

College of Business Book Review by James W. Carland

Title: "The Art of Innovation: Lessons in Creativity from IDEO, America's Leading Design Firm"

Author: Tom Kelley with Jonathan Littman

Publisher: Doubleday, New York, 2001

Length: 307 pages

Price: \$29.95

Reading Time: 6 hours

Reading Rating: 8 (1 = difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall Rating: 4 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Tom Kelley is brother to David Kelley, the founder of IDEO, and has played a major role in the development of the company since 1990, when it was still known as David Kelley Design, and employed 20 designers. IDEO is generally considered to be one of the most innovative and creative designers in the world, and now employs more than 300 designers with offices in Palo Alto, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, London, Munich, and Shanghai. *Business Week* ranked the firm in its April 24, 2006, issue as Number 15 in the Boston Consulting Group's 2006 listing of the 25 most innovative companies. The firm became a household name in 1999 when ABC's *Nightline* aired the *Deep Dive*, featuring the redesign of a shopping cart and calling IDEO "the largest and perhaps the most innovative industrial product design firm in the world..."

Tom Kelley, now a general manager of IDEO, takes readers behind the scenes of this imaginative and energized company. With the help of an experienced and talented collaborator, Jonathan Littman, he reveals the strategies and secrets that IDEO uses to foster creativity and to consistently innovate. The book has become such a phenomenon that it has its own website: www.theartofinnovation.com. It has been hailed by critics, academics, entrepreneurs and business managers, and impressing such a diverse group is no mean accomplishment.

There have been many books written about creativity, of course, and this book really doesn't introduce new concepts, but the book does do something that no other book in the field has done: it demonstrates the processes of creativity in action in a real company in a non-threatening way. The book is filled with anecdotes and stories which make the concepts come alive and which demonstrate how they intermesh to produce real innovation. We all know the power of self-managed teams made up of people with diverse backgrounds and training, working in an environment of cross-pollination, collegial challenge and fun. This organizational structure may have been perfected by Thomas Edison in the *Invention Factory* that he built in 1887 (<http://edison.rutgers.edu>), and it was the secret behind the amazing work that produced the personal computer age at Xerox PARC, featured in *Dealers of Lightning* by Michael A. Hiltzik, and it is the secret behind the IDEO success, as well. Entrepreneurship scholars recognize it as the single most critical element in fostering creativity.

The problem is that describing the best creative environment, and embracing that environment, are two entirely different things. The latter requires a major change to the traditional corporate structure and mandates a retreat from the hierarchal nature of work in most firms. Deciding to

make such a leap, based upon an academic tome, or even a research based treatise, is difficult. Change is always threatening and managers are reluctant to commit to something that might not work. Tom and Jonathan make every reader want to go back to the office and build a *greenhouse*: “A place where the elements are just right to foster the growth of good ideas.” The down to earth style allays fears and makes each reader believe that the processes can be adopted and embraced in every company in the land. The illustrations and descriptions avoid psychological issues and personality problems and focus on showing the reader exactly how a creative process can be harnessed.

The book is about processes. It points out the problems which cause most brain-storms to come up short, and shows you how to avoid them. It makes the value of prototyping concrete. It demystifies observation and field work. Perhaps most importantly, it recounts numerous failures and shows how people learned from those to accomplish even greater results. It is this fear of failure that binds us all to the traditional. This book takes the sting out of failure, and helps you view it as you did when you were a child: simply a demonstration of one more way not to do something.

A great book, and one which could change your life, “The Art of Innovation” lives up to its name and its billing. It is must reading for every manager and every entrepreneur in America.

Dr. James W. Carland is Professor of Entrepreneurship in the College of Business at Western Carolina University. For previously reviewed books, visit our Web Site at www.wcu.edu/cob/.