uber and Spotify. Today we can buy virtually anything online, and soon we will be able to have it delivered by drone.

Can we imagine the same advances for our infrastructure and tolling programs? Absolutely! We are seeing innovative ideas on how to finance and deliver the world’s largest and most complex projects. We are merging technologies and collaborating emerging industries and service providers to provide new ways to serve our toll customers. Our future looks bright!

How do we achieve blue-sky thinking?

Blue-sky thinking requires an inquisitive attitude, a willingness to question the status quo, the ability to disagree and be vulnerable and a commitment to setting aside time to explore the possibilities. As leaders, we need to model and encourage blue-sky thinking in our organizations. We must create an environment where we and our team members can grow, be creative and do the best work of our careers.

But how do we do that? How can we challenge ourselves and our team members to shift our views of the world and start asking “what if?” We can start by encouraging and rewarding individuals and teams for exploring and coming up with new, innovative ideas. We also need to institutionalize the pursuit of innovation in our organizations. Remember, what gets measured gets done. If we are to be successful, we must incorporate blue-sky discussions into our recruitment and selection criteria, one-to-one meetings, work programs and evaluation processes.

We also must create mindwidth, or space in our brains to think about what is possible. For most of us, our day-to-day work focuses on urgent matters and our daily job activities. Under daily pressure, most of us have little time for thinking about “what if?” We are so busy working “in the business” that we fail to take time to work “on the business.” I encourage you to regularly schedule time away from the day-to-day grind to exercise your imagination and focus on what could be.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Take Action

The world around us is changing. Status quo is not an option. Like the dinosaurs of yesterday, we must adapt or face extinction. Imagine the impossible, then make it happen. Start with one small step. Maybe pigs never will fly, but by embracing blue-sky thinking and incorporating it into our organizations we can change our industry, the services we offer and greatly improve the lives of those who benefit from our efforts. ■