

Innovation in the Workplace: Processes that foster innovation

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Introduction

Innovation in organizations has been considered a key means of generating competitiveness (Beer et al., 1990). Within the field of Business Management many theoretical arguments have been put forward demonstrating the various different organizational factors that affect innovation, such as organizational design, motivation and systems of incentives (Drake, 1999; Lipman and Leavitt, 1999), the capacity for absorption of knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) and the capacity for organizational learning (Akgu net al., 2007); and the human capital of the company (Dyer and Shafer, 1999; Subramanian and Youndt, 2005).

While normally overlooked in the planning process adoption hurdles can make or break the commercial viability of the most powerful innovative ideas. Therefore successful innovators focus on the product's utility. Talking about music does not make you a singer. Attending live concerts may help you appreciate music but it still does not make you a singer. To be a singer you need to learn music and practice under the guidance of a good teacher. This is true of sports too. There is no substitute for learning and practising under continuous guidance.

This is equally true for organisations that want to foster innovation. Talking about innovation does not help. Innovation training sows the seed for innovation thinking. But what makes it grow is nurturing and a good encouraging climate. Very few Business Leaders know how to do this well. This dual process recognises the specific roles that the business leader and his team need to play - alone and together - to deliver innovation that matters.

There was a time when the concept of creativity was only associated with writers, painters, musicians and similar people in artistic professions. But with the ever-increasing necessity of cultivating a unique brand personality, the need for creative thinking has transitioned from the arts into everyday business. In addition, the act of producing a product that distinguishes itself from competitors in a marketplace where differences are often hard to come by demands a high degree of creativity both in innovation and marketing.

As a result, it's now become commonplace for companies – both large and small – to adopt policies that foster creativity and thereby promote innovation.

Fostering Innovation and a Creative Environment

Creativity is the mental and social process used to generate ideas, concepts and associations that lead to the exploitation of new ideas. Or to put it simply: innovation. Through the creative process, employees are tasked with exploring the profitable outcome of an existing or potential endeavor, which typically involves generating and applying alternative options to a company's products, services and procedures through the use of conscious or unconscious insight. This creative insight is the direct result of the diversity of the team – specifically, individuals who possess different attributes and perspectives.

It's important to note that innovation is usually not a naturally-occurring phenomenon. Like a plant, it requires the proper nutrients to flourish, including effective strategies and frameworks that promote divergent levels of thinking. For example, by supporting an open exchange of ideas among employees at all levels, organizations are able to inspire personnel and maintain innovative workplaces.

Therefore supervisors must manage for the creative process and not attempt to manage the creativity itself, as creativity typically does not occur exclusively in an individual's head but is the result of interaction with a social context where it's codified, interpreted and assimilated into something new. Within this system, incentives are paramount – ranging from tangible rewards such as monetary compensation to the intangible, including personal satisfaction and social entrepreneurship.

Corporations in nearly every sector of the economy are on a quest for innovation - be it a new techno gadget, a more effective means of delivering a critical service, or strategies for breaking into new markets. Unfortunately, many people believe that innovation is an almost magical quality that only a few prodigies possess. In reality, nearly every employee - and certainly every corporation - is capable of at least some level of innovation. Executives, managers, and other leaders just need to understand what innovation is and what it isn't - and how to create a workplace culture that promotes, rather than dampens, innovation

Innovation: What it is and isn't

Innovation, broadly speaking, is about change or a novelty that provides an advantage. When a company innovates, it revises an existing product or service to add value or creates something new that promotes growth. Typically, innovation is not:

- the same as "right-brain" creativity
- the result of a sudden insight or brainstorm
- something that executives can simply mandate

On the contrary, hard work, focus, and investigation drive innovation. One common mistake corporations make is looking at innovation as a quest for blockbuster ideas. In reality, something as simple as developing a routine that increases nurse response time by 10 percent is an important innovation. Most companies' continued success depends far more on a steady stream of small innovations than a huge innovation windfall. Emphasizing these small but regular improvements is critical since they're more sustainable than constantly reinventing routines or disrupting markets.

Leaders who want to promote innovation in the workplace should focus on their organization's culture and organizational processes. Most professionals already have the desire to innovate. Creating a physical and social environment conducive to innovation will help them realize their ambitions.

Principles for Fostering Innovation

Establishing a creative environment takes more than just turning your employees loose and giving them free reign in the hope they'll hit on something valuable. As with any other system, the process of creativity requires the proper framework to operate effectively, which also enables management to evaluate the profitability of the results.

1. Time and Autonomy

Bell Laboratories has brought the world more innovations than virtually any other company. The researchers there invented the first transistors, the photovoltaic cell, the C programming language, the first communications satellite, the wireless local area network and much more.

The secret of Bell's success? Time and autonomy. Executives hoping to emulate Bell Labs should create an environment where potential innovators can:

- Explore new ideas without worrying about immediately monetizing or marketing them
- Use their own methods for developing and investigating potential innovations at their own pace
- Work within a relatively flat hierarchy that eliminates needless bureaucracy
- Freely discuss ideas and collaborate with colleagues without seeking management approval or calling formal meetings

2. A Critical Mass of Talent

Bell Labs - as well as companies like IBM, Apple and Google - owe much of their innovation success to a deep talent pool. Mervin Kelly, a senior executive at Bell for 23 years, believed that bringing lots of smart people into close physical

proximity was a critical component of innovation, and far outweighed the contributions of any single superstar.

Leaders can develop and retain their company's talent pool by:

- Providing regular training, professional development and mentoring opportunities
- Giving employees a forum for expressing their ideas, sharing their accomplishments, and connecting with others whose ideas and projects interest them
- Implementing a liberal job and department transfer policy
- Paying top dollar to a broad group of top talent rather than sensational bonuses to a small number of "rock stars."

3. Spaces for Collaboration - and Solitude

The workplace's physical environment can dramatically affect innovation. A landmark study in 2002 by McCoy and Evans found that employees given tasks requiring creativity did most of their thinking in complex spaces that included wide views (especially of nature) and promoted social interaction. But research has also shown that once workers develop an idea, they need solitude and freedom from distraction to produce results.

Create a stimulating environment. Offices that include stimulating objects such as journals, art, games and other items - some of which may not even be directly related to your business - serve as sources of inspiration. In addition, structuring the work area by removing physical barriers between people will improve communication and promote creative interaction

Companies hoping to prime their physical space for innovation should:

- Create central common spaces where people want to linger, such as cafes or courtyards
- Include as much light and nature, and as many windows and natural materials as possible
- Design traffic paths that encourage encounters with as many people as possible and provide nooks for casual interaction
- Give knowledge workers their own offices or workspaces away from the bustle of call desks, meeting rooms, and cubicles

4. Tolerance for Failure

A key unifying feature of all innovative companies is frequent - sometimes spectacular - failure. For example, Apple has experienced past and present failure with the Apple Lisa, Power Mac Cube, Copland OS, MobileMe and even Apple TV. Google's no stranger to failure either. Take Buzz, Wave, Orkut and Froogle.

Like companies, employees seeking to innovate are bound to fail. When they do, leaders should:

- Create opportunities for collaborative reflection and peer review
- Provide prompt, constructive feedback while discussing what went wrong and why

- Identify and highlight the specific areas where employees did things right
- Encourage employees to move on to the next project without adding additional barriers or bureaucracy

5. Reward Efforts

Reward efforts through positive psychological reinforcement. Encourage your employees to take risks, rewarding them for creative ideas and not penalizing them when they fail. In doing so, you'll enable people to more readily take on assignments that stretch their potential (and that of your organization), discussing in advance any foreseeable risks and creating the necessary contingency plan. Encourage employees at all levels to contribute suggestions for improving current business operations.

6. Different Points of View

Foster different points of view through outside perspectives. Innovation can often spring from a review of how your customers view and use your products and services. Soliciting their opinions can provide valuable insight into potential areas for improvement as well as areas where you're succeeding (essential knowledge for positioning against competitors). Other perspectives might include: vendors, speakers from other industries or consumers using a competitor's products or services.

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