

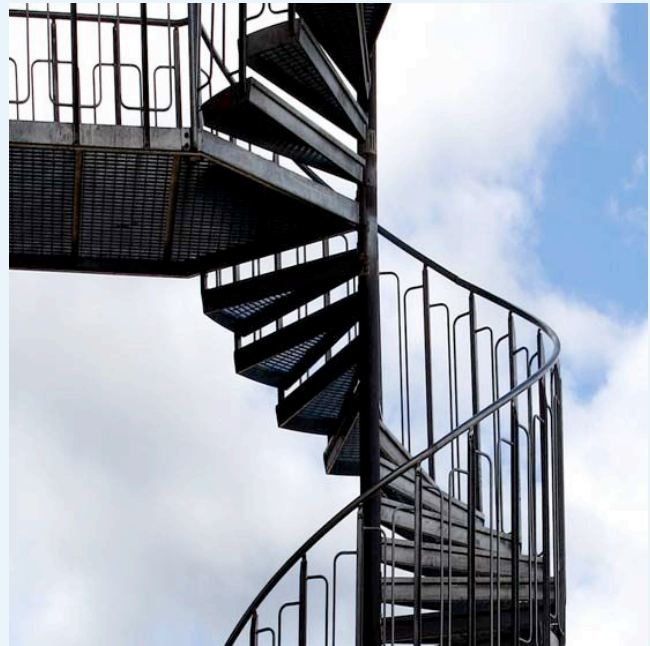


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The Battle for Innovation

Innovation is one of the battles of the 21st century. How can you win it?

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Article at a glance

Nelson's Column is a monument in the centre of London's Trafalgar Square. Thousands of business people walk past it every day on the way to and from work. Few of these people realize that, even though he died over 200 years ago, Lord Nelson could teach them some valuable techniques that could help them and their companies innovate in today's business world.

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Nelson's Column is a monument in the centre of London's Trafalgar Square. A 5.5 metre statue of Lord Horatio Nelson stands on top of a 46 metre granite column. Thousands of business people walk past it every day on the way to and from work. Few of these people realize that, even though he died over 200 years ago, Lord Nelson could teach them some valuable techniques that could help them and their companies innovate in today's business world.

Lord Horatio Nelson is regarded as the greatest officer in the history of the British Royal Navy. He is renowned for his innovative, confident and unorthodox battle techniques. He died in 1805 after he and the British fleet annihilated their Franco-Spanish enemies in the Battle of Trafalgar. This battle was one of the most decisive naval battles in history and it established Great Britain as the leading naval power. After this humiliating defeat, Napoleon Bonaparte of France abandoned plans to invade Great Britain.

Innovation will give 21st century organizations competitive advantage. But, as Nelson showed, innovative and cutting edge ideas are not random. They come from relentless, focused preparation. Wisdom, experience and preparation provide the confidence to follow through with seemingly risky, unconventional ideas.

It's the way we do things around here.

In the 18th century, traditional naval war tactics were formal and predictable. The two attacking fleets knew exactly what to expect from each other because they generally followed the same battle formation.

Each side would arrange their ships so that they were facing each other in two, parallel lines. They pounded each other with gunfire until someone surrendered. Countries preferred this familiar, linear approach because all ships in a fleet could see their commander's signals better so it was easier for the admiral to control the fleet. This approach was fairly time consuming because it would take a while for the ships to form the lines. Battles were also costly as ships in the line were particularly vulnerable and were often badly damaged during fighting.

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Sharpening his intuition

Every day of his naval career, Lord Nelson monitored the weather regardless of whether he was on land or at sea. He carefully observed the direction and speed of the wind, the air temperature, the type and position of the clouds, the strength of waves and the size and direction of swells on the sea. He would jot down his observations in his diary twice daily. To an observer, this must have seemed a dry, dull daily routine.

Preparation revealed opportunity

When he woke up on 21 October 1805, Lord Nelson observed the weather like he always did. He noticed the calm, light wind and the swells on the sea and suspected there would be a storm later in the day. His consistent, daily weather observations gave him the astuteness and wisdom to see that the wind and sea were providing a powerful, yet subtle, window of opportunity. That morning, he knew it was an ideal time to confront his Franco-Spanish enemies.

Every day of his naval career, Lord Nelson monitored the weather regardless of whether he was on land or at sea. Lord Nelson's regular, fastidious weather monitoring ritual gave him the benefit in a critical moment of judgment during the Battle of Trafalgar.

Lord Nelson and his fleet of British ships sailed in the direction of the wind and approached their enemy in two columns. Instead of forming the usual linear pattern, they sliced through the Franco-Spanish line. They split the enemy fleet in the centre and at the rear. The enemy ships were crippled, as they were unable to see signals from their commanding flagship. Lord Nelson's focus on the rear ships forced the stronger Franco-Spanish ships in the battle frontline to turn back and support their colleagues in the rear. This took time and gave the British another competitive advantage.

The calm, northwesterly wind made it difficult for the enemy to position themselves in the usual straight line of battle. The light wind meant that the slower, heavier, more powerful ships were not as effective in battle. If Lord Nelson had waited until the storm gale started, he would have lost his competitive advantage.

Lord Nelson discussed his battle plans with the ship captains before they set sail. However, his plan was not rigid and rules based. He simply said that their fleet should cut the enemy line and focus on the rear. He allowed his captains to execute this battle plan as circumstances on the day dictated. Lord Nelson gave them a broad outline of what he wanted and gave them freedom within these



boundaries.

Lord Nelson's regular, fastidious weather monitoring ritual gave him the benefit in a critical moment of judgment during the Battle of Trafalgar. He dipped into this reservoir of insight and wisdom in order to capture strategic advantage over his Franco-Spanish enemies. His preparation gave him confidence at a time of critical stress and judgment.

Innovation in the 21st century

Innovation is the latest business buzzword. Companies see it as one of the keys to their future competitive advantage, which it is. But, many people misunderstand innovation and believe it is easier than it really is. Companies falsely believe that if you create an environment that encourages random creativity, a fountain of ideas will follow. Innovation cannot be cooked to order, like a steak in a restaurant. It grows over time out of wisdom, experience, discipline and preparation. Innovation is not just about spouting creative ideas. It is about what you, as a company, do to recognize and implement these ideas in a timely way.

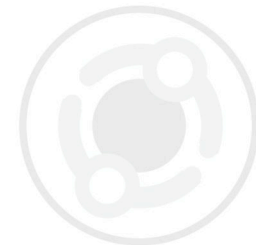
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Lord Nelson identified his window of opportunity and put his audacious plan into action after small, consistent steps, by being sensitive to signals from his environment and by giving his subordinates freedom within boundaries. Preparation refined his intuitive instinct and he created his own competitive advantage. His innovative, unconventional battle plans were successful because he understood his environment so well.

Innovation is one of the battles of the 21st century. What is your plan of action? Audacious, unconventional, cutting edge tactics come from preparation and discipline. Innovation is not random creativity. Innovation is creativity with wisdom, discipline and direction.

If you know your product from A to Z you will have a feeling about it that is difficult to describe. You will be so positively charged, so fortified, and so strengthened in your own mental attitude that you can be both irresistible and unconquerable.

Dale Carnegie



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RESOURCES:

Historyofwar.org

<http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk/server/show/nav.3878>

http://www.thebiographychannel.co.uk/biography_story/602:21/1/Horatio_Nelson.htm

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