



# How to Invent the Future

**NILOFER MERCHANT**

We need more than big ideas, or pithy words, or an ultra-clear vision to invent the future.

Odd as it may seem for discussing innovation and management, I'm reminded of a sociology experiment done in the 1960s. Five monkeys were placed in a cage, with a batch of bananas hung from the ceiling and a ladder placed right underneath it. It took only a few seconds for one of the monkeys to race up the ladder to grab the bananas.

But the next day, whenever any of the monkeys started up the ladder, the researchers sprayed all of the monkeys with ice-cold water. Soon, each of the monkeys learned to not go up the ladder, and if any of them started to, the others would hold them back by pulling on their tail. This was done repeatedly until each little monkey had learned the lesson: no one climbs the ladder. No banana is worth it.

Once all five monkeys were conditioned to avoid the ladder, the researchers substituted in a new monkey. And wouldn't you know it—the New Guy monkey spots the beautiful yellow bananas and goes up the ladder. But the other four monkeys—knowing the drill—jump on New Guy, and beat him up.

One by one, the researchers replaced each monkey, until none of the monkeys in the cage had been sprayed by icy water. And yet none of these new monkeys would go up the ladder, either. The rules had been set, because, "That's just the way we do things around here."

You know where I'm going with this story, right? Most of us are a lot like those monkeys. On the upside (and there is an upside) we learn from one another, we don't let down our mates, and we get along. But on the downside, we don't bother to examine the rules as they've been handed down.

And this downside—not examining the rules as they've been laid down—is not a minor thing; it has a huge cost. It stalls progress. It defeats those with fresh new ideas. It reinforces entrenched interests.

When a society accepts the practices, methods, and measures of the 20th century to conceive the 21st century, failure is inevitable. In order to consider new ideas, you have to be willing to let go of ones that no longer serve you.

The challenge, though, is not how to throw away the Old to embrace the New. That would be folly; the efficiency of the 20th century is what allows (most of) us have clean water and plenty of relatively inexpensive food to eat and so on. Plus, let's not forget that "new" ideologies can be misleading. I'm reminded of Enron's "new metrics" once touted by big-name thinkers as reflecting the future of management. Only later did we all collectively learn it reflected criminal accounting practices. So "new" is not the end-all. Unlike the medicine in your bathroom drawer, ideas don't come with pre-printed expiration dates. There are no clear signs for which ones to toss and when.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nilofer Merchant has personally launched 100 products amounting to \$18B in revenue. Her blue-chip career includes Apple, Autodesk, GoLive/Adobe. She's served on both public and private boards. Today, she lectures at Stanford. She's an expert on collaborative leadership and author of *The New How* and *11 Rules for Creating Value in the Social Era*.

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The challenge is in knowing how to evaluate and build new ideas into reality.

And when management thinkers are confined together in our own enclosures—not cages, but conferences—we seem to do little more than pull on each other’s tails. We find flaws in each other’s arguments (and surely there are many, for they are nascent ideas). We largely advocate for our own idea and ours alone, because we want so desperately for it to be seen. And we show why any New Idea doesn’t prove out, often without sharing our fundamental assumptions. And like the monkeys, we find ways of signaling: “That’s not the way we do things around here.”

And this approach is definitely not the way to invent the future.

So I’ve been thinking about what we’re all facing: How to deal with Change. That’s change with a capital C. Your career, your company (if you have one), and your industry are all coping with change. And with it, comes an opportunity to question what new approaches to adopt, and what to do with existing frameworks and ideas. In this social era, when connected humans can now do what once only large organizations could, the fundamentals are shifted enough, a lot of what once worked, doesn’t.

So, I think we all need a better “how” for creating ideas. It’s not enough to have the best idea, or the phrase that makes an idea go viral. Instead, what we need is a way for ideas to become powerful enough to dent the world. And no one can do that acting alone.

To figure out a way forward, let’s explore how Eric Liu, founder of Citizen University, which runs programs designed to help build the skills of effective citizenship, works on his initiative.

**First**, any group that joins the program has to have a shared purpose that goes beyond their own private interests. Not common strategies, but a common shared purpose, with many possibly different, most likely opposing strategies to achieve that purpose. This is why Citizen University draws leaders from both MoveOn.org and the Tea Party. They choose to come together, because they’re both leaders and activists interested in revitalizing democracy with a bottom-up, inclusive approach.

**Second**, the individual participants agree to build on each other’s ideas. Not as a cheerleader or a critic, but what we might call being “loyal oppositionist”: someone able to say “Here’s what’s wrong, why I think so, and one possible way to make the idea better.” As Eric says, “We ask people to not just reflexively respond, but to help one another.” Explaining why you have doubts about an idea lets everyone understand if they have different working assumptions. And proposing a solution helps advance the idea. Eric has been convening the group for three years now, and he says that one sign of success is that people keep making the effort to come back and help one another in these private forums, because people learn best and take in new ideas when they’re not “on the spot.”

**Third**, and underlying both points above, the conveners are inclusive of who can participate in the conversation. To hear an up and coming idea, you’ve gotta hear from many types of people, from different histories and with different experiences, so you can be challenged by newness.

It’s hard to know if Eric and the Citizen University idea will accomplish what they set out to do—to revitalize citizenship in the United States. It’ll take years for that story to play itself out. But their approach matches what I’ve seen work for innovation teams across companies. It is the “new how,” a collaborative way that shapes ideas to be better, to be stronger, and ultimately become real. To invent the future, we don’t need more ideas, or better words, or directional visions to invent the future. Instead, we need challenge common beliefs and ingrained interests. We need to stop pulling each other down by the tail and instead build up our ideas together.

*This post is part of a series leading up to the annual Global Drucker Forum, taking place November 13-14 2014 in Vienna, Austria.*

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## SPONSOR PERSPECTIVE

At Google, we often get questions from CEOs and business leaders about innovation. How does Google innovate? Can it be planned? Can it be taught?

The truth is, there's no secret formula for inventing the future. But we have identified a set of basic principles that we believe will set just about any organization on the right track. The most important thing to understand is that for innovation to flourish, you need to make it part of your company culture. Here are three ways we do that at Google:

### 1. Think 10X

If you want to be truly innovative, you need to aim high. For example, if you set a goal to boost your car's gas mileage to 50 mpg, you'll simply end up fine-tuning the existing engine. But if you set your sights at 500 mpg, you'll force yourself to completely rethink what's under the hood. By the same token, if you want to invent the future, don't just tinker with today's problems—instead, think 10 times bigger and you'll solve tomorrow's challenges instead.

### 2. Launch, then keep listening

A new restaurant often has a “soft opening” where they take a few days or weeks to learn what works (or doesn't) before they open up full time. At Google, we do something similar. Early on we released some of our products as “beta launches” then made rapid iterations as users told us what they liked or didn't like. Today we continue to listen carefully to user feedback after each launch and revise products based on what we hear. The beauty of this approach is that you get real-world user feedback and never stray too far from what the market really wants.

### 3. Share everything you can

At Google we believe that collaboration is essential to innovation—and collaboration happens best when everyone shares information openly. Many of the work tools we've brought to market as Google Apps for Work are great examples of how innovation and company culture are intertwined. Google Docs, Sheets and Slides let teams bring content to life together. And most of our content—documents, spreadsheets, presentations, video, etc.—is stored in the cloud on Google Drive for Work so employees can share it with anyone anywhere and invite them to comment or collaborate.

To see how Google Apps for Work can help you invent the future, visit us at: [google.com/apps](http://google.com/apps)

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