

The Journal for

# Quality and Participation

People | Pride | Performance

October 2013 | [www.asq.org/pub/jqp](http://www.asq.org/pub/jqp)  
Vol. 36, No. 3

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## Fostering Creativity and Innovation

Strangers add value

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Form and function unite



INNOVATION

CREATIVITY



Enlarging the pool of people providing input to include strangers greatly increases the probability of obtaining innovative suggestions.

# New Insights on Innovation and Quality

Alan S. Gregerman

If asked to make a list of the real keys to quality and business success, what items would you include? If you are like most people in the field of quality, your list would probably look a lot like the following:

- Visionary and effective leadership committed to quality
- A clear and compelling business purpose and strategy focused on quality
- A keen commitment to, and understanding of, the needs of customers
- A corporate culture that is driven by quality
- The right people with the right training and motivation
- The right knowledge and know-how
- The right tools and processes
- The best systems and technology
- A high degree of teamwork and collaboration
- A passion for innovation and continually raising the bar

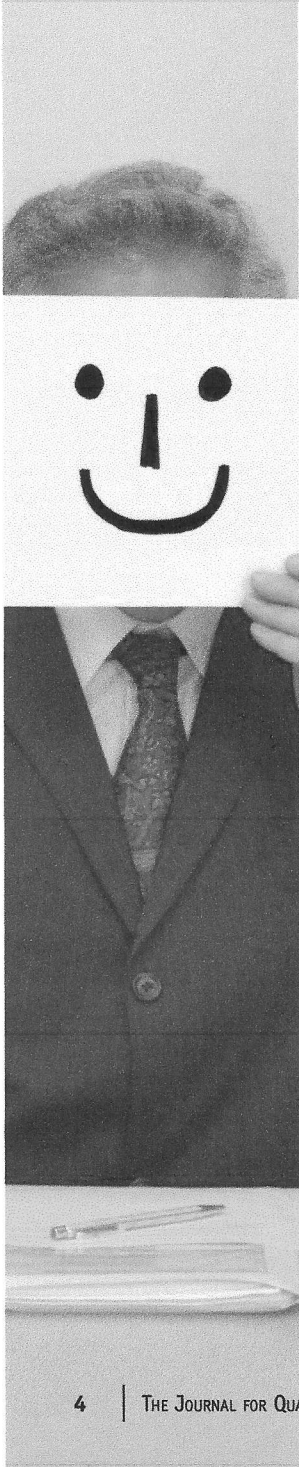
All of these keys are exceedingly important, but you probably wouldn't

include *strangers*—people you've never met before and are probably not likely to go out of your way to meet, and why should you? After all, it's hard enough to achieve consistently high quality by yourself or with the help of the people you know and trust, without having to worry about involving people you don't know. Strangers, therefore, rarely figure in your thinking about how to create the most remarkable and valuable products, services, solutions, or enterprises, but they should.

In fact, some might argue that they are the most essential ingredient in reaching your full potential and can serve as your greatest competitive advantage in the battle to innovate, create, and deliver greater quality and value to external and internal customers. This article shows exactly why that's true.

## Strangers Drive Innovation

If you are open to this idea at the outset, you can probably begin to imagine the vital role that strangers



play in innovation—a fundamental driver of great quality. The right strangers bring new ideas, insights, perspectives, and practices that can help you question, rethink, and improve the way you do the things that matter most.

Consider this fact: 99 percent of all new ideas are based on the thinking and practices of others—strangers—in other industries, disciplines, walks of life, cultures, periods in history, or parts of the world. If that isn't a call to get out of the comfortable confines of your office to wander around and engage strangers, then what is? This simple reality enabled the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen to reach the South Pole before British naval officer Robert Falcon Scott—his well-trained and well-financed competitor—who relied on his knowledge and the best expertise that mainstream science had to offer. Amundsen instead spent two years living with and learning from Inuits in the Arctic Circle—strangers who had survived for countless generations in one of the world's harshest climates—as the key to understanding how to survive at the bottom of the earth.

Even the remarkable Apple iPod is based on the genius of strangers. Sure, Steve Jobs and the folks at Apple were really brilliant designers, creative technologists, and very clever marketers, but they didn't invent personal and portable entertainment. That was the visionaries at Sony who, in 1979, created the amazing Walkman. Apple didn't invent the MP3 standard, the fundamental platform that drives the iPod. That was audio engineer Karlheinz Brandenburg and a German company named Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft, which received a patent for this technology in 1989. Some might even suggest that the Apple iTunes store, a critical component of the iPod's ecosystem and success, owes part of its inspiration to the Great Library in Alexandria, Egypt, which, 2,300 years ago, was the world's largest repository of content—holding more than 400,000 documents long before anyone knew how to print, although they didn't have a particularly strong music collection.

Although you are taught to believe that it is whom you know that matters, that's simply too narrow a perspective. It's whom you *could* know that matters more. The future belongs to the most curious people—those who are willing to connect with, learn from, and collaborate with strangers.

## Strangers Test Your Openness to New and Better Ways

When we think about strangers, we think about people who are very different than us with different sets of skills, experiences, and worldviews. These may be people who approach the same or different problems and opportunities in very different ways. They might ask very different questions to get at the heart of things. For some reason, most people have a strong aversion to others who are different. It's an aversion that is tied in great measure to the belief in the power of your own training and expertise and your belief that your way is the best way. A fascinating story about the evolution of swimming illustrates this point.

In the middle of the 1800s there was only one place in the world where people cared about competitive swimming and that place was Northern Europe. Whenever the water got warm enough—let's say roughly 55 degrees Fahrenheit or 12 degrees Celsius—all of the leading swim clubs would hold a competition. The only problem, although no one seemed to realize it at the time, was the fact that Northern Europeans had only figured out how to swim one stroke, the breaststroke—the slowest of the four strokes used today in swimming competitions at any level. Yet they delighted in the breaststroke, regarded it as their own marvelous invention, and used it in every single race. After all, they were experts and it was all they knew.

Then in 1844 a couple of Native Americans happened upon a swim meet in London. Curiosity must have gotten the better of them and, having never been part of a formal swimming competition, they asked the meet's organizers if they could participate. Their request was received gladly and they were told the rules and invited to join in any of the races. As it turned out, the visitors did not have any idea how to swim the breaststroke. Instead, they did swim their version of the freestyle or "crawl"—the fastest stroke used today in any swimming competition—and they proceeded to win every race they entered. At the end of the meet they thanked their hosts and graciously accepted their medals. One might have imagined that the hosts, having seen a faster way to swim, might have invited their guests to



### *Eight Ideas to Unlock Greater Innovation and Quality*

1. Acknowledge that you can swim faster and that success depends on raising the bar consistently in doing the things that matter most.
2. Create a culture of greater curiosity, openness, and possibilities as a way to push your best thinking in new directions.
3. Expand your reading horizons to gain new insights and perspectives. You can start with leading magazines, blogs, websites, and books focused broadly on innovation or explore any field that strikes your interests—then stretch to discover lessons from other industries, walks of life, disciplines, cultures, and even history, science, popular culture, and nature.
4. Wander around regularly in search of ideas and inspiration—begin inside your company or organization then step outside to visit other enterprises, leading museums, bustling business districts, and attend interesting lectures and cultural events.
5. Make a deliberate effort to connect with strangers from different walks of life and commit to discovering and understanding the things that they know best—then challenge yourself to see how their ideas might spark your fresh thinking.
6. Attend a conference on a brand new topic that, on the face of it, has very little to do with your work. Do this with an eye toward discovering new frameworks for thinking and action.
7. Don't take YES for an answer—once you've come up with a great solution, commit to making it even better.
8. Put a picture of those you serve on the wall as a constant reminder of the real reason why innovation and quality matter!

stay and teach them how to swim the freestyle. Instead, they wished them well and sent them on their way, then huddled to figure out how

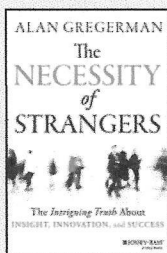
to swim the breaststroke faster so that next time any strange-swimming visitors arrived, the hosts would be more successful. For the next 29 years, Northern Europeans continued to swim only the breaststroke until a young man named John Trudgen became the coach of a leading British club. He had never seen anyone swim the freestyle but, having heard from an older member of the club about the time when the strangers from a distant land had come with a different and faster way to swim, he ventured to South America to learn the new stroke and then introduced it to his team and an entire continent. Competitive swimming was changed forever.

The most interesting fact about the history of swimming strokes and this meeting of strangers is that it's known in every corner of the world, except Northern Europe, that people have been swimming a variation of the freestyle for 10,000 years. Interestingly, the only place where people cared about competitive swimming was the only place where they had no idea how to swim fast.

In an important sense most people, and most companies and organizations, are swimming variations of the breaststroke—holding on to and periodically refining business as usual—unwilling to be open to new and possibly better ways of doing the things that matter most. Most importantly, too many people are unwilling to really open themselves to the wisdom and know-how of strangers—especially strangers who are very different than them. This aversion is the biggest obstacle that separates you from ever reaching your full potential in a world in which real success depends on a consistent openness to ideas, approaches, and business models. Consider the fate of once-leading companies like Blockbuster, Borders, AOL, and Research in Motion (the maker of the Blackberry phone) that were unwilling to acknowledge and adapt to major changes in their industries—changes initiated by strangers with fresh perspectives.

Sometimes openness means combining the best things that you know with the best things that other people know—as was the case with competitive swimming. Sometimes it means scrapping what you do and moving in an entirely new direction. Think about the service or solution called “cloud computing” that has taken the world

## The Necessity of Strangers: The Intriguing Truth About Insight, Innovation, and Success



**Author:** Alan Gregerman

**Abstract:** Most of us assume our success relies on a network of our closest friends and contacts, but what if this isn't the case? What if the real key to new thinking and action is strangers? Although we are often taught to look upon strangers with suspicion and distrust, this book offers the provocative idea that engaging with strangers who are often very different than us is an opportunity, not a threat. Strangers challenge us to look at ourselves, the challenges we face, and the world around us with fresh eyes and a sense of new possibilities. Engaging with the right strangers is essential to unlocking our

real potential. *The Necessity of Strangers* shows how strangers can help us innovate in ways that matter, build remarkable teams and energize workplaces, and achieve genuine collaboration. It also shows how to develop a more open and stranger-centric mindset that can enable us to develop new markets, build stronger customer relationships, create more worthwhile partnerships, and become more effective leaders. Finding the right strangers in all walks of life will help us tap the real brilliance in ourselves and our organizations.

**Publisher:** Jossey-Bass

**ISBN:** 978-1118461303

**Format/Length:** Hardcover/240 pages

**Price:** \$26.95

of business and government by storm (no pun intended) as a truly game-changing alternative to buying software and maintaining data and all of your information resources. Instead, you can now hire a provider to take care of everything for you at a significantly lower cost of ownership, with fewer problems, and greater quality and security—assuming you choose the right partner. You simply have to be open to this new way of swimming or, more precisely, surfing—the Web that is.

### Creating a More Open and Stranger-Centric Mindset

The real key to success is creating a more open mindset. Here are eight straightforward questions that will help think about your openness to new ideas, perspectives, and people. Use them as a way to take a fresh look at an approach to quality or any other essential area of a business.

- When faced with a new challenge, is your initial inclination to try to solve it by applying the knowledge, approaches, and tools you already have?
- When looking to collaborate in solving a pressing problem or creating a new opportunity,

do you rely on people you already know and who have similar backgrounds and expertise to your own?

- Do you believe that there is generally a single best way to do something?
- When trying to solve a problem, are you typically satisfied when you come up with an acceptable solution or are you more likely to continue working until you get a significantly better result?
- Do you make a regular practice of sharing the knowledge you develop or acquire?
- Do you believe that strangers, especially people who are very different from you in other walks of life, have ideas, insight, and perspectives that could help you to solve the problems you face?
- When faced with a problem or opportunity, are you very likely to search for solutions across a wide range of disciplines?
- How often do you wander around in search of new ideas and inspiration?

You might begin by asking each member of your group or team to spend some time thinking

about these questions and writing down their candid answers. After that is completed come together to share everyone's thoughts with a sense of curiosity and openness. This way introverts, extroverts, and the people in between will have an equal chance to have their thoughts heard. Then, use these initial answers as the start of a broader conversation about your goals and objectives, your real potential as a group or a team—that is, what it would take to be remarkable—and the mindset required to reach your potential. Finally, you can share your ideas on concrete steps for moving forward—steps like taking a fresh look at the key challenges and opportunities you face, searching for possible solutions outside your comfort zones and areas of expertise, looking for more than one approach, sharing ideas and knowledge more consistently, and connecting with the right strangers from other walks of life.

The real value of these questions, and your commitment to answering them, is their ability to spark a conversation about what it means to have an open mindset and why this actually matters. It will also help you to appreciate the power of four “guiding principles” of openness (listed below) that can empower greater success.

- *Humility*—the belief that there are limits to your knowledge and expertise and that you can always be better at the things that matter most.
- *Curiosity*—your innate gift for being open to new ideas, people, and possibilities.
- *Respect*—the belief that everyone matters, especially people who are different than us, and that you learn and grow by engaging other people on their own terms.
- *Purpose*—your reason for being that guides your efforts to learn and grow.

It is important to realize that your degree of openness is something you can develop over time, in fact, over your entire life and career.

Think about all the ways you have become more open over the years, with particular attention to the types of people and ways of thinking for which you now have a greater appreciation. While people often believe that they become less open to new things and more set in their ways, experience shows quite the opposite. The biggest challenge is getting people and organizations to be willing to try.

#### A Final Note

Each day you pass by at least 100 people, places, or things that could change lives and spark the next great innovation. In your haste to get things done or to simply get from point A to point B, you fail to lift your head, pay attention, and connect. In the process, you limit your ability to learn, grow, and be more remarkable. It doesn't have to be this way if, as individuals and organizations, you dare to believe that strangers matter and that you can always be better at the things worth doing.

*Editor's note:* This article is adapted from the new book *The Necessity of Strangers: The Intriguing Truth About Insight, Innovation, and Success* (Jossey-Bass, 2013).



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