

Are Your Innovation Ducks All In A Row?!

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Survey after survey emphasises how important innovation is to any organisation. Most senior managers would put this at or near the top of their Christmas wish list. However if it were easy then everyone would be doing it instead of thinking about it! Embedding creativity to drive innovation is clearly not a quick fix.

If it is recognised as so important why is it so difficult to achieve? The short answer is that, while each organisation is different, there still needs to be an holistic approach. We need to line up some important organisational ‘ducks’ to ensure we increase substantially the probability of idea generation to drive innovation. Doing it piecemeal without an integrated approach across the organisation will tend to raise expectations which are likely to be dashed because an overall strategy is not in place. So, which particular ‘ducks’ are there in any organisational pond?

Is innovation an integral part of all *strategies and policies*? For example, is *ongoing* innovation strategy a hefty chunk of the monthly Board Meeting, or is it left to planning processes which operate like sclerotic Victorian pipe-work?

Ideas are ‘born drowning’ and poor *leadership* can either stretch out a helping hand or look the other way. Do managers see their job as leaders who should ‘clear the way’ for creativity?

People and learning are fundamental. Courses which provide a few creative tools to a few people cannot ensure that creativity will magically flourish at the workplace. Are people given the tools and the support climate to encourage creativity and innovation, or is “my people are just not creative” still the prevailing misconception or excuse?

Innovation metrics are sometimes thought to be just too difficult to gather or non-existent. Creativity and innovation *can be measured* however and ‘what gets measured gets done’. If it is also rewarded then it is even more likely to get done!

Only *systematic processes* incorporating lateral and logical tools can deliver innovation. Is there an effective innovation ‘pipeline’ or end to end tracking system for turning ideas into innovative services? Serendipity, divine intervention or luck are unlikely to prevent your organisation being ‘mugged’ by the future.

We all have *mindsets* comprising attitudes, beliefs and values which drive our behaviour. These range from individuals who believe ‘old dogs cannot learn new tricks’, to organisations with corporate ‘immune systems’ which reject new ideas or challenges to the existing business model. These collective mindsets can be barriers to creative progress and need to be ‘unlocked’. As Peter Drucker comments, “*defending yesterday, i.e. not innovating - is far more risky than making tomorrow*”.

Information technology is an enabler allowing organisations to break through the traditional barriers of hierarchy, function and geography to spark new ideas and to bring all the minds of the organisation into the game. How many organisations have an intranet which does not capitalise on this possibility?

Customers – the public

- demand innovative products and organisations demand innovative *suppliers*. Are current (and future) customers involved enough, to support a dialogue about inventing the future? The future may be something they do not know they want until they see it or are made aware of the possibility!

All of the above dimensions - or ducks! - then need to be tackled to ensure an overall or holistic approach is developed. When is the *best time* to get your ducks in line? Now! is the short answer. The gap between imagination and achievement has never been smaller. Starting somewhere is preferable to weighing up the options until ‘paralysis by analysis’ sets in. Clearly a ‘wake up call’ to establish the current whereabouts and status of all ducks would be useful?

This however will be difficult, given the power of some of the likely internal *mindset constraints*. As the economist J.K. Galbraith once commented “*faced with the choice of changing one’s mind and proving there is no need to – almost everyone gets busy on the proof*”! And all the ducks need to be tackled since it is no more possible for an organisation to be partly innovative than for a woman to be partly pregnant! Finally there needs to be a *willingness* to listen to, and act on, the change plan that will inevitably result. The ducks can then be prioritised and plans developed to bring them into line.

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