Innovation Nation: How America Is Losing Its Innovation Edge, Why It Matters, and What We Can Do To Get It Back

John Kao  
Free Press (2007)

The last time I checked, Amazon offers more than 48,000 titles on the general subject of business innovation. Nonetheless, John Kao asserts that in the United States, “our national capacity for innovation is eroding, with deeply troubling implications for our future... In tomorrow’s world, even more than today’s, innovation will be the engine of progress. So unless we move to rectify this dismal situation, the United States cannot hope to remain a leader. What’s at stake is nothing less than the future prosperity and security of our nation... While our competitor nations focus on educating and training engineers and inventors, our schools are turning out youngsters who are better consumers than they are creators.”

What to do? Kao proposes that the United States become an “innovation nation” by making a major commitment of resources, both human and financial, to rejuvenate our age of innovation. “And the obvious first step is simply to acknowledge the challenges we face at a national level. After which we must develop a compelling vision and a blueprint for action that will reinvent the way we educate our children, marshal our resources, pursue our research projects, communicate and share our discoveries, and conduct ourselves in the world community.”

After first identifying the “what,” Kao devotes the bulk of his attention to the “how” of achieving these and other objectives. He cites examples in the past when innovation in the U.S. was unequalled (e.g., the Manhattan Project, Lockheed’s “Skunk Works,” and the U.S. space program’s “Project Apollo”) as well as examples of successful innovation initiatives in other countries, notably in China and India (of course) but also in Brazil, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, New Zealand, Singapore, and Taiwan. There is indeed what Kao characterizes as “the new geography of innovation” in a world that Thomas Friedman describes as “flat.”

Kao examines the four principal driving factors behind this “global evolution,” noting that the globalization of innovation and of the capital to fund it “are, in my estimation, great positives overall for both the United States and the rest of the world. But the United States must begin ratcheting up its own innovation capacity to stay ahead of the curve.”

To me, one of Kao’s most interesting ideas is what he calls an “Information Hub” such as the one in San Diego that demonstrates “how talent, investment, and creativity flow to places whose culture encourages the pioneer spirit, the search for open spaces, and the hunger to express itself as much by creating value in a place as through the ideas and ventures that are generated by it.”

Indeed, John Kao’s BHAG for the United States (Big Hairy Audacious Goal is a term introduced by Jim Collins) is to establish twenty Innovation Hubs, each devoted to solving one “wicked” problem (e.g., climate change, environmental degradation, communicable diseases, energy sufficiency, water quality and sufficiency), with initial funding of at least $20 billion. One day, he hopes, “the catalytic nature of diversity and the power of innovation on a planetary basis will unleash the full potential of human beings to better themselves and to create a world well worth living in.”

Since February of 2001, Robert Morris has been reviewing business books for ACCE as well as for other websites, including those of Amazon and Borders that now rank him #9 among their “Top 100 Reviewers.” Based in Dallas, Morris heads a management consulting firm. “All organizations have problems developing leaders they need. I solve those problems.” He also conducts interviews of best-selling business authors, several of which have appeared in Chamber Executive. His e-mail address is interllect@mindspring.com.

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904-725-4668 Office  
904-318-5266 Cell  
mail@lukevision.com