

Embedding a Culture of Innovation

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Introduction

When it comes to corporate and management training, it is one thing for a trainer to deliver an inspirational “one shot wonder”; but quite another to have the training message become an imbedded part of an organisation and thus to achieve lasting benefits.

Corporate training programs are instigated by well meaning managers or HR departments with the clear aim of adding value to staff, and so the organisation. People come to these sessions with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The more interesting programs, delivered by inspirational trainers create enthusiasm and “touch” people in a way that inspires them to take the message back to the workplace. Unfortunately, despite the best intentions of attendees, the training message is often lost as soon as people return to their workstations, only to find a bank of phone message and e-mails that need immediate attention.

As soon as this happens, people are back on the work “treadmill” and it’s business as usual; and not a lot has changed.

There are several essential requirements that need to be addressed if the real benefits of corporate training are to be derived.

1. The importance and relevance of the training message needs to come from the top of the organisation
2. The training message needs to be easy to understand, assimilate and use
3. People need to be motivated to use it
4. A means needs to be established within the organisation to measure the outcome of implementing the training message.

In the case of innovation training, consider the above four points in turn:

Importance of Innovation

Leadership needs to come from the top. That of course is what leadership is all about.

Few chief executives would doubt the value to an organisation of innovation. In these days of even improving ways of doing business, high speed communications and the means for ideas and initiatives to be delivered across the world in a matter seconds, the pace of change is accelerating.

Indeed in a recent study undertaken by Lester Thurow, an MIT economist it was established by research that the typical life expectancy of a US based public company

in the 1920's was some 65 years, today this life expectancy has fallen to less than ten years. According to Thurow, if companies are not constantly looking to re-invent themselves they risk quickly becoming overtaken by competitors and falling by the wayside.

CEO's and senior managers are generally aware of this "innovation imperative" and in moving to embed innovation into an organisation, it is these senior people that must take the lead. Clearly it would be unlikely to find most people going "that extra distance" and working to find innovation initiatives if there is no real interest at the top.

How to undertake innovation

If you were to ask 50 people what the word innovation actually means you would doubtless find 50 different understandings of the word. Further, if you asked people how you actually "do innovation", you would most often get curious and inquiring facial expressions in reply.

Innovation, unlike some other disciplines, is not a "black science" or a special area of endeavour reserved only for the gifted. Innovation is in fact quite a rigorous pursuit that can be undertaken in a structured and systematic way once people understand what innovation is, and have a methodology that they can use to inspire innovative thinking.

The message, as with the methodology, needs to be simple, for the following reasons:

- So people can easily understand what it involved, (if the message is complex and requires a lot of work and effort to understand, most people will simply allow it to pass by without any real "buy in"
- So staff at any level can understand the methodology and thus be able to contribute. How often have you walked through a factory or an organisation only to hear a worker say "I have a great idea but nobody listens to me". Often it is the lower level staff in organisations, the ones closest to the workface that have the good ideas, the innovation initiative needs to be able to reach out to include these people.

Motivating People to training tools

As with the top down message, at least one senior person within an organisation needs to have the innovation imperative as a job function KPI, for without that it may be difficult to ensure innovation is embraced as an essential part of the business. The problem in most companies is that senior people are usually time poor and just do not have the capacity to devote to issues that may not be directly applicable to their measured, and perhaps bonus related job function.

If you were to give a factory production manager the innovation portfolio as a "nice to do", but non critical task, you can be sure that it will not take long for that busy person to realise that his real job, managing production, is the one he is paid to do, and indeed it the one his annual review will doubtless focus on. Without a clear mandate in the job function the innovation initiative will soon dissipate.

Thus for at least one senior manager, having some measure of innovation activity as a job function with a corresponding KPI and periodic review needs to be in place.

For staff that are not so senior as to have job function KPI's other ways need to be found to maintain the innovation initiative.

In general, unless there is some particular disharmony within an organisation, most people wish to make a contribution and wish to be seen as a useful and valuable part of the team. This mindset needs to be harnessed for the good of the organisation.

To achieve this it is first necessary to train people in innovation and creative thinking, and then, once equipped with these special innovation tools, to form innovation SWAT teams. These teams may only need to comprise four or five people, (but ideally perhaps six to eight) and they should be encouraged to meet periodically, perhaps over lunchtime once every two or three weeks. At these sessions, these teams with the guidance of a team leader should use the innovation tools provided to explore innovations opportunities for the business.

Rewards in many cases need only be simple; perhaps providing lunch for the people is often all that is needed to have them eager to contribute.

After several months of innovating in team meetings there should be a presentation to senior management of the progress of their work, and perhaps annually there should be a competition for the best innovations with rewards provided to the winning teams. Again the rewards may only need to be little more than recognition and perhaps a night out to dinner for the winning team and their partners, sponsored by the company.

In most cases inspired workers will be overwhelmed with pride at being nominated, or asked to undertake special training and so become an innovation SWAT team member.

The results from this activity can be outstanding in building organisational coherence, a sense of "team" and outstanding innovations.

Measuring the innovation outcome

Selection criteria for the winning innovation team can take a number of forms, some quantitative, others less tangible.

Ideally the aim of innovation is to find winning business opportunities and perhaps these are best measured in financial terms of cost benefit etc. in new products or new and more effective ways of doing business with existing products.

However, in some cases a reward for a team can be made for effort and endeavour and commitment to attending meetings and attempting to contribute. These "soft criteria" can be just as important as the hard fiscal measures in establishing and embedding innovation into the organisation.

Appendix:

Possible senior management KPI's for embedding innovation:

- Achieved proper establishment and mentoring of teams. How many teams are created and how many meeting attended by the senior manager. Perhaps 1 in 5 meetings to attend is acceptable
- Feedback from SWAT teams members to the HR department of the contribution and support of the senior manager
- Number of innovations created that are progressed beyond the SWAT meetings, and thus seriously assessed
- Value of innovations created and cost benefit
- Number, if any, of patents lodged.

Roger La Salle, often referred to as Australia "*innovation guru*" is the creator of the "Matrix Thinking"™ technique and is a widely sought after international speaker on, Innovation, Opportunity, and business development. He is the author of three books, Director of a number of companies both in Australian and overseas and has been responsible for a number of successful technology start-ups. In 2005 Roger was appointed to the "Chair of Innovation" at the Queens University in Belfast.
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