

Leading an Innovation Culture

Sustained Innovation is the Key to Long-Term Success

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Organizations today recognize that sustained innovation is essential in order to compete and survive in the global marketplace. However, “innovation” is not just about coming up with radical ideas, nor is it simply about cool products (iPads and iPhones, for instance) or “creative” gurus (such as Steve Jobs and Richard Branson). While these might represent the most visible and tangible evidence that innovation exists, there is far more to the story.

Author and creativity expert Bryan W. Mattimore, in his book *Idea Stormers: How to Lead and Inspire Creative Breakthroughs* (Jossey-Bass, 2012), says that “Ideation – the term for the collection of group creativity techniques formerly known as brainstorming – is fun but can be hard work. Innovation – getting an idea or product to market successfully – is much harder work still.”

Sustained innovation is more about a supportive and aligned culture than a singular product or individual. Mattimore writes further that “...innovation, which is complex and with high stakes, can be fraught with highly political, occasionally gut-wrenching, even career-threatening challenges.” As this suggests, for innovation – and organizations – to last, a number of key “cultural” factors must line up as best they can across the organization and with the needs of the customer in mind. The role of “leader” is vital, not necessarily because those in leadership roles are themselves creative and innovative (although that is certainly often the case), but because they control many of the very cultural factors that either reinforce, encourage, or discourage innovation by others within the organization.

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Daryl R. Conner, in his seminal book on organizational change, *Managing at the Speed of Change* (Villard Books, 1993) describes organizational culture as reflecting “the interrelationship of shared beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions that are acquired over time by members of an organization.”

New products, ideas and methods are not randomly conjured up from thin air in or around a company headquarters or workplace. They come from a diverse population of people – the same people whose collective “beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions” make up the organization’s culture. Thus, only when culture is aligned to achieve innovation over the long haul will it be truly sustained.

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That gets us back to the role of leaders. A leader's greatest contribution to an organization is in creating an environment where innovators flourish. The things people do – their behaviors – and think – their beliefs and behaviors – are profoundly impacted by leaders.

If you are a leader in an organization where sustained innovation already exists, congratulations! Now all you have to do is keep it going. If, however, your organization seems to be lagging in some or most areas, whether it is in products, services, technology, processes, or practices, there is still hope. But it will take concerted effort to change the behaviors, beliefs, and assumptions of those whom you lead. What does a culture of innovation look like? Here are a few things which innovation cultures have in common:

1. Open to possibilities

In innovative organizations, leaders and followers alike think in terms of possibilities, not limitations. Leaders especially, who demonstrate openness to ideas, will go a long way toward freeing up employees to think “out of the box.”

2. Non-judgmental – a safe environment

Leaders who are quick to criticize thwart the learning process and, with it, innovation. Criticism typically comes from the leaders frame of reference, which may be outdated. Employees should be encouraged to learn from outcomes and or mistakes.

3. Trust – people are connected to one another

Leaders and employees having poor character and competency will erode trust in short order. People of poor character – those who lie or habitually break promises – will cripple an organization. If competency is lacking, training could prove beneficial in improving skills.

4. Support – emotionally and financially

Whether we like it or not, people are emotional creatures, and we have basic economic needs that have to be met. At some level, everyone wants to feel appreciated, recognized, understood and rewarded. They have families to support and dreams to pursue. Innovative workplaces see their associate as “whole persons.”

5. The ability to have productive “arguments” – difficult conversations

Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Organizations need diversity of opinion, yet need to establish ground rules for expressing those differences. That does not mean conflict is avoided. It is simply addressed as differing ideas or opinions, not as personal affronts.

6. No one specific “shining star” – it takes everyone

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Of course there are stars and superstars, and even egos. But in an innovation culture, even the most minute of contributions are appreciated for how they affect the outcome. The collaborative effort, not the individual achievement, is what is valued and nurtured.

7. Allowing for mistakes

Innovation and perfection are not typically found together. Sure, no one wants catastrophic mistakes to occur, but rarely do they. Leaders who promote risk taking and support employees when mistakes occur typically see fewer mistakes made over time.

8. Learning to process with "yes and...," rather than "yes but..."

Very simply, one screams "possibilities" and the other reflects limitations. Leaders within innovation cultures inspire greatness with "yes and..." responses.

9. Learning from mistakes and applying what has been learned to move forward

Humans learn from mistakes. Period. Imagine telling your six-year-old child to "get it right the first time" when she first tried to ride a bike. It simply doesn't work that way. Encourage mistakes and people learn to avoid them the next time around.

10. Losing the thought that the one with the idea has to make "it" happen

The "idea" may have started with one person, but it will take everyone to refine it as well as make it come to pass. Talents, skills, energy and resources should be fairly allocated to turn ideas into successes.

Innovative individuals brought together to form collaborative teams within a strong culture of innovation are key to successfully crafting an innovative organization. If any one of these ingredients is missing, you greatly reduce – if not totally eliminate – the opportunity of successful innovation. This process takes time and does not happen overnight; however, this concept brings to mind the quote:

"When I go slow, I go fast...."

There are times in our fast-paced environments that we need to slow down in order to go fast again. When we miss this step, we end up going back and being re-active or doing "damage control" to "fix" things. In the realm of innovation, knowing when to slow down, when to push forward, when to take the risk and knowing when good enough is good enough are all vital elements to success. One does not have to be naturally "wired" for innovation to lead innovation. We lead innovation by empowering our team and people to create a culture of innovation. Abraham Lincoln was a great example of leading innovation.

Leaders hold the key. They have complete control over their own actions and are responsible for putting in place the culture and environment that promotes innovation. Leaders who do so thoughtfully and with sound intentions toward employees and customers will contribute greatly to

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sustained innovation.

Monday Motivations:

1. Write down how you see your organization in terms of innovation.
2. Ask five or ten associates in your organization how they see it in terms of innovation. Tap into various levels if possible. Assure them that you want to hear the “bad” impressions along with the good. This is a time to listen and learn - not explain or defend.
3. Identify three key things the organization does well with respect to innovation. Identify three key things the organization should improve upon with respect to innovation.
4. What cultural factors contribute to innovation being less than desirable?
5. What can you do personally to affect sustained innovation in your organization, and when?

Friday Reflections:

1. What have you observed this week that would support or challenge your view of your organization in terms of innovation?
2. How would you summarize the comments from your associates? What does the organization do well and what could it improve upon?
3. How can the organization leverage the things it does well?
4. What can the organization do to positively impact the culture and significantly expand innovation?
5. Did you do the things you said you’d do in the Monday Motivation? If not, when will you make this happen?

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