



Beth Comstock

EDITORS' NOTE Before serving as GE Vice Chairman, Beth Comstock served as GE's chief marketing and commercial officer where she created ecomagination as an initiative to drive positive environmental impact from GE and its customers. Prior to GE, she was President of Integrated Media at NBC Universal overseeing ad sales and marketing and research, and led the company's digital efforts including Peacock Equity, acquiring iVillage.com and oversaw the founding of Hulu. Previously, she held roles at CBS and Turner Broadcasting. She is a member of Nike, Inc's Board of Directors and Trustee President of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. Comstock graduated from The College of William and Mary with a bachelor of science in biology.

Will you discuss your vision in writing *Imagine It Forward* and what made you feel the timing was right for the book?

After having spent 30 years in business and having seen a lot of amazing times, I wanted to chronicle the innovator's journey in a company. I was coming to the end of my GE career and I also wanted to chronicle that.

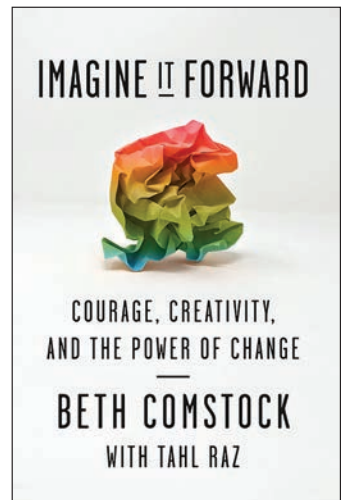
I also wanted to share encouragement with mid-level managers and mid-career people who we need to fight for the future of a company.

Were you focused on targeting mid-level managers with the book?

Yes. Those were the people I found most energizing when I worked at GE. I tried to take myself back to those critical things as I was working my way through my career.

In organizations, we focus so much on the leadership at the top, which is important to set a vision. Increasingly, we have also been looking at the young millennials that come into the company. However, we overlook the people in the middle who are the backbone of the company and the ones who are in the best position to make change happen.

The Innovator's Journey



An Interview with Beth Comstock, Author, *Imagine it Forward*

What are keys to driving change and is it more difficult to do at a large company?

Change isn't easy for anyone. I call myself a change-maker, which means I go forward into what is new and next in order to understand the change that is coming. However, I don't like change, especially if I don't feel I have control of it.

The pace of change is never going to be slower than it is now. We're seeing an acceleration of all kinds of technology and the impact of global forces and this causes people to feel like they don't have control.

At day's end, what we do control is how we behave, what we do with our team, how early we get a sense of the change, etc.

What happens in most organizations, big or small, is that people are afraid – they are afraid of change and of taking risk, because they aren't certain that they know the right answer. Fear happens in companies when people aren't open to discovering and thinking about what is new and next. They hang on too much to the concept of having to have the answer.

Does change need to be driven from the top of the company?

The top of the organization has an important job – to set a vision, to make sure that the team has the resources to make it happen, and then to offer incredible encouragement and direction.

However, the whole organization has to be enrolled in the change and the middle especially has to be empowered. There is a lot of power middle managers have that they may be unaware of because they think they always have to ask permission to get things done.

It is the leader's job to tell the team, "I don't have all the answers. You need to figure it out. Here is the vision, here is where we're going; go figure out how we can make this happen."

It's frightening, because most of us were brought up in business with a command/control kind of existence where everyone had to do what the boss said.

Our organizations now are too distributed, the pace of change is too fast, and we don't have all the answers. There is no checklist for everything that is changing.

The nature of leadership has to change or the organization won't succeed.

How do you incorporate your life experiences in the book?

What I hoped to show in my book is a progression of learning. Early on, I thought it was enough just to say, "because the boss says."

Over the course of my career, I learned that change is about selling vision with a story and then creating the conditions for people to discover what is happening and figure out how to manage it in their workflow.

Too often, we think that everyone has to do things exactly the same way and there is only one way for people to adapt to change. People have to have room to figure it out.

Experience labs and simulations, as well as customer discovery sessions, are critical paths to get people comfortable with the change.

Of course, a dose of fear can help in that it drives a sense of urgency.

How challenging is it to find the balance of running a business while implementing change?

Of course, we have to be sure to keep the machine running while we're going through change. We don't talk enough about incremental innovation and we don't always make room for what is next and what is new.

Too often in companies, we don't anticipate change with sincerity. We don't make room for discovering the trends, testing what we're seeing and then figuring out if there is a solution for our company. We know change is happening, but we want proof. By the time we get proof, it has disrupted us and we're in chaos mode.

I advocate for an ongoing readiness for change. Companies can maintain what is current while planning for change, although each requires different metrics and measurements.

What do you tell people who are resistant to change?

I tend to gravitate to the curious side of people. Not everyone is as curious or adaptable or comfortable with change. We have to recognize in organizations that we have a spectrum of people. Yet, everyone can make room to force themselves to be more curious, to ask different questions, to get out of their offices and to talk with customers and see what competitors are doing. One doesn't need to wait for the more curious colleagues to do that.

I advocate making room for that discovery so you are not suddenly surprised when change does happen. ●