

Collaborate Like Edison

Interview with journalist Alice Bumgarner, 8-25-2011

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Having published *Innovate Like Edison* (Dutton Penguin), author Sarah Miller Caldicott, great-grandniece of Thomas Edison, is working on a second book about his collaboration methods.

EL: Why did you choose collaboration as a topic?

Caldicott: Edison believed in collaboration not only as a way of accelerating the innovation process, but to expand the solution set. He liked to create diverse groups of people from diverse disciplines. So if you had a collaborative effort versus having all experts and like-minded people on the project, you'd have a better product and be able to create it faster.

EL: What did Edison's teams look like?

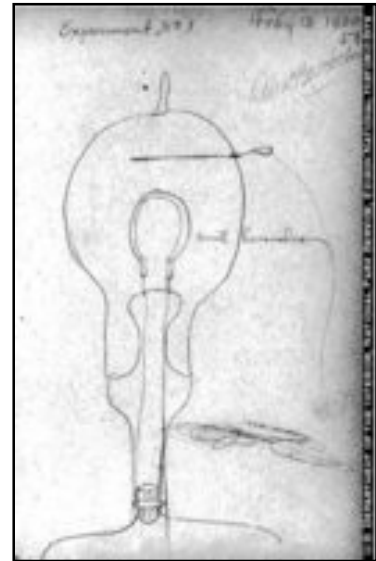
Caldicott: Edison's teams were small, nimble groups—three to eight people—that had budgets. He believed in establishing them as nonhierarchical. There was virtually always a leader, but beyond that, team members were asked for their ideas and contributions regardless of tenure or skill set. Edison liked to have the viewpoints of people who weren't experts but who were bright and innovative.

EL: How would Edison find these bright, innovative contributors?

Caldicott: He would say, "Who are the current and future innovation leaders in my companies?" He would find them, and groom them. This is a different kind of radar than we use today. We have fast-track programs for high-potential leaders—two years in this and that—and those can be really good cross-training programs. Edison did a lot of that, too. But the mindset of a leader today may not be, "Am I increasing the innovation ability of this person?"

EL: If we were going to lead more like Edison, how would we create more innovative teams and future leaders?

Caldicott: First, we'd be identifying individuals with two qualities—creativity and risk-taking—and nurturing them. These capacities aren't disconnected from leadership capability. A recent IBM study showed that creativity is the No. 1 quality we want from leaders, so how are we really getting at that? I don't think we are.



Also, innovative teams under Edison would always begin by pursuing a broad line of thinking. Edison worked from insights. Though it sometimes looked as if he experimented ad hoc, I found in his notebooks that he was always pursuing an array of hypotheses in his thinking. If it didn't pan out, he'd shift to another line of thinking.

Edison would never get upset if something didn't work. But he'd get upset if you were careless...and weren't paying attention!

EL: What did he think about team meetings?

Caldicott: When Edison had meetings, they were typically working meetings. He and his teams would be doing an experiment together, so insight would come to the group *in toto*. Often he'd say, "Go do it yourself and see if you get the same thing; we'll talk about it next week." We tend to be more passive givers and receivers of information. He wanted employees to see results for themselves.

EL: What about social media? Would he have seen that as a collaboration tool?

Caldicott: Edison would think blogs and social media are great, but he'd still keep longhand notebooks. He'd almost insist that his staff do that, too. He'd love wikis. But he'd tell his team not to get away from the core brain process of creating more neural connections in your mind. He didn't know about the way the brain worked, but he could tell, when he got better results, that it had a lot to do with the way he wrote and drew

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