



The Devil's Advocate

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I just finished reading *The Ten Faces of Innovation* by Tom Kelley, who is with [the design and innovation consulting firm IDEO](#) in Palo Alto, California. I am reading about innovation these days because I want to do everything possible to encourage and promote it at the School. We are more likely to generate new ideas to advance our mission if we are conscious of the conditions, structures, and processes that will facilitate innovation. Innovation is one feature of a high-performing organization, which is something that emerged as a priority in our strategic planning

Kelley describes ten roles that different people play in organizations to promote innovation. For example, he talks about the role of the anthropologist, who “brings new learning and insights into the organization by observing human behavior and developing a deep understanding” of how people use products and services. This involves learning by observing your clients with “fresh eyes” and with empathy, and then using your insights to design a better way of meeting their needs. Kelley believes that you must always listen to clients, but he does not believe that innovative breakthroughs occur by asking them to envision your future. He reinforces his point by quoting Henry Ford: “If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they’d have said a faster horse.”



In addition to the other roles that promote innovation, Kelley describes one role that “may be the biggest innovation killer in America today”—the Devil’s Advocate. Why? “Because the Devil’s Advocate encourages idea-wreckers to assume the most negative possible perspective, one that sees only the downside, the problems, the disasters-in-waiting. Once those floodgates open, they can drown a new initiative in negativity.” This is an interesting perspective and one that resonates with me, though I don’t think most people who adopt that role are intending to stop new ideas. I see this approach occasionally in our conversations at the School as we consider possible new ideas or initiatives, and I certainly have been guilty of playing that role. Academic training, especially legal training, encourages a kind of analytical thinking that emphasizes spotting the flaws in ideas or arguments. It is easy to focus on the weaknesses and on what might go wrong, and somehow it is less natural to put your faith in what might go right.

Kelley argues that innovation requires experimenting with less than perfect information and then making adjustments along the way—and sometimes failing and learning from that failure. He quotes Thomas Edison: “I have not failed. I have merely found ten thousand ways that won’t work.” The subtitle of Kelley’s book is *IDEO’s Strategies For Beating the Devil’s Advocate & Driving Creativity Throughout Your Organization*. To be clear, he is all for constructive criticism, free debate, and critical thinking. But too often the Devil’s Advocate refuses to take “a real stand, preferring to tear down an idea with clever criticism” Kelley contends that intentionally developing the ten innovative roles in an organization is one way of challenging the negative perspective coming from the Devil’s Advocate.

What can we do to adopt a more balanced perspective in considering new ideas—seeing the possibilities as well as the potential challenges? Can we become more comfortable with taking risks that might produce great new areas of work, but that might also fail? I’ll be writing and talking more about innovation in the coming weeks, so please let me know what you think. What do you think about Kelley’s perspective on the Devil’s Advocate?