

Looking Back On Selling My Innovations

I had a meteoric career with my first employer in manufacturing, from shop floor to international business dealings and 12 promotions. I bled company colors, getting plenty of opportunities to move upward. As all things change, after more than 25 years I left the company I most loved due to office politics and my new boss' drinking problem. I was recruited by a local company that had not made money in seven years of operations. I was fully confident in telling the owner that I could fix the problems and be profitable. I also had Ideas for future products. Within 12 months our team turned the company into to a silver mine. By year two we were approaching gold mine status. At this point the owner was itching to get back to running the show once again. He made it so difficult for anyone to continue to work with him, and I agreed to go on my way. He rewarded his new-found wealth by not paying me my full amount of commissions when I left. I chalked it up to another business lesson. I would endure far too many of these types of lessons over next several years.

I went on my way and filed for a patent on my earlier ideas for market innovations that I had mapped out in my mind. As sales and marketing are one of my strengths, I set out to call on a company that could use this technology. At first they were very interest in making a deal, and so we began our negotiations. After seven months they were still hemming and hawing about the deal. I gently gave them an ultimatum, which did not motivate them, so I moved on, much to their dismay. Another lesson leaned.

Again, I was recruited to work with another company in the same field. They liked my designs, and they offered to pay the patent costs. I would direct sales for the innovation and rebuild their outdated representative network. Sadly, internal confusion and lack of organization cased them to miss the utility patent filling date. I was back to square one. I re-filed and went out and sold two field units in the worst field application I could find. Customers are always willing to listen if you show them how you can solve their problems. It was the end of 2008 and the home mortgage and banking crisis hit. It was as if someone turned off the faucet in the manufacturing world; no business could be located anywhere. By June 2009 the company had deep lay-offs which included me. I continued monitoring the units in the field for more than a year afterwards. The company's GM was not keeping his obligation to pay patent costs, including a very small royalty due me on the first units. Again, disappointment as they had breeched the contract. I gave them notice to fix the situation but nothing happened. Lesson three learned.

I took my show on the road yet again, now meeting with two more companies in the same field. The first company was the best fit for the patent, an international company, and I was hopeful. The manager I met with lit up with excitement as he reviewed my design. He enthusiastically went to his company's upper management to champion this new innovation. Alas, to the manager's disappointment, they declined. I could hear the frustration in his voice when he called me to tell me the bad news. The second company made an offer, not an ideal fit for me or the product, but sometimes you take what you can get. I took it. We sold several units quickly. However, with a lack of engineering support and the bad temperament of the GM, things started the downward slide. A phone confrontation with the GM and the president of the company that had purchased multiple units so infuriated the president of this account that he canceled the order, not even retrieving their 30% down payment. Only a single order went out. It was shortly after that lost order the GM canceled our agreement still having to pay something to me on our agreement. Let's see, lesson four learned.

I was again revisiting my list of viable companies to work with. Now, I have to tell you, I had contacted my first employer, trying to put the past behind us, not just once but on three separate occasions to share my innovation. The first time was prior to the seven month negotiation with their competitor that led to “No Deal.” The second time was when I had field units successfully operating for more than a year. The sales group was enthusiastic, but management declined yet again saying engineering was skeptical the design would work. I know . . . field units had been working for a year. My third and final offer was after my old company had gone through their fifth VP in six years. I decided to give them one last shot. You guessed it, it was more of the same, “No thank you” once again. I was not surprised as several years prior to my leaving, I had submitted a design memo to the VP with my thoughts on a separate, new innovative design. Even back then I was told it would not work. To my astonishment several years later our sister company abroad filed for patent on almost the identical idea, and it was awarded. I keep the memo to remind me not to be discouraged when I am told no. It is frustrating to continue to hear negative comments, but this was my catalyst to push on. Lessons five, six and seven learned.

Remember I said I left due to office politics, a new boss with a drinking problem, and, let me add, very poor leadership? This is painful critique of an organization that once gave me so many opportunities. However, most people leave companies due to poor managers. Companies rise or struggle depending on the leaders in the company. I started doing contract consulting for a local Cleveland company that also did business publications. The 12 prior upward positions had given me a wide array of skills to help other companies. This relationship gave me a vehicle to write a book about a subject I am most passionate about: Leadership. I included in the book a cutting-edge program I designed and created called “Kaizen for Managers.” This type of system keeps managers accountable to support their people and to focus on continuous improvements with products and the organization itself. It fosters a more team-oriented company culture. Through these successful and unsuccessful experiences and lessons learned, I was compelled to write. My leadership book is titled *Leading People Beyond Expectations*. Lesson eight learned.

Fast forward. It was almost five years later when one of the companies that had initially declined my design came back with renewed interest in my innovation. During those years I had actively worked to gain market acceptance. I negotiated with the company for a few months, and they ended up purchasing my trademark and both my US and European Patents. After incurring about \$60,000 in patent costs, including international filings, my 10 year journey ended with a pay day at last!!! Never quit on what you believe in. Lesson nine learned

I later learned that the innovation I showed them five years prior was forgotten, and only after someone in their company came up with a similar idea, was the idea overwhelmingly embraced by the international organization. Thinking it was the newest innovation in the industry, they were excited. The only problem was that when they shared the design with the manager in America, he had to inform Corporate that he believed it was the same winning idea first brought to them five years earlier which they declined. A man in Cleveland, Ohio was the international patent and trademark owner . . . me! Lesson nine learned. I will let you decide what the company might have learned in this situation.

Looking back at the experience, I considered the entire saga as my own personal miracle. I was very deep into patent costs as I mentioned (about \$60,000) and had not made any money on a design that I believed in. This design was operating flawlessly for three years, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. I felt this was a measure of success. I would not recommend anyone take the route I endured as it truly is the road that should never be traveled. At times I had doubts. I even toyed

with abandoned my design. However, those thoughts were dispelled when I had a chance meeting with a true world-renowned business innovator, voted one of the world's top 100 CEO's. I became an advisor to him on special projects. This relationship was most enjoyable and extremely successful and rewarding. He and I shared the same business philosophy. Upon reading a draft of my book, he was happy to write the book's foreword. I even share some of our experiences and how traveling with him was like traveling with a "Rock Star of the Business World." It was then I realized I could effortlessly work with a business giant who conducted close to a billion dollar turn around in just 18 months. He gained world-wide recognition, and even to this day, he is celebrated by his 40,000 former employees. He encouraged me by saying if I ever needed a professional reference, please share his private number. This was a once in a lifetime lesson and at this point I lost count. I do hope I have spurred your desire to read my book.

Let me close with these thoughts that are lessons for business leaders. First, start by giving everyone you encounter respect. I mean everyone, from the bottom to top, even the guy who may show up at your door with a new idea. It is amazing what can happen when a company's culture thinks this way. Second, create a pathway to embrace and evaluate new innovations within your company, even if they are not yours. Third, look to the future and forgive the past. The reasons you were told about why past relationship went astray may not be the real story. It is better to investigate for yourself than get faulty advice. Do not let future successes hinge on what may not be the truth from the past. Fourth, many companies forget this, and it's a really big deal, "Listen to Your People." They are the experts and that's why you hired them. The manager who saw my innovation as a winner was five years ahead of the company culture. This happened prior to his company believing it was the next market success. He knew it was game changer the moment he saw it. Sadly, he had to wait so long for his company to embrace what he already knew. Think of the missed opportunities the company suffered. Finally, we can all take a lesson from George Washington, our first president, the man who pioneered the office, and one of the world's greatest statesmen. Washington's genius was he gave people respect and listened to his generals. He would go as far as embracing ideas even if the ideas were not his. Washington's respect for people went beyond his own ego.

I wish each and every inventor the best with your innovations. May your path to success come much easier than mine.

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