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The Wizard of Menlo Park lights the way for business success

"Innovate Like Edison" author inspired by her relative

By Mike Cote

At the end of 2003, China surpassed the United States as the primary recipient of foreign investment, the first time another nation eclipsed this country. Sarah Miller Caldicott considered that moment as a sign the United States was losing its edge as an innovator.

That was among the factors that inspired Caldicott to study the work of her great-grand uncle – Thomas Edison. What processes and patterns could she find in the work history of a man who was responsible for the creation of six industries? How could 21st century entrepreneurs adapt those processes to their businesses?

Teaming up with co-author Michael J. Gelb, Caldicott wrote *Innovate Like Edison: The Five Step System for Breakthrough Business Success* (Pulse, \$16). The Chicago resident recently visited Denver to speak about the book at an event sponsored by BPI Group, a global human resources advisory group that expanded into Denver last year.

During an interview hours before she spoke to about 100 people at the Oxford Hotel, Caldicott talked about the three years she spent working on the book and what she learned reviewing the notebooks and other material from the extensive archives the “Wizard of Menlo Park” left behind.

As a young girl, Caldicott knew Edison invented the light bulb, and she had an Edison phonograph in her room, but as an MBA with a background in product development and branding for such companies as Pepsico, Bayer AG and Unilever she became captivated by how he developed his ideas and brought them to market.

“Unlike the historian, who is really looking at what Edison did, I was more interested in how he did it. How was he so successful? What was that process that he undertook?” says Calidcott, who runs her own consulting firm. “Because you can’t be successful over and over again unless you have some kind of process. That’s really what I was seeing in my work, these patterns.”

Edison invented document duplication, the phonograph, the light bulb and the system of electrical power; the telephone transmitter, motion pictures and the storage battery.

“Edison invented six industries in less than 40 years. That’s unprecedented,” Calicott says. “I don’t know if anyone else has ever come forward with that kind of productivity in such a short period of time.”

Edison knew it was not enough to develop a new technology; it had to be targeted toward what consumers would want.

“Edison was very interested in creating utility,” she said. “Today, we would say he wanted the products to be accepted. Utility for him was being practical, that there would be some practical application.”

Edison’s five competencies of innovation, as delineated by Caldicott and Gelb and explored in detail in their book are:

1. Solution-centered Mindset — Aligning your goals with your passions, cultivating optimism, seeking knowledge relentlessly, experimenting persistently and pursuing rigorous objectivity.
2. Kaleidoscopic Thinking – Maintaining a notebook (for brainstorming); practicing “ideaphoria,” discerning patterns, expressing ideas visually and exploring the roads not taken.
3. Full-Spectrum Engagement that balances “twin forces” – Intensity and relaxation; seriousness and playfulness; complexity and simplicity; solitude and team.
4. Master-mind Collaboration – Recruit for chemistry and results; design multidisciplinary collaboration teams; inspire an environment of open exchange; become a master networker.
5. Super-value Creation – Link market trends with core strengths; tune in to your target audience; apply the right business model; understand scale-up effects; create an unforgettable market-moving brand.

Caldicott has high hopes for the potential for innovation from Generation Y, since people of that age group have grown up with so many ways to communicate – and collaborate – through social media.

“Generation Y is a very collaborative generation. They’re using laptops, cell phones. They have all sorts of visual stimulus and visual input in their work,” she said. “They’re able to connect in ways that we never could ... So I’m encouraged that we actually have this upwelling of structures that will be helpful as we look forward to innovation.”

BPI Group plans more author presentations in Denver

Trish Beck, who heads the BPI Group's Denver office, plans to present author experts like Caldicott a few times a year to help promote the company's brand and connect with customers.

"We see ourselves as bringing fresh ideas to our clients, Beck said. "So the opportunity to bring Sarah and her thoughts around innovation is just a perfect fit for us and the Denver marketplace."

BPI first began organizing such events about 10 years ago in its Chicago office, said Paul Schneider, managing partner for BPI Group.

"In times like this, in a business crisis, it's innovation that pulls you out of where you're at," he said.

"Edison was, of course, a great innovator and a creator of ideas."

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