



CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE


Give innovation a chance

A couple of years ago, my eldest son was in the throes of submitting college-entrance applications and debating which engineering discipline to pursue. The University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, the Georgia Institute of Technology, the Colorado School of Mines, and other fine universities were in the mix. As for disciplines, civil, structural, mechanical, industrial, and architectural engineering degrees were being contemplated.

My advice to him was that he couldn't go wrong with any of those schools or engineering disciplines. With a good education foundation, desire, focus, and determination would navigate his career path. I further suggested that once enrolled in the selected engineering program, an internship or summer employment at our modest prestressed concrete manufacturing plant over the course of his studies would be beneficial, and perhaps opportunistic, to both him and the plant. Perhaps, I enthusiastically added, he could study our production processes, research other methods, and with fresh eyes eventually suggest improvements and innovations to our operation.

My son quickly responded, "What? From what I've seen, I can do that in one afternoon! You just don't want to spend the money!" Somewhat taken aback, I decided to humor him and asked from what he had seen, what level of spending was he contemplating. "Ten to twenty million," he matter-of-factly replied. Ah, to be 18 again and with no limitations in sight! This was an opportune teaching moment to explain that it's not just about spending money for the sake of change or for the acquisition of new shiny items. Spending on innovative improvements is a well-calculated investment worthy of a reasonable return. I'm not certain whether my overconfident young son bought it.

In previous messages, I have acknowledged my cautious nature in embracing change, especially when certain processes work well and produce the desired outcomes. Remember the old-school adage, "If it ain't broke ..."? But what if things can be done more efficiently, more quickly, more safely, overall better with improved outcomes by simply tweaking the process? But at what cost? Or conversely, is there a cost of not tweaking the process at all? I submit that every process we employ—be it engineering, fabrication, delivery, installation, or even accounting—is worthy of review for improvement. Innovative minds in our industry are eager for the challenge. Whether handled in-house or through suppliers or consultants, new or improved methods should be considered and tested periodically. Suppliers, PCI-sponsored TechnoQuest tours, employees, and perhaps AI are a few examples of sources of innovative ideas and methods to build better "mouse traps."

Innovation does not necessarily have to imply a multimillion-dollar commitment. In most cases, it is the small low-cost incremental improvements that, over time, produce welcome returns. The biggest commitment is decision makers like me giving innovation a chance. 



Carlos D. Cerna

2025 Chair

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