

Innovation

The best way to create change
by Col Allan R. Millett, USMCR (Ret)

If one reads *Proceedings* and the *Marine Corps Gazette*, the concept of innovation has reached the status of holy writ in the naval Services. From petty officers to NCOs to admirals and generals, the chorus of complaints about current Service problems focuses on an organizational culture that discourages change and punishes innovators.

Although the history of the Navy and Marine Corps provides plenty of examples of thwarted innovation and the influence of unimaginative senior officers, both Services have changed throughout their more than 200 years of existence. There will always be disagreement about the speed value and opportunity costs of change. It is this process that feeds further innovation.

As a scholar and Marine officer, I had ample opportunity to study innovation within military organizations, especially the Marine Corps. I also had the opportunity to direct, with my friend and colleague Williamson Murray, two DOD-sponsored studies of effectiveness and innovation in the armed forces of seven nations in the 20th century. I have come to some conclusions about why innovation can be difficult and how innovators can best advance their ideas.

Champions of the status quo are not merely visceral or self-interested opponents of change. They are aware that changes may not work and are hard to fix. They represent lost hours of labor and wasted money. Misguided innovation closes off other opportunities; it may saddle a Service with doctrine and weapons systems of marginal utility. Furthermore, it may force a Service into investments it will later regret because an enemy and the operational environment can change more rapidly than a Service can adjust. In a government with civilian control and democratic

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participation, failed innovation invites non-professional intervention and broad challenges to a Service's legitimacy; all of the Services can provide examples of such phenomena. We may celebrate successful innovation, but we should also study failed innovation as more than a product of perverse leadership and civilian interference.

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When Professor Murray and I tried to draw lessons from our case studies in *Military Innovation*, we did not offer a guideline for potential innovators but described the institutional environment we thought advanced innovation. I think I can fill some of this void:

- Timing is everything. Some ideas that seem wasteful or irrelevant may become useful as the strategical and operational context changes. Senior officers do not serve forever in billets and therefore cannot block changes.
- Find allies wherever you can. Lone Rangers do not innovate, no matter how noisy they can be. Purity of commitment is not necessary and can alienate people who can help. The modern mantra is horizontal networking.
- Find outlets for your ideas, such as publication (including Internet use),

teaching, and broad participation in relevant interest organizations.

- Tie the innovation to a requirement that emerges from an organizational mission. The innovation must improve capability.
- No matter what unit you are assigned to, learn how it does things and figure out how it might do its mission better—meaning faster, cheaper, and more effectively.
- Be proficient in the professional-technical sense. Be a paragon of performance. How can you believe a Marine who cannot run, shoot, or read a map? You must complete boot camp or the OCS courses at Quantico. As a senior lieutenant who later retired as a general once told me, if you are going to wear the uniform, play the game. It may not be fair, but the length of your hair may affect your credibility.
- Do not think that all people who disagree with you are your enemies. At least they are interested in your innovation, and you might convert them to your cause.

I might go on an aged Polonius bereft of my utilities, but we need to think about how innovation occurs—not just what needs to change.

