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Doing Better: Nonprofit AMI creating innovative NC business leaders

Angelo Lagrega freely acknowledges that he's not a natural innovator. "There was a time when if somebody said, 'How do you squash innovation?', they could have put my picture up there," he says.

But these days the president of the Americas jeanswear division at VF Corp. plays a key role in redefining how innovation happens at the Greensboro-based Fortune 500, whose brands include Wrangler and Lee jeans. "I've changed dramatically," Lagrega says. "I had to get out of my comfort zone to really understand what innovation can do."

What brought about this personal transformation?

Lagrega gives most of the credit to the Association for Managers of Innovation. The nonprofit started in North Carolina as an early pioneer in innovation thinking – and now helps organizations around the world take a proactive approach to disrupting their industries.

Driving social innovation

Launched in 1981 by innovation guru Stan Gryskiewicz and loosely connected for many years with the Greensboro-based Center for Creative Leadership (with which we are both affiliated), AMI spun out on its own several years ago. It has attracted about 85 members globally, with 13 in North Carolina, where its only full-time staff member is based. Members include textile company Glen Raven in Burlington, Eastman Chemical Co. in Raleigh, and Quaintance-Weaver Restaurants & Hotels, which operates Lucky 32 restaurant in Cary.

For the past 20 years, AMI has held two annual meetings that bring together top innovators from around the world. Committed to driving social innovation as well as business growth, the nonprofit commits a portion of its meetings to community service projects in the cities where it meets. In Orlando, Fla., it helped a food bank re-envision its marketing plan. In Colorado Springs, Colo., it partnered with leaders who realized the city's exploding population of retirees required services they had not considered.

And it was at those biannual meetings that Lagrega's perspective on innovation began to change.

"I came in seven years ago leery of innovation," Lagrega said. "My first impression was of innovation being about creativity rather than a key growth driver."

He was far from alone, especially in the apparel industry, where innovation has historically been more about inventing new fashion trends than creating consumer products that solve problems. In many industries, in fact, innovation occurs haphazardly, without a formal process and disconnected from day-to-day realities. Small pockets of inventors experiment on the fringes, often eliciting negative, knee-jerk reactions from operations leaders who are trying to keep the business running.

Steady leadership key

Though it seems counterintuitive, more deliberate structures can spur greater innovation. So with insights from his AMI mentors, Lagrega developed an innovation process that relied more on steady leadership than fleeting inspiration – and was capable of moving ideas from incubation to production. It paid off. "Every bit of our growth in jeanswear in the past three years has come in some form from this innovation process," Lagrega says.

Lee Jeans, for example, are particularly popular with women over 30. Research showed that these consumers are less concerned with buying stylish jeans than finding a pair that feels comfortable and makes them look slimmer. So, in this case, innovation meant fast-tracking slimming technologies that got those jeans to market at an affordable price.

As a former leader of Bank of America's innovation lab, Matt Calman came to appreciate the distinct difference between being a pure innovator and an effective manager of innovation. "It's a different set of skills," said Calman, now an independent management consultant in Charlotte who serves on AMI's board. "A lot of inventors don't make good innovation leaders."

But he found that innovation leadership can be learned. Calman soaked up the most effective techniques at AMI meetings, where he mingled with experts in sectors ranging from government and manufacturing to education and hospitality. He emerged with knowledge that helped Bank of America pursue cutting-edge ideas for mobile-phone banking and wealth planning for a broad range of customers.

Over time, the involvement of numerous North Carolina companies with AMI has created a rare and precious resource for our state – a cadre of leaders who are capable of blending an innovation mindset with traditional business thinking. Their expertise has helped build stronger companies that are better positioned to invest in our communities. And they have plenty to teach us about fresh approaches for driving economic growth and social impact.

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