

WKF Day 3 – How to Boost Culture for Innovation by Theresa Arico

Moderator:

Gino Yu – Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design, Associate Professor

Speaker:

Benjamin Butler – Emerging Future Institute, Futurist

So-Young Kang – Awaken Group, Catalyst and CEO

“She who wants to have right without wrong, order without disorder, does not understand the principles of Heaven and Earth.” With this dramatic quote from ancient Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, Benjamin Butler, self-proclaimed futurist and founder of Emerging Future Institute, began his speech during a panel discussion entitled “How to Boost Culture for Innovation” on the third day of the 2015 World Knowledge Forum. The panelists passionately talked about how companies can create innovative, engaged, corporate cultures.

Moderator Gino Yu, Associate Professor at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University School of Design, set the tone for the panel. “The only difference that exists between people is that we’re all at different stages of development.” Conflict is the result of people at different stages misunderstanding each other. This is because, as we experience new things and develop, our outlooks change. Companies need to build systems within themselves so that “as the company improves, the quality of life and the personal development of the employee also grows.” The question, then, is how a company can accomplish this.

Professor Yu explained that companies need a culture with a “consistent myth, art, and ritual for the entire company.” By this, he meant a meaningful culture that can be applied to each person on a personal level so that people can engage with each other. He mentioned the online shoe company Zappos as an example and also referred to the yearly Burning Man festival, which takes place every year in the Nevada desert. “[This is] the beauty of the human spirit and what’s possible when you have people working together in meaningful ways,” he remarked.

“We’re still stuck in the Industrial Revolution,” said Mr. Butler. “We can see it in the language of companies...we talk about human resources, employing human capital, driving initiatives...we regard the workforce as...cogs in the wheel.” Furthermore, “workplaces today can be characterized by fear, greed, politics, a little bit of despondence, resentment, and powerlessness.”

So, what should we be doing instead? Mr. Butler suggested that instead of companies being organized in a top-down, organized manner, that they embrace disorder. Instead of one brain managing everyone and everything, we can use our brains collectively. He stated, “Leaders need to change their attitude from being commanders and generals of big, military-like organizations to...being more like a gardener who shapes the conditions, as opposed to trying to control everything, including the outcome.” Mr. Butler offered Pixar as a perfect example, citing it’s “messier, chaotic system of organization” and its stellar creative results.

Finally, So-Young Kang, CEO of Awaken Group, took the stage to explain how companies can become more innovative. Companies must be willing to allow employees to make mistakes and to lose money. Ms. Kang explains, “We say, ‘Go innovate! But make sure you’re profitable and you make no mistakes.’ Do we want to be innovative and creative or do we want to be safe? Don’t say you’ll be innovative and then create a culture that doesn’t allow it to happen.” Furthermore, companies should not pursue innovation simply for the sake of innovation, but in order to make the world a better place.

“It takes time and multiple interventions,” concluded Ms. Kang. “A culture of innovation is not one talk; [it] is not one seminar; [it] is not one workshop. It requires focused intentional effort over time.”