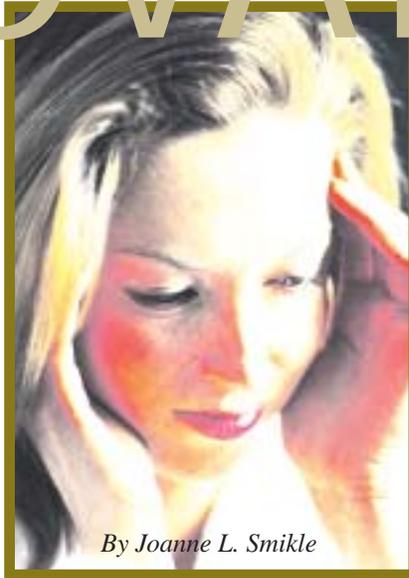


# DIAGNOSING

## An Allergy to

# INNOVATION



By Joanne L. Smikle

**W**hether you're in the association world, hospitality, health care or industry, you know there are lots of fresh ideas that could radically improve your business model. You agree that the sweeping winds of innovation could revolutionize almost every aspect of your operation. And, if you allowed a little ingenuity to creep in, you could probably turn your industry upside down. So, what's getting in the way? Why do we see so much stagnation? Why is inertia so often the norm?

I am convinced that the answer to all three of those questions is the same. . . we're allergic to innovation. Yep, I think many of us, and I will put myself in that number, sneeze, wheeze and otherwise gasp at the thought of a novel approach. We get so very comfortable with routines that lead to lethargy. We allow our intellectual curiosity to lay dormant while we rely on yesterday's solutions. We forget that yesterday's solutions seldom fit today's problems. I'm convinced that the Allergy to Innovation is what leads us to this point.

### Symptoms of A to I

So, how do you know if you have this allergy? First I'll tell you the symptoms, then I'll give you a test (no needles). Once you self-diagnose, I will prescribe remedies. There are five common symptoms:

#### 1. Running in place

If you find yourself running in place at frenetic speeds, getting absolutely nowhere. . . you could have A to I. You see, you're not covering new ground or making progress. You may be busy beyond belief, but busy at what? What's it netting you or the organization that employs you?

#### 2. Poor hearing

If you don't listen to alternative approaches, hear other perspectives or even listen to your own thoughts. . . you could have A to I. One of the first signs of this malady is poor

auditory function. You are just too busy, too preoccupied and too tired to be actively engaged in listening.

#### 3. Myopia

That ole tunnel vision is a sure sign of the disorder. When your vision is too narrowly focused, when you cannot see the proverbial "big picture," you could definitely be plagued with this problem. Please note, myopia is often accompanied by poor hearing. Together they make it nearly impossible for you to explore and consider alternatives.

#### 4. Rigid Limbs

This clear sign of inflexibility is another of the hallmarks of the disorder. When you're unable to bend, stretch and flex, you may have the **Allergy to Innovation**. When even basic activities that are out of the ordinary leave you stiff, tired and in pain, you may have it. And, when your only exercise is running in place, you surely may have Allergy to Innovation.

#### 5. Cold Sweats

This symptom only surfaces when you're asked to provide creative ideas or new approaches. It is activated by the stress of having to expand your brain-power and develop greater mental acuity.

Some of the symptoms may sound familiar. But, don't be certain that you have the malady just because you have symptom one or two. Let's conduct a more thorough examination. Take the quiz that follows. Provide honest answers, no matter how painful.

- 1. I make it a habit to master new competencies at least twice a year.** \_\_\_ Yes or \_\_\_ No
- 2. I implement my new skills in all areas of my life, even if it seems unrelated.** \_\_\_ Yes or \_\_\_ No
- 3. I seek input from unlikely sources.** \_\_\_ Yes or \_\_\_ No
- 4. I create time for fun every day.** \_\_\_ Yes or \_\_\_ No

**5. I regularly celebrate small successes, both my own and those of others.**

\_\_\_ Yes or \_\_\_ No

**6. I am constantly refining work processes so that they keep getting better.** \_\_\_ Yes or \_\_\_ No

**7. I allow conflicts to emerge so that I can learn from the different perspectives.** \_\_\_ Yes or \_\_\_ No

Every Yes earns you 1 point. Every No earns you 0 points. Tally your responses. Don't go changing the answers . . . your score is your score. If you have a score of 0-3, you have a severe case of the allergy. If you have a score of 4-5, you have a moderate case of the allergy. A score of 6-7, means you have not been afflicted with the malady.

## Treatment of the Malady

Fortunately there are treatments available for this allergy. You, too, can get beyond your inertia. First, recognize the fact that your resistance to change may be a symptom of yet another disorder called a "competing commitment."<sup>1</sup> According to Robert Keegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, resistance to change may not always be a sign of opposition. Instead, it can signal a competing commitment. So, what are your stated commitments? And, more important what are your competing commitments?

Here is a practical example drawn from my consulting work. An association executive has been talking about the need to increase membership. Too many of their potential members are opting to join the state societies instead of the national association. He has queried staff and members about why the numbers are declining. When he meets with the board he talks about the data he has gathered but never has a plan for moving forward on marketing or membership development. Logic would dictate action in these areas, wouldn't it? Sure, it would. But, here's his dirty little secret. He does not really want to see membership growth. His idea has always been that the association should be more of an intellectual think tank than the trade association that it is.

This executive's competing commitment centers around an identity crisis. The issues of identity and purpose have been debated in the inner circles of the association for years, but no definitive stance has been struck by the board, the executives or the membership. So, the executive director spoke about building membership and then did absolutely nothing to further that objective. His actions supported his competing commitment, shrink the numbers and eventually build an elite little think tank to deal with the substantive issues facing the industry.

Treat your allergy by diagnosing your own competing commitments. What are you torn about? What's the true direction of your heart? You will experience far less internal consternation if you follow that direction. However, if that direction is not congruent with larger organizational goals, you may have trouble on your hands. There will come a point where your competing commitments will be exposed and you will have to choose which master you are going to serve.

The next treatment for the allergy is to begin questioning your assumptions and assertions. Who said that your association has to be managed like that? Who says that resources have to be allocated in just that manner? Who says that all you have done is all you can do? Identify the core assumptions that govern your leadership style. Get input from trusted colleagues and friends. The input will help you develop clarity about what those assumptions are and how they may be impacting the organization. Once you have identified your core assumptions, you can begin unlearning them. Yes, I'm suggesting that you unlearn how you relate to the board, staff, volunteers, members, colleagues and everyone else. Unlearning basic assumptions is a challenge for executives. But it is necessary if we're to find and create ways to increase our ability to shift gears and raise our threshold for innovation and change.

Begin working backwards. This may sound like bad advice, but it enables you to focus on the strategic intent of the association. You can reduce myopia by looking at where the organization really wants to go and then plotting a variety of interconnected strategies for getting there. This

will require input from sources with different information about how you get there. It will also require a broader network and expanded input in solution generation.

There are three final treatments I need to recommend: Grow Up, Lighten Up and Shut Up. (Oh dear, I may have offended a reader or two.) Let me explain. Grow up and recognize the fact that your perspective is not the only legitimate worldview, nor is it necessarily correct. It's just a reflection of your experiences and exposures. And, since no one of us is as smart as all of us, the more perspectives you invite, the better off the organization will be. Lighten up and laugh a little. Laughter has phenomenal therapeutic value. Some of the things that people in associations struggle with really are funny. Between the boards, the members, the allied societies and the staff—there are lots of oddball occurrences worthy of a laugh or two. Allow yourself to incorporate a little levity into your life. . . everyone you encounter will appreciate the change. Lastly, the need to shut up. The only way to hear different perspectives, to champion change, is to shut up and listen. Hearing other voices, respecting other viewpoints, requires a commitment to quiet, thoughtful listening.

### Summary

So, have you stopped sneezing? Have you figured out just which treatments you need? We all become susceptible to the Allergy to Innovation at different times in our careers. The wisest patient will recognize the symptoms before the disorder reaches the chronic state. A course of treatment may involve multiple modalities, but is definitely worth the effort. ■

1. Adapted from *The Real Reason People Won't Change*, by Robert Keegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2001.

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