The Invisible Element: A Practical Guide for the Human Dynamics of Innovation
Robert B. Rosenfeld and Gary J. Wilhelmi

In The Invisible Element, Robert Rosenfeld and Gary Wilhelmi tackle the age-old question of how to create a culture that promotes and profits from the innovative potential of their employees. Leveraging extensive experience with a variety of organizations and people, the authors present a complex, multifaceted model for realizing “quantifiable gains” through sustained innovation. It is the focus on “quantifiable gains”—defined as “what matters” to an organization, be it financial returns, number of new-product introductions, number of publications, or quality improvements—that sets this book apart from others focusing only on tools and techniques for fostering creativity. The broad definition of value in this construct means that a wide variety of organizations can benefit from the step-by-step approach to assessing and building a culture of innovation.

The underlying theme of the book is the authors’ observation that when it comes to innovation, executives and managers tend to focus only on what they can see; that is, the visible elements inside the organization (for instance, number of patents, ROI). They make the case that it is the often overlooked invisible elements, such as organizational culture, trust, and risk tolerance, that are essential for building a foundation that supports sustained innovation. Without attending to the invisible elements, organizations cannot translate ideas into valuable innovation.

Combining both invisible and visible elements into one model, the authors present 12 essential principles for sustaining innovation. The Innovation House model consists of eight human principles that lay the foundation for sustained innovation and four application principles that allow organizations to generate both short- and long-term innovation. The model is designed to assist CEOs and “executive entrepreneurs” in understanding what it takes to build an organization that fully leverages the innovative capacity of its people.

Rosenfeld and Wilhelmi begin the discussion by illustrating the need for leaders to examine critically the values and principles in play within their organizations. Beginning with the foundational, human principles, the authors discuss the role trust plays in revolutionary and evolutionary innovation as well as how invisible forces can destroy or encourage novel thinking. Next, the authors move to the core of the Innovation House, the “pillars” that support sustained innovation. This section includes detailed examples and exercises for leveraging individual differences, creating team cohesion through co-location, harnessing passion, overcoming pain, converting problems to ideas, and creating the appropriate innovation systems.

In the second half of the book, the authors examine the upper portion of the Innovation House. This portion of the book begins with exercises designed to help innovation leaders understand where the organization wants to go. Here, leaders are asked to assess past, present, and desired “organizational DNA” elements such as trust, risk tolerance, decision-making processes, and knowledge transfer and sharing. By building a deep understanding of where the organization has been, where it is today, and where it needs to go, the exercises help leaders uncover gaps that may impede sustained innovation.

The book includes valuable discussion on how to encourage knowledge sharing, align incentives with innovation goals, attack difficult or “wicked” problems, and balance short-term and long-term objectives. Still, its most valuable contribution may be the numerous exercises provided for each of the 12 principles. The exercises facilitate critical examination of the current environment and encourage leaders to visualize more clearly their desired organizational culture. With this vision, leaders can begin to increase the creativity of their people and leverage that creativity for measurable gain. Key to these assessments is the behaviors of executives and employees, and the underlying values demonstrated by those behaviors. Where do leaders spend the time? What questions do they ask? What type of innovation are they best suited for? By asking these questions, leaders can begin to uncover what is truly valued and whether these values align with the principles that drive sustained innovation. That said, these exercises may not
provide an accurate view of the current state of the organization if they are completed by only one person. Leaders may bring to any assessment biases that do not truly represent the dynamics within the organization. Therefore, readers may find the exercises more beneficial and accurate if they are completed by multiple people within the organization.

Readers may be overwhelmed at times by the complex, multifaceted framework and the number of different models, acronyms, and principals discussed. It can be challenging at times to take in all these different layers of information and understand their relationship to other parts of the model. For example, the discussion on leveraging differences within the organization includes a complex model for assessing an individual’s innovation strength preference indicator. This chapter includes a discussion of four categories of visible and invisible attributes, 12 characteristics that define innovation orientation, and two categories of problem-solving preferences, all combined into a complex form with over 20 different attributes requiring an additional two pages of explanation.

To be fair, the authors do acknowledge the complexity of their model and provide excellent chapter summaries, as well as a glossary and multiple appendices. Nonetheless, the level of complexity makes the book both eye-opening and difficult to get through. Therefore, this is a book best tackled when the reader has sufficient time to devote to regular reading versus shorter reads over a longer period of time.

Finally, acting on the advice provided requires an understanding of how to manage both formal and informal channels within the organization, as well as the power to do so. High-level executives or managers or those with substantial influence within their organizations are most likely to be able to act on the advice provided. However, individuals at all levels will gain a better understanding of the dynamics that influence an organization’s ability to innovate.

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