Strivers, Drivers and Survivors
Often Determine Which Organizations Become Thrivers

Where do the best innovative ideas and creative solutions come from? Who comes up with these awesome initiatives and how can I identify, connect and collaborate with them?

In my experience, innovators come in all shapes, sizes, ages, colors, and backgrounds, and generally fall into three ‘buckets’ – what I call strivers, drivers and survivors. Let me explain and give an example of each and how they contribute to the organization’s innovation mosaic.

‘Strivers’ are passionate about a cause, they have a problem to solve, a challenge to overcome, or envision an opportunity that will make the world, or at least their piece of it, better.

‘Drivers’ think about problems and challenges a bit differently than others. They often do research and analysis to determine how to best improve the efficiency and effectiveness of a process. They have a unique perspective on the issue at hand and frequently take a novel approach to solve problems and develop and implement creative solutions.

‘Survivors’ are often compelled to take action due to extreme pressures that threaten their team, customers, organization, nation, or even the planet. They generate and adapt to meet the challenge using limited available resources in new and ingenious ways to overcome these threats – they are the epitome of the sage saying “Necessity is the mother of invention.”

Let me share some examples with you.

Strivers: The Food Recovery Network
Several years ago I heard an inspiring story about four college students at the University of Maryland, College Park who simply asked the question, “Why does our university dining hall throw out perfectly good food at the end of the day when it could be used to help feed needy individuals and families in our community?” Of course there were rational risk-averse reasons...the food might become spoiled or contaminated, what if someone got serious sick from our donated food?...the University might be held libel for hospital bills or if someone died from eating our donated food...

But the students were passionate about not wasting perfectly good food that could help the needy in their community, and they were relentless, asking questions and searching for answers...How do restaurants safely donate leftover food to homeless shelters?...What steps do they take to keep the food safe?...Wouldn’t this be a great opportunity for the University to be a valued partner within their community? They methodically chipped away at the risk-averse reasons, finding solutions. Then the conversation shifted to who would manage the program,”. the University doesn’t have the resources or staff to take this additional work on.”
Not daunted, the students sought advice and formed a non-profit organization (the Food Recovery Network – www.foodrecoverynetwork.org) and informed the University they would use trained student volunteers to safely collect, protect, and deliver the food to local charities to distribute to needy individuals and families in the community. By the end of the 2011-2012 school year the Food Recovery Network, or FRN, recovered and delivered 30,000 meals to Washington, DC-area non-profit organizations fighting hunger. In the spring of 2012, a second FRN chapter was established at Brown University, and shortly afterwards at the University of California at Berkeley and Pomona College. By the time I saw the news report, FRN had established chapters at 14 colleges and was recovering and donating hundreds of thousands of meals annually to feed the needy.

The founding students were ‘strivers’ passionately committed to a cause to make their community, their part of the world, better, and they did it in a scalable model that was difficult for college administrators to refuse and easy for other students around the nation to commit to and act upon. FRN now has expanded to chapters on 172 college campuses in 46 states and the District of Columbia and has recovered and donated over 4.9 million pounds of food – equivalent to more than 4.1 million meals to needy individuals and families!

**Drivers: The Stroke Pathways Project**

‘Stroke Pathways’ was a research project intended to improve stroke health outcomes conducted at Harvard University during 2005-2008 (www.strokepathways.blogspot.com). This research, surprisingly was not conducted at Harvard’s famed Medical School, but rather at the Harvard Design School, and under the leadership, not of a leading medical professional, biomedical scientist, or M.D., but was led by Professor Marco Steinberg, an associate professor of architecture at Harvard’s Design School. (Professor Steinberg later went on to become the Director of Strategic Design of Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund). The objective of this project was to improve patient outcomes (mortality, morbidity, quality of life) at lower costs.

Professor Steinberg was specifically chosen to lead this effort to take a different approach than most traditional medical research projects which might involve assessing the impact and effectiveness of various medications and treatments. Instead, the Stroke Pathways Project took a system design approach to health care delivery that focused in three areas:

- A full care cycle approach to care-innovations (prevention, acute therapy, long-term needs)
- A systems approach to care delivery, focused on strategic improvements
- A design-centric approach to problem solving
The strength of their approach was in asking the right questions, rather than providing good solutions to the wrong problem. Products delivered by the team included:

1. A methodology for looking at complex systems
2. A strategic roadmap to improving outcomes at lower costs
3. Defining the “top ten” areas of opportunity for improvement

Survivors: “The Other Option is Death” -- Sharing of Ventilators
On March 26, 2020, the New York Times reported a remarkable story about a life-saving innovation in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic that was raging through New York City. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo wrote on Twitter “Our single greatest challenge is ventilators. We need 30,000. We have 11,000.”

On March 14th, Dr. Charlene Babcock, an emergency physician at Ascension St. John Hospital in Detroit, posted a YouTube video showing how to modify a ventilator to keep not one, but four people breathing. Dr. Babcock used a T-tube and three adapters to split two valves into four ports for ventilating patients.

In response to the urgent need for more ventilators in New York City, New York-Presbyterian Hospital began “ventilator sharing” - treating two patients instead of one on some ventilators, a desperate measure to help alleviate the critical shortage of ventilators and treat more critically ill patients in dire need of ventilation. New York-Presbyterian explained that each patient received the same amount of oxygen and level of care as if they were each on a single ventilator. Doctors developed protocols for the process and rapidly scaled it up and shared it with federal and state governments and other hospitals.

Dr. Lorenzo Paladino, author of a 2008 study on using shared ventilators, acknowledged that there were risks and stated, “Nobody believes this is the best way to ventilate somebody – this is for the doomsday scenario when we run out of ventilators. It’s sub-optimal, but the other option is death.”

Innovators’ Collective Impact on Organizational Performance
Each type of innovator featured in the above stories was successful developing creative solutions for the specific challenges and circumstances they faced. It’s important to note however, that each innovator type may not be best suited for every challenge. For instance, using a ‘Driver’ who takes a non-traditional systematic approach to solving complex problems, is likely not the best person to quickly take life-saving measures in a crisis situation. Likewise, a ‘Survivor’, is not as likely to come up with a breakthrough to solve complex challenges like poverty, international crime, or climate change, as a ‘Driver’ might be.

The very best organizations employ a diverse collection of all types of innovators to address their tactical, operational, and strategic issues, problems and opportunities. The most valuable innovators are those rare individuals who can adapt their innovation style to the challenges, problems and opportunities that need to be addressed – they are the ‘Adapters’.
High-performing organizations and savvy senior leaders and executives understand where their diverse collection of proactive innovators fit in their organizational toolkit (Strivers, Drivers, Survivors, or Adapters) and when to best use them.

**Strivers + Drivers + Survivors = Thrivers (individuals and organizations)**

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