From Vision To Reality: The Innovation Process

Innovation is a collaborative process by which organizations abandon old paradigms and make significant advances. Innovative ideas come from several sources, including unreasonable demands or goals and time pressures. However, there are many blocks to innovation. An innovative idea is not helpful to an organization unless it is tested and implemented. The perfect solution is sometimes there; as a vision, a thought, a dream or just a wish. But it is often far too complex for an individual to take it into reality.

There are many examples of individuals who have great ideas but do nothing with them. Their organizations do not even know of these concepts. Unfortunately these ideas die. They die because the creator kills it! They may recognize that the idea may negatively impact their job or the job of their co-workers. They do not know how to explore the idea to take it from a vision to a reality. Furthermore, They rationalize that no one would ever agree on how to structure such their concepts or pay for them.

Just how many innovative ideas in your organizations regularly go nowhere because they are not linked to overall Business Improvement Strategies. In order to protect innovative ideas, organizations need to create a forum for the Innovation Process.

What Is Innovation?

It is not:

- The result of a lone genius inventor.
- Just about ideas (The problem is that people often do not know where to go with ideas or how to implement them, which is sometimes a problem with suggestion-box systems).
- About individuality in thinking (which is what suggestion-box systems tend to focus on).

Rather it is:

- A collaborative process where people in many fields contribute to implementing new ideas. Teams are very important to the process.
- About products and reengineering and processes, both future and present processes.
- Involving people who will challenge the status quo. The person who moans and groans and complains may be the source of the next great innovation.

Where Does Innovation Begin?

It begins with an idea which comes from:

- Nowhere…Such ideas usually die unless a fertile ground exists to develop them. or
- A goal…An outlandish or unreasonable demand or goal, one that a continuous improvement process will not reach, often may spark innovation.

How Do You Get These Ideas?

1. **With pressure!**
   Being under the gun, with a deadline, adds a sense of consequence to the task and a purpose to spur it. By facing a challenge…seemingly unreasonable!Studies show that positive thinkers rise to a challenge. The more they are likely to face defeat, the more they want to beat it.
2. **By abandoning old paradigms!**
   Abandoning the status quo, like rules, policies, and set procedures. Only when you leave the rules behind, can you be free to create. This is critical to successful innovation.

Innovation Blockages

- Can't do that
- That's stupid
- That's not in the rules
- It's against our policy
- We don't have the budget
- We don't have the time
- We'll never get it approved
- That's not what they're looking for
- You've got to be kidding

An organization that is innovative, creative, and willing to take risks has a higher likelihood of creating organizational effectiveness. Look at the following innovation blockages created by innovators:

- In 1880, Thomas Edison said that the phonograph was of no commercial value.
- In 1920 Robert Milliken, Nobel Prize winner in physics said; "There is no likelihood man can ever tap into the power of the atom."
- In 1927 Harry Warner, Warner Brothers Pictures said (in reference to the desirability of adding a sound track to silent movies); "Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?"
- In 1943 Thomas Watson, Chairman of IBM said; "I think there is a world market for about 5 computers". In December, 1977, Ken Olsen, President of Digital Equipment Company said; "There is no reason for an individual to have a computer in their home".

The Innovation Process — Six Stages

Stage 1: Generate Ideas

This is the exhilarating part of the process! Do this in teams rather than individually…which is what suggestion-box systems tend to promote. Innovative ideas generally come from a vision, an unreasonable demand, or a goal.

To get innovation going in your organization, ask; "What is impossible to do in your business today, but if it could be done, would fundamentally change what your business does?" Answers to this question will help you to see the boundaries of a new organization and a new you! That is where innovation begins.

This is the exhilarating part of the process!

Stage 2: Capture Ideas From The First Stage
Do this through team discussion or discussion among peers. Make sure to record the ideas. A great brainstorming technique is to ask each team member to silently brainstorm individually. Ask them to write each idea they come up with on separate sticky notes. Then have the team create an "affinity diagram" on the wall or whiteboard by collectively organizing all ideas into columns of similar ideas.
Now the drudgery begins!

Stage 3: Begin the Innovation

- Review the entire list of ideas and develop them into a series of statements of ideas. The team will then need to agree on which ones to explore further.
- Next, quantify the benefits of each statement of ideas to pursue. Do this in reference to the department, the organization and/or the customer.
- Then describe how the statement fits with the organization's strategy, mission, and objectives.
- Now you will have to estimate the business potential…the expected outcomes of implementing the idea.
- Although the organization has yet to apply and think through the innovation, these steps are designed to capture ideas and agree on a statement of feasibility before trying the Innovation.

Stage 4: Develop a Business-Effectiveness Strategy
Innovation implementation begins here. It usually means a re-think of an existing process, product, or service. This is not the same as looking at an existing process and improving it. It is describing what a future process will look like.

The innovation team will first develop this "picture of the future". This is usually where the innovation resides. The easiest way to get started is to have the team members list their basic assumptions about the way things are now done (that the Innovation is intended to overcome). Then they'll brainstorm, discuss, and record every single idea that arises about a possible future process. It helps to use yellow stickies to record ideas individually first and then consolidate them all. The team will conclude by writing a full paragraph that describes the innovation and illustrating it on a flowchart. This will provide them with a look at the entire "future process".

Essentially the team will have detailed how to possibly go about the process without concern for current thinking or typical procedure. This is similar to what Mary did with her inventory system in the example at the beginning of this article.

Stage 5: Apply Business Improvement

Once the innovation is applied, it is necessary to continuously examine it for possible improvements to the process, product, or service. In the example of building a house in 3 hours, how could the team improve the process by using fewer people or less money?

The team starts this process by identifying the business process gaps between what is done in the present and what is done in the innovation. This is followed by identifying the blockages and barriers which will stop them from improving the innovation. Estimating the difficulty, benefits, costs, support required, and risks is necessary before the team can refine the innovation process. Then it will be ready to apply the improvements identified.

Stage 6: Decline

In time, it often becomes obvious that what was once an innovation no longer fits. Continuous improvement of the existing process, product, or service is no longer of value; perhaps the former innovation has now become outdated or outmoded. It is time to let it go; abandon the existing thinking, and set a new goal to start the innovation process once again. It is time for new innovations in response to external pressure.

Innovation & Organizations

Every organization undergoes innovation or else it is not successful. It is just a matter of degree. The essence of innovation is discovering what your organization is uniquely good at, what special capabilities it possesses and how it can take advantage of these capabilities to build products or deliver services that are better than anyone else's? Every organization has unique strengths. Success comes from leveraging these strengths in its own service or product market place.

Innovation & Globalization

Today, many organizations operate globally. They find that innovation can occur anywhere, in any country or culture. Traditionally, innovation has been a local issue, not transferred to other corporate locations. But today, innovation teams, similar to improvement teams, work on innovation surrounding a product or service and then develop a centrally planned roll out. For process innovations, the local organization implements them and then, because of enhanced communication, the innovation moves from location to location. This is accomplished by using the technology available today, including the World Wide Web, teleconferencing, and video-conferencing.

Take Action!!

Innovation is an action. To encourage youself to take action, let me leave you with some famous words of hope. George Bernard Shaw said,

"You see things and you say, why?
But I dream things and I say, why not?"

Michael Stanleigh

Michael Stanleigh, CMC, CSP is the CEO of Business Improvement Architects. He works with leaders and their teams around the world to improve organizational performance by helping them to define their strategic direction, increase leadership performance, create cultures that drive innovation and improve project and quality management. Michael's experience spans public and private sector organizations in over 20 different countries. He also delivers presentations to businesses and conferences throughout the world. In addition to his consulting practice and global speaking he has been featured and published in over 500 different magazines and industry publications. For more information about this article you may contact Michael Stanleigh at mstanleigh@bia.ca

Related Articles

Accelerate the Innovation Engine in Your Organization but Watch for the Potholes

Building a culture of innovation is the first step in being innovative. If you get…

How to Use the Innovative Process to Improve Attendance at Your Next Conference

By applying the innovation process to your next conference you can ensure your conference stands…

Building Innovation Into Organizational Capabilities

Innovation is a matter of survival at the medium or long term for the majority…