

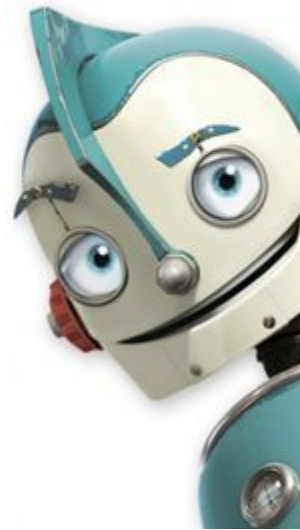
See a Problem, Fix a Problem

## Description

SEE A NEED  
FILL A NEED

Do Not Copy

- ROBOTS, 2005 -



The best life lessons come from kids movies

## Embrace the frustration

Being frustrated isn't always a bad thing. So many innovations are born out of frustrations. Annoyed that the online world had places to share music but not connect with your friends around the world, Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook. Frustrated by his vacuum cleaner bag clogging and losing suction, [Sir James Dyson](#) invented the bagless vacuum. Sarah Blakey was frustrated that she couldn't find pantyhose that didn't leave a visible seam line so she invented [Spanx](#).

Driving innovation isn't about employing these creative geniuses and living in a bubble until they have "aha" moments. To be innovative is to be listening for the problems underneath everyday activities, and have the intention and perseverance to solve them. These people did just that. They took a problem they saw, looked for an answer and turned them into multi-billion dollar companies. But this applies to any level and any kind of problem. So how do you get better at noticing problems?

Finding a problem to fix and innovate on can be tricky. They're likely not going to hit you in the face and scream at you to be fixed, it takes effort and focus to extract the best ideas to work on. So where do you find problems to solve?

## Try it yourself

Apple famously avoids focus groups. They use their own employees as the input for their designs, because their mission is to design the best experiences for their customers, who was basically everybody. And the best way to design the best products, in their mind, was to use their products themselves and apply their own expectations for excellence. And through that exercise they discovered and solved many issues on their journey to designing great products. One item for example, was the traditional lag time between a user's input and its response. This was typical of electronics of all kinds at that time, but that frustration of lag time drove them to innovate the UX and insist on instant responses from the device, or prioritizing the response action before the functional action in the system. It was a revolution in user design because no one had put the response action ahead of the execution of the command.

Using your own products, if practical, is a great way to experience any frustrations your user may have and can inspire ideas on where to innovate. In business aviation of course, it was impossible to have all our employees use the product, but as much as we could we had key people on our demo aircraft.

## Survey says

Another important way to find problems is through customer feedback. Surveys, focus groups and feedback forms are ways many companies collect information about user habits, preferences and dislikes. This is probably the most common way to look for opportunities for innovation. It can be very effective if you ask the right questions, accept their input without any bias and look a couple layers below what is said. I've seen so many customer survey exercises be wasted because the receivers of the results only looked for validation that what they were doing is good.

Whenever getting data from customers, the most important thing to remember is to let go of your preconceived ideas of your business and product. How the customer sees you is very different from how you see yourself, and to be fully present in their perspective means letting go of your ego. It may sting to feel what they feel, but it is a critical lesson to finding pathways to innovation. Many leaders struggle with this, because they want to believe there are no problems to fix, or see problems as annoyances. I see them as opportunities to shine.

I really like looking at other industries and emerging technologies for inspiration. Oftentimes, one industry innovated in an area that is totally applicable in other kinds of products. Look at the boom in the sharing economy, like Uber and AirBnB, and how many copycat companies sprouted in unrelated industries by applying the same innovation in new ways.

## The outsiders view

Looking at the work you do as if it's not yours is the outsider's perspective, and it's critical to sparking inspiration for innovations. We all love patterns and doing things on autopilot, and it happens to be human nature. Our brains are wired to conserve physical and mental energy so whenever we learn something that works it gets hard wired into our brains. And the next time it happens our brains pull out

the template and apply it. It happens without us even realizing it. It's also why I have such a hard time avoiding Lindt chocolates.

But the ones who are able to see problems and create new opportunities to innovate are those who can stop themselves from being a slave to these patterns, pause and look at a situation as if it's the first time they're hearing it. The great news is that it's a learnable skill. The bad news is that most people don't realize that it's necessary. When their patterns are screaming at them to go one way, many of us have been blinded to other great ideas.

You can use consultants to help gain the outsider's view of your situation for sure. Being a consultant myself who is in it to help companies see customer perspectives and their impact on strategic decisions and innovation, I will be the first to recommend using consultants. We're not all going to recycle your already-learned internal knowledge into a sexy presentation to validate the decisions you want to make. I'll leave that to others. Be thorough when screening outside help, that they will be genuinely an outsider and offer that different perspective that is so hard to extract from the inside of your organization.

## It also matters where you set the bar

"They're not complaining, so what's the problem?"

How many of you have heard this excuse before. There's an issue you see, and when you bring it up it's dismissed because the customers haven't cried loud enough about it. Pay very close attention to where you set the bar for your products, it says a lot to your customers about what you stand for. From an outsiders perspective would it really be ok to set the standards of quality to be the loudness of the complaints are after you've delivered it?

I hate how many viruses and background software gets installed on PC's. My standard-issue work laptop boot up time steadily increases until I lose an hour each morning waiting for the churn to subside. So much so, that I now do all my work on a Macbook. I never once complained to Dell, or Microsoft, or my company for that matter about the boot up times. Okay I complained to my IT department, but the answer was "yeah it sucks". So I gave up complaining very quickly. People will hate your product for the unspoken and unresolved issues, but tolerate them until a better overall solution presents itself. That's a real threat to your long-term success if these latent problems are there and unspoken. Your customers are waiting to jump ship when a better solution appears, and then it'll be too late to keep them.

The problems you decide to innovate on may be sitting right in front of you but you don't see it because your bar is set too low. Raising your standards could be enough to see new opportunities. For example, did you know that the average commercial airliners cabin pressure is around 8,000 ft above sea level? That's like standing on top of a mountain in the Rockies. The oxygen level is ~15% there. No wonder we feel so dead-tired after a long flight (not to mention fighting for an armrest with your neighbour). A highly-valued innovation in purpose-built business jets like Bombardier and Gulfstream is lowering that altitude to a much more comfy ~3,000 ft. Just by changing the goal-post you can find ways to innovate.

## Iterate, iterate, iterate

Once you've identified opportunities to solve, then it's a straight shot to implementation right? Nope. Truly innovative solutions usually take many iterations before they land on the solution that hits.

My favourite example of persevering and iterating is back to Sir James Dyson, who [had 5,127 prototypes](#) before settling on his vacuum design. Hopefully whatever you work on doesn't take that many iterations to get right, but failure is a critical part of any innovation endeavour. Many leaders bail during this phase, seeing the failures as proof that the innovations won't work, will take too long, or cost too much money.

But to be truly committed to an innovation mindset you need to accept that failures are merely learning opportunities towards the right answer (which is also a good lesson for life in general). Of course, sometimes you need to scrub an idea that isn't converging to an answer, but in my experience far more innovative ideas fail because companies fail to stick it out until it works, than because the idea isn't practical.

## If not you, then who?

The last thing I'll say about this is to give yourself permission to solve the issues that you find. Its really easy to dismiss the problem because, "if no one has solved it yet, what makes me think that I can?". If you're a human being on this planet, then you have all the same resources as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, James Dyson and Sarah Blakely. So why not you?

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- Uncategorized

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