Creating The Space To Innovate

On July 8th, NASA will launch a space shuttle for the final time when Atlantis lifts off for the International Space Station. The flight of Atlantis marks the last of 135 manned missions conducted over the past thirty years by NASA's space shuttle program. The program has done much to advance scientific knowledge of the universe, having accomplished the following:

•Deployed and repaired the Hubble Space Telescope

•Assembled the International Space Station

•Launched the Magellan spacecraft to explore Venus

•Launched the Galileo probe to explore Jupiter

In addition to its achievements in outer space, technology from the space shuttle program has led to commercial innovations improving the quality of life here on Earth. For example, construction of the next generation of artificial hearts harnesses the technology of space shuttle fuel pumps. Also, the infrared cameras used to observe the integrity of a space shuttle's heat shield have been employed to aid firefighters in locating brushfire hotspots.

The Law of Sacrifice

Given the space shuttle program's popularity and notable successes, many are mystified that the program is being scrapped. However, the decision to shut it down illustrates an important leadership principle pertaining to innovation: leaders must give up to go up. Creativity and forward-thinking are undermined when leaders refuse to part with the past.

Pursuing a vision for the future often requires leaders to abandon existing systems—even ones that may be working well today. Ultimately, NASA hopes to send manned spacecrafts beyond low Earth orbit (LEO) to investigate asteroids and to land on Mars. Space shuttles are not designed to make such long voyages into outer space. Although the shuttles are serving their function as transport vehicles between Earth and the International Space Station, their upkeep and operation divert attention from NASA's long-range goals. Thus, rather than maintaining the shuttles, NASA has decommissioned them in order to focus its resources on inventing a spacecraft capable of carrying a crew into deep space.

Summary

In the words of author Kevin Kelly, success in the 21st century, "flows directly from innovation, not optimization. It is not gained by perfecting the known, but by imperfectly seizing the unknown." As leaders, we cannot reach for the unknown until we let go of what's familiar. To free up the space (the funds, manpower, energy, and time) to innovate, leaders have to make sacrifices. What might you need to give up so that you can get to a higher level of leadership?