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The Hardest Part of Innovation

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For many in the innovation field, the hardest task is listening—real listening, deep listening. To listen without building a mental model or rushing to a conclusion is a cultivated skill. To listen to a person's summary of your product or service and honor their experience as the only experience that matters is not only a great courtesy, but it can be a competitive advantage; that is, if you are willing to collect feedback from a lot of customers and apply adaptive intelligence.

The hardest part is just listening.

In the Design Thinking methodology of innovation, the first major phase is empathy. Empathy is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings.” Really feeling the feelings of your customers means walking in their high heels or loafers. What it really means is surrendering all of your pre-set and pre-amp notions of what you may mean to them and approaching the session with a receptive, open ear. As our Buddhist friends say, you must see their experience with a Beginner's Mind.

Once they start pointing out where they get confused or frustrated, the hardest part is just listening. Your hands start shaking when taking notes. You may catch yourself wanting to instruct them on “proper” usage of your product or service, but then you remember, it's their experience and they are the customer. You are just here to collect information. There will be a time for clustering for trends and developing theories. There will be a time to make revisions and test them. Right now, in this moment of empathy collecting, your role is to listen deeply—and that's a metaphoric mountain you have to climb, the hard part, just listening.

Only after you have paid respects to those you serve by listening and collecting enough empathies sans personal or corporate bias can you begin to reframe or define the next steps. At this point in the empathy phase listening to the patterns and trends that emerge is the hardest part.

What you find may unlock many fresh perspectives, ideas for sustainable competitive advantage, and new ways to surfeit unmet customer needs.

But you need to listen and that's the hard part.