



## LESSONS FROM THE “CUTTING EDGE”

BY NANCY OELKLAUS

**S**uccessful companies are led by people who put systems in place to release and focus brainpower. To do so, they create workplaces where people want to be as well as to meet—and even exceed—business objectives. Such organizations take many forms and can be found in almost any industry and community. We can learn valuable lessons about their processes and practices if we take the time to observe them—even when we’re going about our daily routine.

Innu Salon in Austin, Texas, is one such business. “Innu” is a Greek word that means “pillar.” Co-owners and marriage partners Ron Fredericks and Tiffany Rasco say, “That’s what we want to be—not just makers of money, but pillars in our community. We’re eager to add benefit for causes we believe in. We don’t want to come to the end of our career and ask why we did this—was it only for money?” Fredericks and Rasco recognize that, to achieve this goal, they must work with employees to build a sustainable business.

To that end, Fredericks has developed a powerful process to ensure that learning is continuous and incremental (see “Design for Sustainable Success”). “That way,” he says, “we don’t get surprised with a new trend and then have stress and anxiety trying to play catch up. We’re predicting the trends all along.” Here’s how the Innu approach works.

### The Trend Report

Unlike in much of the fashion industry, Innu stylists are salaried and receive benefits. One of the most important benefits is a two-hour education session every Thursday morning. The shop remains closed while the stylists focus on learning and staying on the leading edge of their profession.

During six to eight of these ses-

sions each year, stylists develop what they call a “Trend Report.” Doing so keeps them focused, challenged, and inspired. It helps them build their technical and communication skills. Additionally, compiling the Trend Report serves as an education for young employees and an energizer for the more experienced.

The point of the report is:

1. To forecast the shape, texture, color, and mood of the next trend in hair design.
2. To inspire and educate stylists and clients.
3. To bring theory and creativity to life.

The Trend Report for Fall 2002 includes a spare nine lines of text, along with photos of up-and-coming hairstyles and an explanation of the styling process for each. This format keeps the learnings simple and easy to remember. The stylists summarized the rising trends this year as:

1. More geometric hairstyles
2. Bolder use of color and contrasting colors
3. Subtle use of asymmetry in weight distribution and design line
4. Strong design elements balanced with softer ones, for instance:

- A strong undercut may have softer overlapping layers on top
- A heavy bang might be balanced with layers
- A strong perimeter can be coupled with a softer interior

5. A fashion-forward client will be wearing these looks as early as this fall. The masses, however, will become comfortable with these elements next year or later. (Transla-

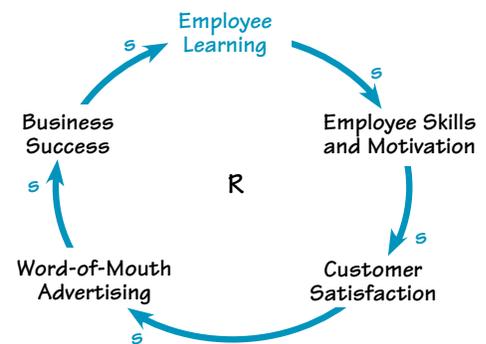
tion: Relax, you have time to learn this. We’re ahead of the curve.)

According to the stylists and owners, they arrive at such simplicity in the following ways:

1. We scour haute couture magazines and any other sources we can get our hands on.
2. We compile and categorize the strongest fashion-forward images.
3. We compare/contrast these images with trends from the preceding seasons, discerning a direction or development in the trend.
4. We brainstorm words and vocabulary to describe the images and trend.
5. Each stylist draws his or her own version of the trend on two-dimensional headsheets.
6. Using a mannequin head, each stylist then creates the look in three dimensions.
7. The report culminates with models and a photo shoot.

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### DESIGN FOR SUSTAINABLE SUCCESS



At Innu Salon, a commitment to employee learning creates a virtuous cycle of sustainable business success. Skillful and motivated employees provide high levels of customer satisfaction. Satisfied customers tell their friends about the salon. Financial success in turn reinforces the commitment to employee development.

8. The images and information are sent out to local and national media. The Trend Report is also made available to our clients.

“Invigorating, inspiring, and fulfilling are words that the stylists have used to describe the Trend Report. They say it is their favorite part of the year because it keeps them focused and confident,” Fredericks and Rasco say. “Throughout the year, it’s satisfying to see the stylists looking through couture magazines and proudly pointing out that their hairstyle forecast is holding true.”

Feedback from clients about the Trend Report is also positive. They say that they appreciate that their hair is in the hands of professionals who are forward-thinking and continually willing to improve their artistic and technical skills. The consistency of education within the salon helps make customers comfortable with trying different stylists if their regular stylist is booked or away. Innu’s business process virtually guarantees that clients will have a good experience.

In business for only three years, Innu has greatly benefited from word-of-mouth advertising from satisfied customers. The salon is already sought out for editorial work, fashion shows, fundraisers, and beauty-school classes. The national magazine *Healing retreats*

and *Spas* featured Innu as “the best in Austin.” A local newspaper has also written favorable feature stories, as has *Push* magazine. The latest recognition came from a local TV station, which solicited the salon to do televised makeovers on the morning news show.

### Lessons for Other Businesses

If you think this article is about hair, think again. It’s about business and business leaders. Leaders who know that their most valuable asset is human capacity. Leaders who develop and follow a continuous process for identifying and linking trends from outside the company’s walls with inside potential. In this way, the natural peaks and valleys that all organizations face do not deplete people’s energy. Instead, the business and its employees continue to grow slowly and incrementally, even in the face of a sluggish economy and other challenges.

What lessons might other organizations take from Innu’s example?

- Organizations are fueled largely by the brainpower of the people within them.
- Engaging all employees as equals in a process for continuous learning and change energizes the organization. In Margaret Wheatley’s words, “Information nourishes a system.”
- Employees don’t have to be experts

in research and development to scan the environment for trends. All they need is encouragement, safe space for learning, and an effective process.

- “A rising tide catches all boats”—by engaging in the data-gathering and analysis process, employees improve their individual skills and their organization’s overall reputation and capacity.
- Recognition from the outside world for the way the business operates can further energize the organization.

A process like the one described here works best when the leaders have humility—that is, their intent is pure and they strive to be authentic, neither less than nor more than they are. In this environment of honoring themselves and others for the unique value each brings, people learn and thrive because no one has to spend energy trying to please someone else. They are safe to be themselves.

At Innu Salon, the constant is the process. The variable is the change wrought by new learning. Balancing the two releases ongoing creative energy. Innu is an example of knowledge creation at its finest. ■

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