

be considered too risky.” Competitions inspire entrepreneurs and philanthropists to attempt the impossible.

I recently joined about 100 engineers, scientists, thought leaders, and celebrities in Los Angeles to design such a competition. This “Vioneering” conference, hosted by the X PRIZE Foundation, brought together people such as innovation guru Bill Gross, Qualcomm executive chairman Paul Jacobs, businesswoman and investor Lynn Tilton, Indian industrialist Ratan Tata, and entertainment industry leaders, will.i.am and Patricia Arquette.

The purpose of the gathering was to brainstorm what new and radical innovations might be created in the next few years to positively affect humanity.

These ideas, which could spawn new industries and challenge the conventional wisdom of what is

“impossible,” will form the basis of the next X PRIZE competitions.

My brainstorming team, which included Tilton and Tata, proposed a prize to create affordable housing for the billions of people who lack decent shelter. The challenge: develop the tools and technology to build, in less than 24 hours, a home for a family using locally-sourced materials for \$1,000, providing them with the dignity and shelter that all human beings deserve.

It sounded like an impossible challenge but so were transatlantic flight and building your own spacecraft.

In the end, our prize concept took second place. The winning idea was to develop radical, even controversial, alternative sources of energy. But other ideas that emerged from this event were so great, that a few contestants said they would personally fund them.

There are other notable public competitions. Richard Merkin, president and chief executive of Heritage Provider Network, for example, announced in 2011 the \$3 million dollar Heritage Health Prize data-mining competition to decrease the \$40 billion dollars spent in the U.S. on avoidable hospitalization costs. The challenge is to create an algorithm that predicts how many days a patient will spend in the hospital so that doctors can work with the patient to prevent hospitalization in the first place. This prize in predictive modelling is larger than the Nobel Prize for Medicine and offers six “milestone prizes” along the way. Merkin says that his goal is to “create an online global community of problem solvers dedicated to creating more cost effective, healthier outcomes.”

Useful competitions needn’t be grand, though. Corporations can use more achievable challenges and smaller prizes internally to spur out-of-the-box thinking.

The power of the crowd can also be harnessed for social causes. A startup named HeroX, which the X PRIZE Foundation spun off, created a platform upon which to design and launch such competitions on the Internet. It is modeled on popular crowdsourcing sites Kickstarter and Indiegogo. One of the first HeroX competitions is the ImagineX Challenge, which offers ten \$1,000 prizes for the best ideas to address problems in communities.

The real genius in offering such prizes is that the possibilities truly are endless. We could have thousands of innovation prizes addressing every challenge humanity faces—competitions that unleash the intellectual power and drive of entrepreneurs to create better solutions for a better world. **N**

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