

BusinessWeek

INSIGHT February 6, 2008, 2:31PM EST

A Familiar Problem

Being too close to—or distant from—a situation can thwart innovation. Here are some ideas to help executives put ideas into action

by [Bill Buxton](#)

Consider these two scenarios:

1. You walk into a meeting with a great idea. You're full of anticipation for the excitement it's going to cause, only to be met by the comment: "That's just like 'X'—it's been done before." The idea is dismissed and you leave, perplexed and deflated.
2. Your competitor comes out with a phenomenal product. You not only wish you'd had the timely insight that led to the innovation, you know in your heart of hearts you have the same business and technical skills, and had access to the same data as your competitor.

Despite their apparent differences, these scenarios are actually two sides of the same coin. I know from experience, as I've lived both far more often than I care to admit. But rather than view these moments as failure, I view them as expensive tuition for a valuable education. To save you from having to pay the same fees yourself, I thought I would try to summarize the nature of the coin—and explain how it can be flipped to your advantage.

A FINE LAW

Since everything needs a name, I've decided to name a new law "GGR," or the law of gradual granularity refinement.

I want to express it as a formula. But don't worry. It is trivial. This is to give the "law" its richly deserved gravitas: *JND significance ~ 1 / familiarity.*

The term JND (just noticeable difference) might remind you of your first-year psychology class. It asks, "What is the smallest level of differentiation that you can perceive as being significant?" The tilde character (~) means "varies with."

Hence, the law says that the granularity at which we distinguish meaningful differences gets finer the more our familiarity with a subject grows. Conversely, it also says the less familiar we are with something, the coarser the granularity will be before we can distinguish differences as being significant.

PREDICTABLE AND AVOIDABLE

Let me tie all of this back to our two scenarios. Each is the result of differences in JND (the granularity of recognizing differences of significance) at play between the two parties involved.

In the first, you had the insight and saw something significant in it because you were immersed in the problem space. The granularity of your analysis was really refined. But the subtlety required to appreciate the essence of

the idea fell below the threshold of your audience's ability to see any difference between it and what they had seen before.

In the second, the roles were reversed. Yes, you had all of the data. But what you didn't have was the ability to see the significance buried within. The granularity of your analysis was too coarse compared to that of your competitor. Most likely, despite your hard work, you simply weren't sufficiently familiar with the problem space to fully appreciate the significance of its subtleties.

The reason that I've taken the seemingly pretentious step of declaring the GGR as a law is to help emphasize there are no villains or stupid people in any of this. The behaviors in both scenarios are human nature. But that means they are predictable and avoidable—so there are some lessons that can be drawn from all of this.

LAW AND ORDER

In the first scenario, the GGR law says that you need to go into the meeting in full recognition that your appreciation for the significant subtleties surrounding your innovation is at a completely different level of granularity than that of the people you are addressing. You may explain things wonderfully, and they may even understand at an intellectual level. But at a deep, visceral level, they still do not get it. They simply do not have sufficient experience or familiarity to internalize things in a way that even vaguely resembles the way that you have. And it will not be clear why they should put your plan into action.

Does that mean there is no point in trying to explain your idea? Of course not. It just means that you need to apply as much creativity to how you present your approach as you invested in your original idea. In a short presentation or pitch, you certainly cannot bring your colleagues or management up to your level of experience or understanding. But you certainly can use things like well-chosen stories, examples, or prototypes to give them enough of a taste to at least be willing to come back to the table for more. Ideas are like any other product. Regardless of how good they are, without an effective pitch, they will most likely fail. If we really want them to get traction, we can't afford to focus our creativity on only the ideas themselves, and ignore their explanation.

Now let's consider the second scenario. In all likelihood, you knew your competitor. You went to the same type of school, had similar grades, and read the same journals. You probably work just as hard, go to the same conferences, have access to the same data, and know similar people. Yet, the competitor saw something that you didn't. Why? Let's rule out luck (there is little you can do about that). It had to be that they were doing something different than you. They were not having the same meetings or using the same techniques.

What the GGR law suggests is that your competitor found a way to accelerate their familiarity with relevant materials in a way that you did not. Working at a far more refined level of granularity, they were first to see the subtleties that made the difference between being the innovator and being the observer.

VISION QUEST

Viewed this way, the good news is you have proof that there is a way to achieve such acceleration. There is no magic. It is attainable. Your challenge, then, is to invest as much creativity into redefining your process as you have in your sought-after innovations.

It takes time to gain experience and familiarity that lead to the fineness of granularity wherein the sweet spots lie. And, no, we haven't found a solution to time travel. But the history of technology is full of discoveries of how to move faster, finer, smoother. That is the heart of your quest—to find ways to accelerate the rate and quality of gaining experience that get you to the fine level. What all of this says is that to be successful, we need to

innovate around the whole package, not just one part.

In his classic book, *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust observes: "The only true voyage of discovery is not to go to new places, but to have other eyes." Therein lies the key.

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