

Jeff Eilertsen

# Innovation and Process: What football teaches us about customer experience



A friend of mine, the Head of a Middle School, wrote the following as part of his weekly letter to parents. He is working hard to balance change and innovation demanded by modern times with the tradition and process long revered in student education. His message also rings true for service innovation in business and government organizations:

*“When Brazil defeated Italy in 1970 for their third World Cup in 12 years, football aficionados claimed it was the greatest team ever with the greatest player ever, Pele. Four years later, it was the West Germans who defeated the Dutch in Munich to seize the World Cup, led by their brilliant defender, Franz Beckenbauer. The styles of the Brazilians and the West Germans stereotypically could not have been more different. The Brazilians played the beautiful game, filled with innovation, artistry, and imaginative give and take. The West Germans relied upon organizational systems steeped in traditions and rote drill after rote drill, shying away from innovation.*

*Except that they didn’t. As is often the case, stereotypes reveal a morsel of the truth, and miss, with much fanfare, a full portrait. The West German triumph in 1974 signalled that the tradition, the system, and organization of this team reigned supreme, but it was the brilliant innovation of Franz Beckenbauer, a defenseman, creating the concept of the sweeper and moving onto the offensive side of the pitch, which*

*changed the paradigm. Tradition in relationship to innovation.*

*Don’t kid yourself with Pele. For all the bicycle kicks, the aerial artistry, the wizardry in passing and distribution, and creative scoring abilities, Pele and the rest of the Brazilian players were steeped in rote monotony of spacing, drill, fitness, and passing. Innovation in relationship to tradition.*

*The same is true in education as it is in your fields of business, law, medicine, engineering, finance, journalism, architecture, and investments. There has always been and will always be a creative tension between tradition and innovation... How does a school integrate tradition with innovation? Hopefully as well as Pele and Beckenbauer did.”*

**Warren Sepokowitz**

This letter pulls at the creative tension we face in organizations working to improve service within the structures and process of a complex business. Business systems and process have been defined and refined for quality and efficiencies. They are proven with use to reduce costs, mistakes and time. Yet sometimes the “artistry” of creating a positive and unique customer experience gets lost. I am often surprised at how amazed my client partners are to look again at their service transactions – from the customer’s point of view – and discover issues and opportunities their process would never uncover.

And so the challenge, and the opportunity, is to look at proven processes and service experience

hand-in-hand. To honour the process, the “tradition,” for all its internal power and consistency, while also discovering where innovation for each customer can be born. Not as an exception to a rigid process, but as a flexibility in relationship to proven practice. The imaginative “give and take” of the disciplined Pele and the innovative Beckenbauer.

Where do you see tradition and innovation working together to serve the clients, customers and colleagues in your organization?

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## About the Author

Jeff Eilertsen leads Global Service Education for UP! Your Service, bringing over 20 years of experience working in organizational development, training and human resource firms. As a project leader and Master Trainer, he ensures successful implementation of Actionable Service Education, working with clients to develop the people, processes and best practices to turn learning into action and service improvement.

He also manages a community of Course Leaders from a wide variety of clients, sharing ideas and insights across a global network. As a speaker, Jeff shares the UP! Your Service methodology and experience with audiences seeking to uplift service culture.



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