



# The Innovators

Conversations

on the *Cutting Edge*

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January 2010

## Interview with Rolf Smith Jr. Colonel, USAF (Ret)

### Thinking Expedition leader, author, speaker



Rolf spent 24 creatively controversial years with the U.S. Air Force and NATO. In 1986 he created the first military Office of Innovation and a worldwide network of military Innovation Centers. His military decorations include the Legion of Merit, Defense Superior Service Medal, Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star. He was a contract executive with ExxonMobil for 4 years, spearheading their Innovation Initiative.

He is the author of *The 7 Levels of Change (3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 2007)*, a field guide for thinking different, adopted in 2008 as a textbook by Disney University. Rolf founded the School for Innovators in 1988 and is the inventor of the Thinking Expedition concept. He has served on the boards of both the Creative Education Foundation and the American Creativity Association. Rolf can be reached at [basecamp@thinking-expedition.com](mailto:basecamp@thinking-expedition.com).

Interview conducted by Doug Berger, INNOVATE [doug@innovate1st.com](mailto:doug@innovate1st.com)

**Doug:** In talking about innovation, you like to use the metaphor of an expedition to help people create a mental image. You also structure innovation programs as intensive 3-7 day thinking expeditions. What is the significance of the metaphor?

**Rolf:** Its actually more of an analogy – because they are real corporate expeditions. For big busienss problems, there are a lot of unknowns and ambiguity surrounding them just as there are for a major mountaineering expedition. When you're working towards innovation, the problem becomes the mountain; reaching the summit of the mountain is the discovery of innovative breakout ideas; the descent from the summit is focused on bringing back innovative results and implementation. The climb and the decent in mountaineering are challenging in different ways, with the descent being the most hazardous. The same is true with project teams working on a difficult problem. Bringing back and selling breakout ideas and then trying to turn them into breakthrough results – innovation - is equally hazardous.

There are predictable stages in an expedition and similarly in a project team's work. In forming up an expedition, you take inventory of who's on the team, what strengths and skills they bring, and what may be missing that will be essential to success. You organize the logistics, study the mountain and how to get to it, plan a location for base camp, and sketch out your routes for the ascent and descent.

Then you start moving into the real unknowns, the ambiguous stuff, the shaky areas, the things that nobody understands. Depending on the makeup of the team and its thinking style, you typically have to stop, regroup and remind people that, "Hey, we knew we were going hit issues, challenges and unknowns. For us to move forward, we're going to have to make some assumptions and work on those assumptions until they prove otherwise." At the outset, you are going to have skeptics and cynics on the team, and you have to build in time to defuse them during the expedition. People are stretched. They confront fears, personal limits, and the full spectrum of interpersonal dynamics. In overcoming those they come back different – changed personally - changed mentally.

Doug: You have worked with many corporate expedition teams and have found that there are a set of preconditions that the team should meet, or the expedition is not likely to be successful.

Rolf: A team needs to have a problem that everyone recognizes is important and around which everyone can come together. Plus, there must be a degree of urgency – launching an expedition on short notice helps. To join the team on short notice, people will have to disrupt their normal routines. Individuals need to be willing to be stretched significantly otherwise you will just have a "project", with no transformation process. And there must be significant up-line support - what I call expedition backers and sponsors.

People need to be aware of what they are getting into, or they can crater the expedition. We have everyone, including the sponsor and backers, do some pre-work, some thinking around what they understand initially the problem to be. We call the pre-work an e-visa; an electronic application for a passport to cross mental borders into other people's minds and unknown regions. Three of the questions that we ask are:

- "What are the big issues you see facing this project?"
- "What would be a breakthrough?"
- "What results do you hope we return with?"

Everyone also completes an individual profile using a combination of Myers-Briggs (MBTI), the Kirton Adaption-Innovation (KAI) Inventory, and the Keirsey Temperament. This gives the expedition guide team a three-dimensional look at each person, plus a three-dimensional picture of the makeup of the team: personality type, cognitive style, and each person's strengths and values. We augment the strengths and skills of the team by including some people who are thinking "stretchers." These are outsiders who know nothing about the problem. Without some stretchers, the team might only push the edges of the system but not come up with any breakout thinking.

We also need to understand the perspectives of the expedition backer. Let's suppose that a CEO launches this innovation project. One of the basic questions we have to ask him/her is, "You're saying that you've got to have different results - innovation. What do you mean by 'different' and how do you define 'innovation'?" Then, we pay really close attention to what they say *about* 'different' and 'innovation.' You want the team to understand the CEO's definition up front so that they don't come back with ideas considered to be too wild or alternatively, too conventional. So clarification by the sponsor is essential early on.

Doug: It would seem that the purpose of a thinking expedition is to go beyond breakout ideas and actually create a path forward for implementing the idea back in the corporate setting.

Rolf: That definitely is the concept – the purpose of a thinking expedition. However, we're lucky if the expedition is given that leeway. Surprisingly enough, most often it is not. The task we are frequently given is only to come up with breakout ideas, to get the team "out-of-the-box." So in our minds (as thinking guides), the expedition ends with the team on top of the mountain with breakout ideas, but abandoned there, thinking that they can get down by themselves. This inevitably leads to additional challenges and poorly implemented or blocked breakout ideas.

Innovation, whatever definition is used, is about change. I see a thinking expedition as a team climbing through 7 levels of change. Let me summarize:

- Level 1 Change: Doing the right things
- Level 2 Change: Doing things right
- Level 3 Change: Doing things better
- Level 4 Change: Doing away with things
- Level 5 Change: Doing things other people are doing
- Level 6 Change: Doing things that haven't been done
- Level 7 Change: Doing things that can't be done

That's pretty straightforward for the ascent. The descent from the summit and then implementation breaks down when you have generated some truly breakout ideas (level 6 and 7). In coming back home, the organization evaluates those ideas using their normal Level 1, 2 and 3 processes. They look at the results in terms of doing the right things, doing things right and doing things better, and continue using those same traditional level 1, 2 and 3 evaluation and implementation processes for non-traditional Level 6 and 7 ideas. When that's the case you might as well not have held the expedition – the results have been reduced back down to "normal."

Thus, a big piece of what a thinking expedition team has to do is to develop an implementation plan and an evaluation process that itself is innovative, and at the same level of change as the ideas that they're trying to push forward. Then, they have to move into a teaching mode with the senior people of the organization around these levels of change to reach new understandings for approval. That's a very big challenge.

Doug: So there is no presumption that the organization will be able to advance a bold, imaginative idea. The presumption is that the team is going to have to assume a high level of accountability for advancing something that doesn't fit easily within the corporate process, and that's considered to be part of the whole journey.

Rolf: Again, yes and no. The most successful expeditions have typically been two-stage expeditions. The first stage takes us to the summit: getting breakout ideas, putting some shape on them, and sketching out action plans that include how to sell them. In the second stage they either successfully sell and implement the innovative solutions or we rejoin the team, perhaps with some new team members on it, and essentially finish the descent. The team turns the ideas into action plans, and we work with and help them develop ways to sell new concepts for evaluation and implementation to their leadership.

Doug: Let's move into taking what starts out as a project team, and transforming it into a hot innovation team. Based on your experience, what are the few fundamental differences between a good project team and a fabulous, "hot" team?

Rolf: A "hot team" is a small, extremely focused creative group of individuals who all share a distinctive, task-obsessed state of mind. They feel themselves engaged in an important, vital, urgent and personally ennobling mission. Almost universally, the project has to have the level of appeal to attract and hold the interest of the kinds of people who can achieve breakthrough thinking - the challenge of ambiguity and the unknown are essential. People have to volunteer for the team, not be assigned. They need to be given a lot of freedom of movement. That will attract people who think differently, who are dissatisfied with the status quo, and who will expect to have a strong say in what goes on. The project leader needs to be able to facilitate people who don't have much fear of pushing the corporate envelope.

Most companies still operate around old-school values of regularity, predictability, uniformity and top-down management - and their project teams reflect those values. They simply aren't "hot." They've been assigned a job to do.

Doug: I am presuming that you think about transforming a project into a hot team by moving the team as quickly as possible through the levels of change.

Rolf: That's correct. And if you don't have a say in who's on the team - if the team members were assigned and are already in place, it's going to be a real challenge. You have to ootch them - shift them gradually up to each level of change. However, if you've got the option of recruiting them with the team leader, you can significantly accelerate the conversion or the transformation into a hot team. For that you need people on the team who are more intuitive and more open to possibilities and ambiguities, and who understand the thinking and cognitive styles of the other people on the team. We try to get the team thinking at levels 5, 6, and 7 quickly - and that is much tougher with a "normal" team.

With a "hot" team you are also going to be dealing with fluid and changing membership. The people who lead the group to truly breakout stuff are not implementers, don't want to hang around after reaching breakthrough, and the people who are the implementers aren't the people who want to be on the team initially nor will they be the ones who come up with breakout ideas. As the project goes forward and you get the ideas that you're looking for, you need to change the makeup of the team - reduce the number of people who have the more innovative style and increase the number of those who have a more adaptive style. This is not the normal way a normal project team operates.

Doug: Let me open up another branch of conversation. When you work with an organization that's effective in dealing with innovation from more of an incremental and problem-solving orientation, how do you have that organization become more successful in implementing the big innovations and in having big innovations stick?

Rolf: If you talk in terms of large organizations like the Air Force or ExxonMobil, there are no innovative organizations. An innovative organization that large doesn't exist. Big organizations' charters are to grow slowly and carefully by doing what they do very well and very "right." So, when they do implement a Big Innovation it's going to be done right and it will stick. However, within large organizations there are only pockets and groups that are innovative. For those groups to be successful, they need a larger degree of freedom, and they need to be able to run and operate under somewhat different rules (or at least the rules need to be loosely enforced) in order for them to be successful. Typically, the leader is going to be a contrarian, the sort of person who doesn't fit real well, ignores constraints and rules, gets push back, but isn't bothered by that.

Doug: At an organization level then, I have a dilemma. I need to attract and cultivate these outlier individuals. This poses real challenges for career development.

Rolf: That's correct. At the organization level, one needs to be prepared for a different way to staff in order to get jobs done. For instance, we worked with a big team recently of initially 44 people, all of whom were the top experts in their particular areas within that company. We had to make a strong case to get some outsiders in there. People about whom others might say, "Well, you know, he or she gets a little crazy sometimes and ignores or breaks the rules." This is counterintuitive to the way that we make up project teams in most companies. And its counterintuitive in terms of normal career development – they often don't stick around.

I would also say that we avoid the word 'innovation' and we don't use the word 'creativity,' which is somehow threatening to corporate people. We use 'thinking different' instead – nobody owns thinking different. You can have an office of innovation and creativity facilitators, but thinking different amounts to being creative and thinking different leads to innovation, which is the implementation of creativity. Removing those words becomes important because they conjure up a degree of negative image in the roughly 70 percent of the organization who are rule-followers [NOTE: based on creative style and personality type statistics].

Doug: What makes for the best innovation leaders?

Rolf: You can take it from the CEO down to a project team leader, and the same things would apply. An innovation leader needs to be someone who truly, deeply understands him or her self and their own preferred style ... their preferred style of attacking a problem and their preferred style of thinking. They must be able to understand and flex in the direction of other styles, or cope when it's necessary to stay at the flex point for a long period of time. We don't do a particularly good job in developing leaders in these areas.

Innovative leaders have a high degree of originality and intuition, come up with ideas and appreciate another's original idea. They are flexible with rules and the organization's structure – they frequently question them and are not afraid to break them. They are comfortable with the uncertainty of not knowing whether or not an idea can be implemented. And they delay closure and judging ideas as long as possible

Doug: If you've got a business and the business needs significant innovation, can a person who is used to running a company be a successful innovator?

Rolf: Certainly. The leader doesn't have to be at the high end of the innovator scale, but the leader has to see the need, and have the willingness and the ability to flex to accommodate that need. And to support and back people who are strong innovators. The best example I can think of was the manager of a division who went through our School for Innovators. We paired him up with a person who was the opposite type and style than he was to work on a real problem that he had brought with him. His partner came up with a breakout idea of which he said he could never have even thought. With that he had a profound 'aha' that the people in his organization were all like himself. Over a two-year period, he proceeded to completely fill his division with a wide range of creative styles and different personality types. At the same time he ran a series of monthly workshops over a two-year period to make his people aware of and to leverage different type and style on the project teams with whom they worked. The company did some downsizing. A number of divisions were closed and there were cut-backs in personnel. His division, however, doubled in size. He was promoted multiple

times in a five-year period and received one of the largest bonuses that had ever been given. He is absolutely an innovator, but his profile is not the classic innovator profile.

Doug: Would you like to touch on anything else?

Rolf: Yes. The most critical mindshift to becoming an innovator: Write it down. Write it down. If people ask me after a keynote, "What's the most important thing you said today, the most important thing I should take away?" it's "write it down". If you have an idea, write it down. If you hear a new idea, write it down. If you see a new idea, write it down. "Write it down" means "I've thought of it, I've committed it to a piece of paper, and ideally, I'm going to talk to somebody about it." That's a triple reinforcement. If you don't write it down, you'll forget it, and it's going to disappear. For me, it's the fundamental element in the process of turning someone into an innovator. It turns them into an idea person, raises their awareness of ideas and the need to capture ideas, no matter what the ideas are. I'm not saying that you have to do anything with the ideas. That will happen when it happens, but it won't happen unless you write it down.

