The Internet of Things Needs Innovators with these Three Traits: Sound Like You?

by Andrew Timm and Amy Kenly

I’ve been attending PTC’s flagship conferences for a decade. While the keynote speakers are always exciting, Malcolm Gladwell’s presentation this year was especially meaningful. I’ve always understood what was being discussed at a technical level, but this year Gladwell didn’t talk technical – he told a story – one that I connected with deeply.

Gladwell spoke of Malcom McLean, who was instrumental in revolutionizing international shipping through the introduction of a standardized container. He spoke of the traits one must possess to be an effective innovator. At a conference where the Internet of Things (IoT) was a main topic, Gladwell didn’t say a word about the internet, connected devices, or smart products.

Instead he talked about challenges faced when trying to do something revolutionary, something innovative – and let each member of the audience translate that into their own individual messages. In this way, he connected with people in a wide array of industries, looking to solve a wide variety of problems.

I have been building an Internet of Things (IoT) practice within Kalypso (a management consulting firm) for the last 16 months. I’ve been focused on helping my clients first understand how they can realize immediate value from IoT, which requires crafting a value proposition that resonates. Here, casting a broad net is an effective strategy. You might present a perfect IoT example that narrowly misses the mark of your current audience. Going a level up lets your listener connect the dots for themselves, enabling them to solve the problem in their own context – generating that “aha” moment. Judging from the command Gladwell had over his audience, and the conversations I had with those who heard the presentation – there were plenty of “aha” moments.

The three traits of an innovator according to Gladwell:

- **Be a risk-taker.** Be unconventional and potentially disagreeable.
- **Be imaginative.** Be able to reframe the problem.
- **Be in a hurry.** Have a sense of urgency.

In my experience, it is rare for a single individual to possess all three of these traits. Many corporations are not organized to foster this type of innovative behavior. As a management consultant, my job is to help companies organize and build teams that can collectively perform as Malcom McLean did. There are tools and techniques available right now that can very quickly generate radical ideas, build prototypes, and prove or disprove assumptions.

The Internet of Things poses an industrial disruption potentially unmatched in history. Every business needs to reevaluate their identity and position, innovate to take advantage of new technologies, and decide to move with a sense of urgency. Wait-and-see companies that decide to do what they’ve always done will absolutely be leapfrogged by companies that can demonstrate these three traits.

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