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Teaching leadership and innovation

If you can share some of your experience and expertise in a meaningful way that causes students to better understand leadership and innovation, you may be in a position to make a lasting contribution.

By Mike Ferrari, Contributing Editor

Why do you suppose that 80% of the companies listed on the Dow in 1950 are no longer in existence? My hunch is that they failed in two key strategic areas. They didn't nourish new leaders and they couldn't sustain innovation.

In my 32-year career at Procter & Gamble, I was fortunate enough to be part of a 10-fold increase in annual revenue. Throughout that period, I watched strong leadership and a truly innovative portfolio of products—as well as innovative packaging solutions—drive this global growth and success. I'd like to think I made a meaningful contribution to P&G's emergence as the world's largest consumer product company, a company with 27,000 active patents.

Somewhere along the way, I noticed that students emerging from the universities were not bringing leadership or innovation skill sets with them. So when the opportunity presented itself, I decided to take training in leadership and innovation into the universities—or I should say, “university,” and more specifically, the University of Florida's Packaging Engineering Program. An alum of UF, I am now a guest lecturer in collaboration with another P&G veteran, Keith Lawrence.

Leadership and innovation are the topics on which we lecture. These are skills that can be taught at the university level. Students who are exposed to real-life examples of how leaders effect change and how packaging innovation drives success are in a unique position to jump start their careers when they emerge out into the workplace. And ultimately, it's the companies they go to work for that reap the real benefits.

By the way, our workshop is also available to packaging professionals who are beyond the university stage, people who are out there working but who want to hone their skills in leadership and innovation.

Regardless of who is on the receiving end of our lectures, students or working stiffs, what we try to drive home is that no matter how great a product is, no matter how dramatically it grows revenue and profits, it's going to reach its peak at some point in time. If innovative thinking isn't brought to bear at that critical juncture, revenue will decline.

On the other hand, if enlightened leadership focuses the organization's energy on taking that great product or service and further enhancing its usefulness to the consumer, then you're looking at sustained innovation. Maybe the enhancement or upgrade is so innovative it leads to the replacement of the original. The growth curve in such a scenario begins anew, which yields an “S” curve whose peak is higher than ever. This is how leadership builds and manages an innovation portfolio, and this is what ensures long-term business success.

One final thought. Give some thought to the academic institutions in your region where packaging is taught. If you can share some of your experience and expertise in a meaningful way that causes students to better understand leadership and innovation, you may be in a position to make a lasting contribution.

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