Keep those ideas flowing

Driving and sustaining innovation is key, and leaders should encourage creative thinking, writes Robert Rosenfeld.

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Most organisations want new ideas. At the same time, employees at all levels are constantly generating a fresh pool of ideas which they want to be heard.

Innovation is the force that drives organisations forward, and today's leaders are looking for ways to encourage and sustain it. The task for leaders is to connect this need with each corporation's supply, making sure that the pool becomes self-sustaining, and ensuring that this lifeblood does not stop flowing.

To do this, there are well-known principles that can foster innovation, and organisations that ignore these suffer for it. It is a journey that begins with an understanding of some of the more common obstacles to innovation.

Firstly, few understand the drivers and barriers to innovation in their organisations. They do not understand the often invisible human principles that support or block innovation. Some organisations also do not have effective ways to talk about the innovation process. There is no common language. Their existing innovation processes often encourage small, incremental changes at the cost of keeping an open mind towards breakthrough ideas that lead to new disruptive products or unusual concepts.

In other cases, departments and groups may be isolated, creating subcultures that are different from the rest of the organisation and limiting the exchange of ideas and information. In the overall corporate hierarchy, many high-level managers have never worked on the development of a breakthrough idea that led to a disruptive product. Most of their experience is with incremental improvements. Without a background in breakthrough, they may not understand how to evaluate and push breakthrough ideas forward.

Also, innovation requires structures that are supported by bonds of trust, confidence and respect for those involved, which are sometimes absent. Finally, people are often dependent on the familiar or become comfortable with the status quo, leaving little room or tolerance for anyone with wildly different ideas and behaviour.
Leaders will need to choose strategies for innovation that fit their organisations and their unique challenges. Even so, they can rely on several timeless principles that give life to the process of innovation in almost any situation.

Innovation starts when someone uses a problem as a springboard for new ideas. Leaders need to see obstacles and problems not as burdens or hassles, but as opportunities to find new solutions. A climate that encourages inquiry and welcomes problems at all levels will foster innovative thinking.

Seeking new ways of seeing is also paramount because innovation requires the ability to see new possibilities. When faced with a complex problem, consider it from many different perspectives. In addition to spending time developing a solution, devote some time to evaluating the problem itself. Innovation requires creativity which requires the ability to see the world through others' eyes. Try these strategies for expanding your creative perspective:

- Put yourself in the shoes of the person on the other side of the fence. If you are a marketer, become the customer. If you are a coach, become the trainee. If you are outside something, look at it from within. Turn the problem upside down so all the familiar parts look strange, then look again.
- Borrow ideas from people in different fields. For example, if you are an artist, look at problems from the perspective of science. If you are a scientist, import the lens of artistry. The ability to use different lenses may already exist within you as an individual leader or within your group's collective experience.
- Ask questions and take aim at the roots of group members' issues and assumptions. Some useful questions could be: "What is missing?" or "What are the patterns?" They may be what-if questions that pose surprising scenarios and invite imaginative responses. What if we deliberately tried to make this problem worse? Ask each question five times.
- Foster new knowledge by sending members of your organisation into the market, among customers, constituencies, competitors. Make sure they regularly spend time in places where they can gain new perspectives.

In order to foster new ideas, it is also helpful to leverage differences in people. This can be done by challenging yourself to learn more about other people's strategies for generating ideas. If you usually generate only enough ideas to solve specific problems, find prolific idea generators and interview them. Ask them, among other questions, where they get their ideas, how others receive their ideas and what they do with the ideas that are rejected or ignored.

If you are someone who usually generates a lot of ideas, talk with someone who generates fewer ideas but is methodical and likes clear, established procedures. Ask them, among other questions, how they prefer to work, how they feel when someone introduces new ideas in the middle of a project and whether they prefer to work with change or stability. We need both kinds of people in our organisations - those who generate a lot of ideas and those who generate just enough ideas to solve a specific problem.

Meanwhile, trust and collegiality in your organisation pays dividends as well. Physical proximity between co-workers is important for building the trust that makes innovation possible. It also creates opportunities for exchange of information, cross-fertilisation of ideas and critique of ideas during their formative stage.

In addition to physical proximity, certain "soft" values are crucial to promoting the teamwork that makes innovation possible. Hard values are results, like the scores and statistics of sports. Soft values have to do with how the game is played. It might surprise you that it is the soft values that drive the organisation. Both the quality and quantity of innovation depend on the nature of the soft values.

Soft values that create environments conducive to innovation include motive, spirit, service and patience. On the other hand, soft values such as contentiousness, stubbornness, pride, discounting, indiscriminate criticism and dominating attitudes will reduce the likelihood that innovation will flourish.

Healthy and positive soft values create an environment of trust. That trust is vital to the process of innovation. Members or employees must feel free to express opinions and ideas without fear that they will be rejected or belittled. Trust greases the wheels, helping the group overcome obstacles that can create friction and hamper the innovative process.

All organisations have either formal or informal systems for innovation. Informal systems tend to be untidy and inefficient, but they almost always yield innovative ideas. To make those ideas a reality more quickly, establish a formal channel for innovation. Most formal systems for innovation fall into one of five categories:
   • Originator-assisted A process that helps employees transform their ideas into business opportunities, usually driven bottom-up and is often a source for breakthrough ideas
   • Targeted innovation A process for developing solutions to meet a specific need, usually top-down;
   • Internal venturing A launching process for new businesses that do not fit the company's current lines of business;
   • Continuous improvement A process for incremental improvements that, in their aggregate, lead to cost savings or increased quality; and
   • Strategic transfer A process of transferring technology or knowledge from one point to another for the purpose of leveraging capabilities.

Take some time to examine the ways in which ideas are made visible in your organisation. Who is driving innovation? Is it top-down or bottom-up? How does an idea move through your organisation? How are ideas funded to become opportunities for development? Do you have idea "champions" and what role do they play?

Finally, remember the importance of passion. Innovative people are passionate people who throw themselves into their work. Even though passion never shows up on a balance sheet, it is the force that propels ideas. To increase your understanding of the role that passion plays in your organisation, list your five most passionate colleagues and answer these questions about each:
   • How do you know they have passion?
   • Are they successful in what they undertake?
   • How do you measure their success?
   • What fuels their success?
   • How are they viewed by colleagues, managers and people outside the organisation?
   • How many hours a day do they work?
   • What is their home life like? Why is this question important for an innovation leader to know?

Ask yourself whether you belong on a list of passionate people. Why or why not? Being on that

list will put you one step closer to the cutting edge of innovation.

From the coach's bench: Cultural challenges

Peter, an Italian national, was recently transferred to Hong Kong to become the information technology director of his Italy-based company's regional headquarters.

Since 2001, his employer has conducted 360-degree feedback for all middle and senior managers every two years. Peter had received feedback in Italy in 2003 and 2005 and recently, for the first time, in Hong Kong after working here for more than a year.

When I looked at the results of all three reports, I noticed excellent feedback in 2003 and 2005, but rather mediocre results in 2007. His subordinates in Hong Kong, in particular, gave him unusually lower ratings than the excellent marks he received in Italy.

Peter was stunned when he saw these results and wondered what was going wrong. He said he hadn't changed his leadership style and did not understand why the results were so much different than before.
Peter said he found it quite a challenge adapting to the systems, processes and work style in Hong Kong that were very different from those in the Italian office. Looking back, he realised that initially he resisted the established processes and followed them only half-heartedly. That explained why he rated rather low.

But Peter was also rated lower when his Hong Kong colleagues were asked if he was clear in communicating, and whether people thought he acted genuinely and in a proper manner.

While his peers and superior gave him a good rating in these areas, his subordinates gave him much lower scores.

When he tried to understand this, he realised that his peers and superior were mostly expatriates, and mainly Italian. His subordinates, on the other hand, were locals. Since all his subordinates were proficient in English it seemed this was not so much a language barrier, but a cultural one.

Peter recalled one incident as an example. One of his subordinates, Jim, was in charge of implementing a major upgrade of a customer relationship management system. Peter discussed the schedule with Jim and focused on a few major milestones and the going-live date. When the first two milestones were delayed by more than two weeks each, and he was not warned in advance, Peter was upset.

Peter learned that his predecessor always walked Jim through a detailed planning process, giving Jim little ownership of the project. His former boss would more or less tell him what to do. Rather than being like his predecessor, Peter realised that it was better to support Jim who

could then learn how to perform the detail planning process. This way, Jim would grow as a project manager and soon would not need Peter's close guidance.

Peter also noticed that he was not yet able to build sufficiently close and trusting relationships with his subordinates. For example, Peter was puzzled with their lack of appreciation when he praised their good performance.

I shared with him the feedback from a couple of his subordinates. One of them said: "When Peter gives me positive feedback, I always suspect it is just given to soften me so that I will more easily accept any of his subsequent complaints."

Based on my experience, this challenge can be dealt with in an active or a passive way. The passive approach is to keep giving positive feedback without subsequent criticism. Over time, his subordinates will feel increasingly safe and he will take the assessment more in the way it was meant. The active approach is to say that he simply wants to acknowledge their good work and that he has no other hidden agenda.

To conclude, being transferred into a new cultural environment brings various challenges for both manager and subordinates.

If certain practices that were successful in the country of origin do not seem to work in the new environment, don't be too quick to discard them, but first understand the situation, make careful modifications and take appropriate action.

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