

## Curiosity, motivation and perseverance

## Kitten-novation

## Selected reader insight and feedback in response to the recent essay, "Of feral cats and pet cats"



I'm screwed. I've had a vasectomy."

With that pithy note, a minor outpouring of insight and feedback began to flow into my email inbox and onto posts at the various LinkedIn group sites after I released my most recent essay in this "Epistemology of Innovation" series, "Of feral cats and pet cats." Since the notes and posts revealed both the additional nuanced insight and the great sense of humor of the readership of these essays, I thought it appropriate to share portions of some of them with the entire group. My hope and expectation is that you will benefit from seeing what others have to say. So, here it goes!

Hilda Cerdeira (CS)<sup>i</sup> observed that the metaphor "... shows there was more to having eunuchs as guards than just sex ..." and expressed her tongue-in-cheek concern, encouraging me to "(b)e careful with giving ideas to the big corporations!!" I assured her that I would keep it quiet in front of the Fortune 500.

John Toeppen (MIT LL) nicely developed the ideas of curiosity as a form of 'intellectual foraging' and innovative thinking in terms of 'intellectual play'.

"The first time the wandering cats go out they may not know what they are looking for until they find it. After they find it they know more of what they are seeking and why.

Foraging behavior can lead to such rewards as well as unforeseen results. Those, who do not forage, never learn of such rewards. Once one has discovered rewards, the motivation to forage increases and more such behavior is a likely outcome.

Satisfying curiosity is a form of foraging as are intellectual pursuits.

Innovative thinking is a form of intellectual play that comes naturally if cultivated. However, there is a managerial philosophy that seeks to account for all time and activities which runs contrary to this. It is known to some that magicians need some time to learn how to place rabbits in hats in order to pull them out later.

The paper chase methods of modern 'investment' are not providing the same sort of returns that a culture gets from real investments. I talk about planting seeds of our technical future, nurturing growth, and cultivating applications.

Do we recognize the opportunities before ourselves today, or are we so immersed in the concepts of hard work and productivity that we forget to 'play'?"

John went on to point out that curiosity as a form of 'intellectual foraging' often is not rewarded. "Cultural factors work to normalize those who question things, and individuals often seek to conform to avoid conflicts. The nail that rises above the rest is first to be struck down."

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William Coville (NPDIG) shared the unfortunately marvelous and powerful insight that "allowing feral innovation can only be done by management who are not afraid of being neutered."

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Kevin Sorbello emailed, suggesting that "... while Eros is certainly a factor in feral cats, I would arguably connect it to 'satisfaction'." He went on to develop his thoughts in depth.

"For those employees 'neutered' by an organization, the method of sterilization may have been to simply sufficiently satisfy the employee's needs. I have seen this in employees that were never what I would consider 'over-achievers' and who by virtue of their lower level of needs, simply lacked the drive to test the limits of their environment. On the other hand, I have witnessed some employees so beaten down that they were traumatically neutered. In these cases the needs were suppressed by adverse organizational policies and actions. They were typically unhappy and eventually either left or retreated into their unhappy, miserable shells. The third group consisted of those 'pet cats' that appreciated the fact that their basic needs had been met, but still needed 'more' to fully satisfy their higher order needs. This group had members who were new to the game (yet to be broken / neutered) and those who knew how to push the limits to a point short of punishment that would threaten their basic needs. The 'lust' involved was the desire to satisfy ➤

unsatisfied needs, and many of these unbroken, savvy individuals found satisfaction in even 'trying' to move the mountain. Others succumbed to a desire for 'all or nothing', and when they failed, dropped into the traumatically neutered category.

Serial innovators were those who found a balance between frustration and inspiration, constantly testing and pushing at the environmental limits to their allowed 'range', knowing that each attempt gained a little more ground and made the next attempt a little easier."

Kevin closed his email by noting that when the needs of serial innovators are satisfied, it "does not end it any more than a feral cat that has been sexually satisfied on any given day. The need is a function of their psychology and ability, and unless it is removed by organizational neutering, will provide a career's worth of innovation."

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Dave Angel (*CS*) wondered "about the habit lions often exhibit when kept in a zoo where they constantly walk in circles around the cage. Are they frustrated 'innovators' trying to resist being 'neutered' by their new environment?"

Dave's reference to a caged animal reminded me of Rainer Maria Rilke's, *The Panther*.<sup>ii</sup>

*In the Jardin des Plantes, Paris*

*His vision, from the constantly passing bars,  
has grown so weary that it cannot hold  
anything else. It seems to him there are  
a thousand bars, and behind the bars, no world.*

*As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,  
the movement of his powerful soft strides  
is like a ritual dance around a center  
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.*

*Only at times, the curtain of the pupils  
lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,  
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,  
plunges into the heart and is gone.*

I first became aware of this poem from a reference to it in the 1990 film, *Awakenings*. In it, Robert DeNiro played the role of one of several patients who are, at least for a while, 'awakened' from a catatonic state after receiving an experimental drug from a caring physician, portrayed by Robin Williams. It is during this brief period of awakening that the audience more fully realizes the tragic and profound nature of the patients' confinement, not unlike that experienced by Rilke's Panther.

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Also resonating with this idea of being caged, Joe Bradley suggested that "(s)ometimes it seems that there is an invisible training fence ... keeping out some good ideas or initiatives."

On a different, yet consistent track, Mike Kruger (*CTM*) shared that the cat metaphor closely paralleled the socialization framework that he has found useful, seeing entrepreneurs as 'incompletely socialized' (as a description, rather than an insult) and "those who are happily in a bureaucratic cocoon as 'too well socialized.'"

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Kaythi Aung (*SI*), exploring the limits of the metaphor, pointed out the influence of one generation of pet cats on the next. She also wrote of the behavior of homeless, hungry pet cats as being "as wild as a feral cat" and even "more wicked than a feral cat in hunting." Kaythi opens up the metaphor to describing the behavior of complacent employees who have been released by their firms, through downsizing for example. While not the rule, there is an uncanny similarity to what I have observed anecdotally.

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One anonymous emailer, who explored the boundaries of the metaphor as well, noted that "(t)he unfortunate corollary may be that if one is professionally neutered, it is hard to regrow the appropriate hardware.

It has been my experience that research scientists and entire groups can be beaten down to the point that they lose the creative spirit.

When that happens, they are done for ... and unfortunately, so too goes the fate of the company's innovation.

Better to take a mulligan and find new cats than to try surgically repairing ..."

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Also working, yet ranging widely within, the metaphor, John Totten (*CTM*) noted that "(o)nce established in their environments, feral cats are very leery of changes. Feral cats can establish relations with one or two people, but are very uncomfortable around large groups of people. In wide open areas (such as farms and ranches), a colony of feral cats can keep vermin (competitors for resources) at bay. To extend the metaphor, a colony of feral cats is usually a lot less disruptive than a pack of feral dogs (disruptive governmental agencies perhaps)."

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Bruce Lavash mentioned that it struck him that "domesticated cats had a few more useful traits that innovators and managers could re-apply:

1. Domesticated cats will interact with humans, rub up against your leg, sit in your lap, purr when stroked, etc. Innovators need to interact with their colleagues in positive ways, creating a mutually warm relationship – innovators can't whip out their claws and hiss at management ☺. Innovators all need to purr when stroked, acknowledging when they receive praise or support from management – versus haughtily walking away ... and/or disappearing.
2. Domesticated cats also provide valuable services to their owners, catching mice and other pests. Innovators have to do things of value to their employers. ➤

3. Cats drop their captured mice as gifts for their owners ... management has to learn not to scream and run from the room when innovators deliver ideas in a bit of a raw state.
4. You can't train a cat like a dog nor get the cat to accept a leash; it's more of a mutually beneficial partnership where that cat does what they do best and the owner what they do best.
5. Cats don't require as much regular care as a dog; they can be easily trained to use a litter box because they bury their waste. So, give the innovator some space and allow them to bury their 'waste' (bad ideas and failures) in a private place versus forcing it to happen on your schedule and in public (i.e. like walking a dog).
6. We often de-claw cats to prevent them from damaging stuff. However, de-clawed cats aren't much use in catching vermin or escaping danger by getting up a tree. Thus management must risk a little damage here and there to have an effective 'mouser' ... and innovators have to learn to minimize their 'damage' as they go about their work."

Finally, Bruce's ongoing rumination on the metaphor led him to this observation. "(W)e gain insight by looking at the metaphor from different points of view.

1. There's a 'don't neuter the cat' viewpoint ... a clear message for management.
  2. There's another way to explore the metaphor which asks the questions ...
    - a. Why are some non-neutered cats domesticated?
    - b. What caused humans to start domesticating these aloof and individualistic felines?
    - c. In other words, what have cat owners and domesticated non-neutered cats each learned so that they create a symbiotic relationship? (a relationship that doesn't exist with feral cats).
- Unless we start to explore that viewpoint, we don't uncover the various relationship insights.
3. There are probably several other viewpoints to look at with this metaphor ...
    - a. What causes domesticated cats to go feral? ... or vice versa?
    - b. What are the differences between non-neutered cats that thrive versus those who don't survive? (my aunt had a non-neutered cat that barely survived a number of fights; she neutered him after his vet bills piled up)

Thus the 'mining' of metaphors become richer as we look at the metaphor from more and more diverse 'viewpoints'."

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In closing, I greatly appreciated the many comments from cat lovers, consistent with Richard Jarman's appropriately wry observation about the positive response to the essay, "innovators must like cats."

Rebecca Brandau represented that intersection well, noting that she was "both a cat lover and a patent attorney." Emanuel Pastreich (*TAI*) wondered out loud about whether his cat had a double life when it was out and about. Judith Wainwright asked rhetorically, "As I have 3 cats myself, how could I not like the piece!" And, finally, John Quarton had nothing to worry about. His "neutered, pet cat slept contently on the couch next to (him)" as he sent his feedback.

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Thanks again to all. Two weeks from now I'll head in some new directions with these essays, yet still on the path of exploring the epistemology of innovation – the study of how breakthrough innovators come to know what to do today in order to succeed commercially in the future. ■

*Bruce A. Vojak is Associate Dean for Administration and an Adjunct Professor in the College of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Prior to joining the university in 1999 he was Director of Advanced Technology for Motorola's non-semiconductor components business; earlier he held business development and research positions at Amoco and a research position at MIT Lincoln Laboratory. In addition to his administrative responsibilities, he teaches and conducts research on the topics of innovation and strategic technology management. With Abbie Griffin and Ray Price he is co-author of Serial Innovators: How Individuals Create and Deliver Breakthrough Innovations in Mature Firms (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012). Further, he currently serves on the Board of Directors of Midtronics, Inc. and periodically consults for Procter & Gamble. Bruce holds B.S., M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Electrical Engineering from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an MBA, with concentrations in finance and marketing, from the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business.*

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<sup>i</sup> To keep this essay compact, I abbreviated reference to the LinkedIn group sites where comments were posted as follows: Chaordic Solutions (CS); Critical Thinking for Marketers (CTM); MIT Lincoln Laboratory (MIT LL); New Product Development, Innovation and Growth (NPDIG); Sustainable Innovation (SI); The Asia Institute (TAI).

<sup>ii</sup> As Rilke's 1905 original is in German, I considered several translations before selecting Steven Mitchell's. From my perspective, it effectively captures the painful emotion of being caged over a sustained period. I also encourage you to view the animated short inspired by Rilke's poem that can be found at <http://vimeo.com/2217438>.

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*"On the Epistemology of Innovation: How Breakthrough Innovators Connect the Dots" is a series of brief, occasional essays addressed to executives, managers, and technologists responsible for innovation in industry. Its purpose is to challenge readers to reflect broadly and deeply on the practice of innovation – in particular on how innovators come to know what to do today – in order to succeed commercially in the future. Essays are available without charge at the University of Illinois' digital archive at <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/27667>. The discussion group at <http://epistemology-of-innovation.com> is a place to provide feedback and dialog with the author and others regarding these essays, as well as to register to receive notice of new essays as they are issued.*