

Creative pragmatism

By Ty Shattuck

In a period when business faces so many daunting challenges at the local, national and global levels, I am drawn to the wisdom of Albert Einstein, who said, "Problems cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them." Those words inspire me but I sometimes fear that we may be collectively trapped between our diametric attraction to, and fear of, bold new ideas. While we are inundated with the notion that innovation and change are the keys to our woes, we at the same time appear nearly immobilized by a mindset of CAVE (citizens against virtually everything).

There is a school of thought that we should focus our research and innovation in areas that have clearly identifiable benefits and returns on investment. This logic is certainly compelling: without at least some focus to our creativity, the result will likely be little more than poverty-stricken poetry. But our need for focus needs also to be tempered. History has taught us that if we restrict our thinking to approaches we already understand, then we will never see truly creative solutions. Consider, as author Tom Kelley suggested, that "if Henry Ford had asked his customers what they wanted, they would have likely said a bigger horse."

It takes a brave soul to embark on a new path when the pragmatic angel over your shoulder is telling you to play it safe. In my thinking, leadership is about the creation, expression and drive toward a compelling vision of the future while management is focused on the efficient allocation of resources along the way. Progress happens when our leadership and management efforts are aligned and in balance. Unfortunately, things are not in balance. Management schooling has focused too heavily on the elimination of risk and not enough on the benefits and techniques of risk taking. Help is on the way, however, as a number of highly impressive institutions in our area are beginning to inject traditional management training with a good dose of creativity, innovation and visionary leadership.

- McMaster's MEEI Program (www.xceei.mcmaster.ca) is a unique graduate program that aims to create the next generation of business leader by combining engineering, business and entrepreneurialism.
- Mohawk College (www.mohawkcollege.ca) recently announced a new strategic focus on applied innovation to ensure its graduates have the skills of today's jobs and the ability to recognize and adopt new technologies as they emerge.
- The Beal Institute (www.bealinstitute.org) is a world thought leader in introducing creativity into the innovation process for products and processes.
- Burlington's own Bay Area Leadership (www.bayarealeadership.ca) is helping organizations and individuals develop their leadership capabilities.

So many seem to espouse the need for innovative thinking, and then transform into devil's advocates as soon as a bold new idea is actually tabled. When it comes to bringing ideas to life, critical thinking is essential but critics themselves are not particularly helpful. What is

helpful, however, are people that can see the potential that lies beyond risks. It is encouraging to know that Burlington has institutions in its backyard dedicated to helping us all do just that.