

# ISA | Innovation & Idea Management Center

## Special Report:

### How Detasseling Corn Leads To Breakthrough Innovations

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I grew up in farm country in the U.S. Midwest where most of our closest neighbors were cows, hogs, and chickens, and the corn fields extended as far as you could see.

Back then, innovation was pretty much limited to finding ways of getting more subsidy money from the federal government or getting paid for not growing anything. It was a great concept!

The results are still in evidence today, though most of the benefits are collected by agribusiness, since the inefficient family farms that somehow produced enough food to feed much of the world have pretty much disappeared.

What happened in agriculture over the past thirty years has been incremental innovation and it has been quite adequate.

But now, this fuel called gasohol requires a whole new level of corn production and better ways to squeeze the energy out of the kernels. Not to mention transport it.

Incremental innovation isn't going to do it. It's not just agriculture – it's every industry, and those who still haven't embraced 'Breakthrough Innovation' are going to get left behind just as the family farmers did.

I've read a lot of comments by some of the so-called innovation experts who, on the one hand, state categorically that breakthrough innovation is so disruptive that no one will embrace it, but on the other hand collect gazillions of dollars from their lectures on how to do just that.

Now, I'm just a country boy, but even I can see that the argument is over and those who don't look for breakthroughs are going to go the way of the old Sony Walkman.

This brings up a real quandary. And that is, where are all the great ideas going to come from that will provide the breakthroughs?

Back at the Front End of Innovation conference in Boston, an Innovation Director told me that he had collected lots of ideas from his suggestion program, but not any great ones.

I know why. Some years ago, when Idea Management was invented, the emphasis was on quantity of ideas, not quality. That worked well enough for cost savings, where there is no such thing as a bad idea, but for innovation it's a dud.

There's a bigger problem. Most of us were never taught how to be creative. In fact, those that were creative, especially in school, often spent time in the principal's office.

I took my turn there when I decided to take down one of the auditorium spotlights and borrow it for my science project. It didn't help that I dropped it from about 30 feet.

I was creative and dumb at the same time, but, hey, I won first place at the state science fair for my moon tracker (a flashlight substituted for the moon or auditorium light) and a free ticket to Purdue. You should have seen my principal trying to take credit for inspiring me.

But, if I hadn't gotten some recognition for that, I might still be spending my summers in the fields detasseling corn. My breakthrough idea was to pack up my brand-new 1969 Ford Torino GT and head east.

The point is that if we now expect folks to be creative so that we can get those breakthrough ideas, then we'd better help them become creative and overcome their fears of getting ridiculed.

Ordinary suggestion programs do absolutely nothing to help people be creative.

In fact, most of the idea management software companies are putting their effort into what happens to an idea after it goes through the software. They are trying to be the next Stage-Gate®.

As we used to say on the farm, they're standing at the wrong end of the donkey.

If you don't have any great projects because you don't have any great ideas, then you don't need portfolio or project management. Or, am I missing something? No, I'm not.

If you listen to the wrong people, you are going to be in big trouble. It's no wonder most CEOs are disappointed in their innovation programs.

A new idea management software program was developed specifically to provide highly creative ideas that will lead to breakthroughs. Sure, it still works fine for cost savings and process improvement and tracking intellectual property, but that's not what's going to ensure that your company meets its future revenue goals (or at least stays in business).

Breakthrough innovation is possible with the right tools and the right attitude.

I'm going back out to Indiana next summer, and I'll let you know if I see any breakthroughs in corn production so that we can drive our corn and eat it, too.

Maybe I'll even see my old girlfriend. She invited my wife and me to visit her grain farm next year, but my wife told her that she is more into dairy farms. And this comes from a New York City girl who had never seen a cow up close until she married me (no, I'm not the cow). Now she pats them and knows a Jersey from a Guernsey. She thinks they have cute faces.

That's not an innovation, but it is definitely a breakthrough. This farm kid has learned a thing or two since he moved East, and I'm doing my best to share some of those things with you.

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