

Promising Practices and Core (al) Innovation

Tim Sharp

American Choral Directors Association, USA

I want to use innovation as the organizing principle for this presentation, to help us get a handle on a complex area. I am going to frame innovation in the three-tiered classification system that helps me as I direct the work of the American Choral Directors Association. Using the categories of core innovation, adjacent innovation, and transformational innovation, my aim is to survey “Promising Practices” in the choral art around the world, as well as survey innovation taking place at the core of our art.

As Executive Director of the American Choral Directors Association, it is my joy and opportunity to view and experience a wide variety of choral practice, in the United States as well as beyond our borders. As you would deduce, my motivation is first and foremost to assist our members in ACDA to fulfill our choral mission, which is to inspire excellence in choral music through education, performance, composition, and advocacy. These four pillars—education, performance, composition, and advocacy—therefore form something of a secondary structure to this presentation.

Returning to the organizing principle of my presentation—Innovation—I find it helpful to realize creativity and innovation are on something of a continuum for all of us. A head-turning, game changing innovation for one of us may be just another day at the office for another. I also want to say up front that some organizations don’t need their heads turned nor their game changed, and I am not suggesting that extreme degrees of innovation are necessary. 1290

However, I am personally guided in my work with ACDA by the knowledge that business leaders, academics, and venture capitalists all agree that organizations that are able to survive, demonstrate the following characteristics:

- 1) They are ruthless about change;
- 2) They are not afraid to cannibalize their big revenue generators to build new businesses;
- 3) They make frequent, but small, acquisitions that bring in new technologies and open new markets;
- 4) They also are the recipients, on occasion, of good luck.

I will use the outline of Core Innovation/Adjacent Innovation/Transformational Innovation as I survey the innovative ideas and practices catching my attention.

Core Innovation (70%) – These include initiatives that are incremental and enhancements to core offerings, such as (i.e., a small risk undertaking). This is the area of automatic renewal and staying ahead of the curve;

Adjacent Innovation (20%) – These expand the existing organization by leveraging what is already going very well (part core initiative) into adjacent new places or collaborative ventures, such as (i.e., slightly larger risks and maintenance).

Transformative Innovation (10%) – These initiatives represent those viewed as breakthroughs or creations of entirely new offerings, businesses, or markets (i.e. a very high level of risk to manage)

Core Innovation

Core innovation draws upon what anthropologists call cultural ratcheting. It requires first and foremost, the ability to pass on knowledge from one individual to another, or from one generation to the next, until someone comes along with an idea for an improvement. We take ideas of others and put our own twist on them, adding one modification after another, until we end up with something new. I don't view core innovations as high-risk ventures.

The Origins of Creativity by Heather Pringle (March 2013 *Scientific American*)

So when did the human mind begin churning with new ideas for art?

Early examples of artistic inventiveness indicate that human creativity simmered for hundreds of thousands of years before reaching a boil around 90,000 to 60,000 years ago in Africa and 40,000 years ago in Europe. Social factors, including an increase in population size, seem likely to have amplified our ancestors' powers of innovation, both by improving the odds that someone in the group would come up with a breakthrough technology and by fostering connectedness between groups that allowed them to exchange ideas. (p. 39)

The areas that are quickly becoming buzzwords for musical arts organizations are

- community
- contemporary music
- cost-cutting/fund-raising

Community—for ACDA, working with underserved populations, urban initiatives, and life-long singing are additional buzzwords, and at the front of our strategic planning.

Contemporary Music—Both in the areas of vernacular choral music and cultivated composition, the creation of a new canon for new audiences is apparent. No one wants to dismiss the masterpieces of the repertory, but flexibility and a reflection of a wider range of tastes is part of core innovation.

Cost-Cutting/Fund Raising—The disappearance of former revenue sources over the last five years has made us turn back to the mother of innovation, necessity.

I see core innovation taking place in various ways within these three areas: for example:

- **Engaging Serious Leisure with Older Adults**
 - **China—older adult choirs, senior choirs**
 - **Voices United—older choirs**
- **Run-Out Auditions; lunch choirs; complaint choirs; come and sing**
- **Defining Communities through choirs—Hospice, etc.**
- **Raising money by doing what you do—sing for the event; auction off the ensemble; YouTube video on asking for money**

- **Crowdsourcing**--the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people, and especially from an online community, rather than from traditional employees or suppliers;
- **National Day of Singing; Choirs are beginning to engage audiences by having them sing in their concert**

Adjacent Innovation

Adjacent innovation takes place when organizations move outside of themselves, and work with those who overlap some part of their core mission. These collaborations have a bit more risk than core innovations, but have larger payoffs by combining the intellectual efforts, human efforts, and financial resources of more than one entity.

The risks of adjacent innovation is the increased effort required by collaboration, and the inevitable tension that comes as a result of this level of innovation. Moving outside of the home base and the home comfort-zone brings challenges of 1) Complementarity, 2) Tension, and 3) Emergence:

1. Complementarity—Collaborators are not homogeneous, but rather, are entities with different perspectives, expertise, conceptualizations, working methods, temperaments, resources, needs, and talents. The interaction of these differences forms the foundation for the dynamics of collaboration to unfold.
2. Tension—The goal of collaboration is not to reach consensus, since agreement does not lead to learning or challenge. Collaboration takes advantage of the tension that comes with differences. Francis Crick, co-discoverer of DNA, said, “Politeness...is the poison of all good collaboration”. Collaboration is the fruitful cultivation of tension. As our song culture teaches us, we have to Wade in the Water children. We go into the storm. Our differences are where the latent opportunities for growth reside.
3. Emergence—Collaboration can lead to outcomes that could not be predicted solely from the additive power of people working as a group. There will be the initial "conceptual" collaboration that will help frame a problem, but down the line there will be technical collaboration that will represent problems and their solution. It will be an organic process.

- **Women’s Commission Consortium**
- **Choral consortiums for new choral music—creating a new music culture**
- **ACDA collaboration with Barbershop Harmony Society (use threads)**
- **Music of the Americas**
- **Perfect Storm—Students with Seasoned directors**
- **Wisconsin Program for Emerging Choral Leaders – Next Direction**
<http://new.wischoral.org/content/nextdirection>

Next Direction is a unique 3-Day Conference that brings together outstanding high school students who enjoy choral music. Students “rub shoulders” with like-minded peers and associate with college music education students who act as chaperones for the weekend. NextDirection is a great way for your students to think about the possibilities, to make great connections, to work with outstanding conductors, and to make wonderful music with like-minded students. Students get a chance to meet and work closely with a master conductor and outstanding choral music

educators who believe passionately in what they do. **Next Direction** is sponsored annually by the Wisconsin Choral Directors Association, Inc., and is open to music students across the nation who will be in 11th or 12th grade in fall of the event year.

I moved to Oklahoma 5 years ago, and I have learned a lot about three things in Oklahoma: 1) Weather, 2) Cows and Buffalo, and 3) Native American Indians. Wilma Mankiller, the first female principal chief of the Cherokee nation, once told me how the cow runs away from the storm while the buffalo charges directly toward it – and gets through it quicker. Whenever I’m confronted with a tough challenge, I do not prolong the torment. I become the buffalo.

Transformative Innovation

Transformative innovation—to do truly different things—an organization has to *do things differently*. It generally needs different people, different motivational factors, and different support systems. And indeed, these game-changing and head-turning innovations do not come without substantial risk.

Malcolm Gladwell has taken this topic on in his new book, *The Gift of Doubt*. Quoting Albert Hirschman and the power of failure, “We may be dealing here with a general principle of action,” Hirschman wrote:

Creativity always comes as a surprise to us; therefore we can never count on it and we dare not believe in it until it has happened. In other words, we would not consciously engage upon tasks whose success clearly requires that creativity be forthcoming. Hence, the only way in which we can bring our creative resources fully into play is by misjudging the nature of the task, by presenting it to ourselves as more routine, simple, undemanding of genuine creativity than it will turn out to be.

And from there Hirschman’s analysis took flight. People don’t seek out challenges, he went on. They are “apt to take on and plunge into new tasks because of the erroneously presumed *absence* of a challenge—because the task looks easier and more manageable than it will turn out to be.” This was the Hiding Hand principle—a play on Adam Smith’s Invisible Hand. The entrepreneur takes risks but does not see himself as a risk-taker, because he operates under the useful delusion that what he’s attempting is not risky. Then, trapped in mid-mountain, people discover the truth—and, because it is too late to turn back, they’re forced to finish the job.

And essentially the same idea, even though formulated, as one might expect, in a vastly different spirit, is found in Nietzsche’s famous maxim, “That which does not destroy me, makes me stronger.” This sentence admirably epitomizes several of the histories of economic development projects in recent decades.

- **Real Men Sing—OU**
- **Encore Program in Dothan, Alabama**
- **Mentoring/Allies/Advocates—ACDA Mentoring Program**

Conclusion

There is no shortage of creativity or creative people. The shortage is of innovators. All too often, people believe that creativity automatically leads to innovation. It doesn't. Creative people tend

to pass the responsibility for getting down to brass tacks to others. They are the bottleneck. They make none of the right kind of effort to help their ideas get a hearing.

The fact that you can put a dozen inexperienced people in a room and conduct a brainstorming session that produces exciting new ideas shows how little relative importance ideas themselves have. . . . Idea men constantly pepper everybody with proposals and memorandums that are just brief enough to get attention, to intrigue and sustain interest—but too short to include any responsible suggestions for implementation.

The scarce people are the ones who have the know-how, energy, daring, and staying power to implement ideas. . . . Since business is a "get-things-done" institution, creativity without action-oriented follow-through is a barren form of behavior. In a sense, it is irresponsible. (Theodore Levitt, Harvard University)

Most (organizations) fail to tolerate the creative fanatic who has been the driving force behind most major innovations. Innovations, being far removed from the mainstream of the business, show little promise in the early stages of development. Moreover, the champion is obnoxious, impatient, egotistic, and perhaps a bit irrational in organizational terms. As a consequence, he is not hired. If hired, he is not promoted or rewarded. He is regarded as "not a serious person," "embarrassing," or "DISRUPTIVE." (James Brian Quinn, IBM)

Five key areas of management for true innovation:

(*Harvard Business Review*: p 65, May 2012: Managing Your Innovation Portfolio)

- Talent—Talent that includes a diverse set of skills and is able to deal with ambiguous data;
- Integration—Teams are separated from day to day operations;
- Funding—Funding should come from outside the normal budget cycle;
- Pipeline management—Focus on the interactive development of a few promising ideas, not the ruthless filtering of many;
- Metrics –Metrics should recognize nonfinancial achievements in early phases.

Corporations that don't survive:

- Are burdened with bureaucracy
- Spend too much time on the defensive
- Try to catch up too late by lurching into big acquisitions

The article stated that top executives at large successful companies display the same characteristics as executives at small companies: they are smart, able to diversify, focused on the company's core.