

Firing up a Million Minds, Building an Innovation Culture

Abstract

Innovation is tough for large organizations. This is because they focus on perfecting what they are doing, rather than taking risks. This orientation stifles freethinkers with standardizations, stringent processes, and security protocols. But what about the power of the million minds within the organization? Are they to be kept on a tight leash, and allowed to think only in conformity? This is unnatural; it makes for a less engaged workforce and perhaps poorer productivity. For such organizations, received wisdom advocates open innovation and entrepreneurship in residence. These practices are proving to be instrumental in industry disruption.

The author of this paper shows how innovation can be encouraged in big enterprises and argues that creativity can bloom despite several constraints. While a large proportion of the innovation is incremental, radical ideas appear with surprising frequency, and the ripple effects are beneficial to the organization as well.

Introduction

Many young people want to work in an energetic and innovative start-up in someone's garage, rather than a large corporation with a hermetically sealed network, a process for every double-click, and a rule book that mostly says "you may not" in obfuscating corporate jargon. The global top 10 employers list¹ bears little resemblance to the globe's biggest companies². Increasingly, innovation is seen as the manifesto of digital start-ups. Big enterprises, with their own disruptive beginnings relegated to a memory, must be apologetic about their present size and incumbency.

Or should they?

While the R&D outfits of big companies contribute to the "invent" capability, there is enormous brain power in the rest of the organization that could also contribute to innovation. To harness it, however, a conscious effort has to be made.

1. A philosophy and investment from the top: It all begins at the top. Management philosophy must clearly state that innovation is important to the company and everyone is a stakeholder. Quite often, there is a department that worries about research, while the rest of the company chases numbers. In some establishments, grand visions of innovation are articulated, but rarely practiced. In large organizations, managers in a number of rungs below the CxOs, who wield enormous power, should invest resources and personal time in promoting innovation.
2. Understanding the problem: Large organizations tend to work as walled gardens for smoother operations and governance. As a result, teams in one area haven't the faintest idea of what the other teams do. This is reflected even within the same service line, where teams working with the customer see a version of the truth that is different from a developer or a support provider. It is important to recognize that the larger customer problem or tacit need goes beyond the twenty tickets logged on a support tool. Clearly articulating the customer problem to the entire unit, or even the organization, will bring surprising responses, new ideas, and an energy to the work culture itself.

3. **Time to experiment:** Corporates try to squeeze their RoI in every possible way in order to meet increasingly ambitious business targets. Consequently, work becomes so target-focused that there is no energy to think beyond the operational. This can be tackled by giving associates across teams time to recharge themselves and think beyond their tasks. Some brilliant failed ideas can also be awarded.
4. **A chance to be heard by senior management:** Easy access to senior management is a great boost to innovation. It helps juniors think through fresh ideas with some seriousness. This has the added benefit of reassuring them that they will not be stalled by their immediate seniors, who may be wrestling with 'run the business' and not engaging with 'change the business'. By being in touch with juniors, top executives can feel the pulse of their own units.
5. **Mentorship:** It is important for technology and business owners to work with in-house innovators. Often, the innovator or the team may be unable to adapt an innovation that was successful in one situation and apply it to another case. Mentoring becomes invaluable as it helps innovators expand the scope of their innovation as well as shape their thinking process.
6. **Parking place for a failed idea:** Many ideas arrive before their time, or may seem impractical, or fail on early attempts at implementation. While the exercise may have been futile, the learnings remain important. These discarded ideas need a parking space with easy recall. More often than not, these innovations can find other practical applications. Regardless of the final outcome, the owner of the idea needs to be appreciated for effort.
7. **Technology enablers:** Technology can now provide scalable platforms for articulating problems, reaching it to the entire organization. These resources help gather multiple solutions and allow the best answers to shine by way of evaluation and transparency. This can be done by engaging with multimedia and data formats. Algorithms can be created to allow the best ideas to bubble up. Access levels can be enabled to preserve intellectual property rights as well as enable access to the right groups.

8. **Intrapreneurship:** Individuals sometimes come up with radical ideas that have potential. These may grow when invested in, or may even fizzle out. Organizations with heavy standardization and quality controls are likely to put these ideas through a process pipeline to ensure success. However, for radical ideas, the use cases and the benefits are not completely visible. If put under process rigor, they might just get crushed. People in leadership positions must be able to spot a star idea, risk the investment, and foster it to fruition. Steps that apply to mature products should be skipped and the development of the idea must be fast-tracked. Ideally, these ideas should be worked upon by a person or a team that functions like a start-up within the larger organization.

Ninety-five percent of the time, these steps can only create incremental or near-term innovation. Yet, it is valuable to keep the innovation agenda front and center. Employees need to feel that they can do meaningful things outside their daily tasks. Thinking beyond the project on hand must be encouraged and rewarded. It is worth keeping the innovation engine up and running for the entire organization on the small chance of achieving something ground-breaking.

Organization-wide innovation is not simple to achieve; it takes time, investment, and risk. At every level in the hierarchy, managers swing between flaunting innovation and cutting costs, risks, and exceptions. Furthermore, innovators are constantly tempted to defy protocols, break rules, and create eddies of dissent amongst the troops. Innovations themselves lay waste 'novelties' created not so long ago.

Conclusion

Large organizations have been described as colossal forms – a large wheel with many cogs; an elephant lumbering along. These images do not credit each part or individual with an identity. Instead, how about thinking of a large organization as a learning brain? Individuals are like neurons that help our command center work in practiced ways. However, neurons also connect differently and enable the brain to do new things, and adapt to solve new challenges. Every neuron, every synapse,

and every transmission has the power to surprise and to keep the brain young and adaptable. This is what an innovative organization should aim to be. Every person should have the power to surprise and help the organization adapt to new opportunities and challenges, while doing his or her day job.

References

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