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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Any of us who has worked on an innovative team can't wait to work on the next one. We are not talking about just any old team; an innovative team is a team of individuals infused with purpose, personality and passion that lead to innovative results. So what are the essentials of an innovative team that can be re-created in organizations to build innovative capacity? Read on to learn more.

The Essentials of an Innovative Team

Most of us have probably worked on a team or two during our lifetime, and if asked we would say that there have been the good ones and not so good ones that we have been part of. But how many of us could talk about the time we worked on an "innovative" team - a high-functioning team that had great synergy and creative spark that lead the team to produce something that didn't exist before the team's intervention. An innovative team can be defined "as a number of persons deliberately working together at high levels of productivity to achieve innovative results and success (Source: The New & Improved Post-Collegiate Dictionary)." Talented individuals who come together with a sense of common purpose, sense of empowerment and a passion for the work they are doing - it is this very passion, which keeps the team together and allows them to thrive. Once you have worked on an innovative team you will always be looking for the next one to work on.

While there are many examples of how teams can stifle innovation by a kind of "group-think," there are many examples of teams that can "jam" together to produce creative results (check out <http://innovation.gc.ca/gol/innovation/site.nsf/en/in02221.html> for Canadian Innovation Success stories). What can we learn about innovative teams as we seek to create our own?

Innovative Teams...

- Surrender to humanity - they practice humility - leaving egos and arrogance at the door, and value playfulness.
- Dance the Inter-depend-dance - "I can focus on doing my thing because I trust you to do your thing" - while at the same time working diligently to increase their personal and group creativity skills.

- Include people who bring different, useful perspectives to the creative task - people with different *deep knowledge* as well as different *culture* and *thinking styles* that lead to intellectual diversity and innovative results.
- Take particular care to maximize the group's ability to think divergently. They take maximum allowable time to generate options; use brainstorming, but are mindful of its limitations.
- Design their physical space in a way that allows them to highly interact, however, still allows them to be in close proximity to people from their own disciplines if needed. The team's creative space often includes interesting objects - physical icons - that symbolize play, culture and old projects.
- Create a climate of open communication - they are places of huge synergy and huge trust precisely because of their ability to listen consciously and speak clearly.
- Cultivate risk-taking - their motto includes, "we learn *ONLY* when we're willing to make mistakes" - failure, stupid ideas, and opposite viewpoints are encouraged.
- Expect win-win - in order for the team to be successful, everybody has to be the big winner.
- Striving for constant improvement - they are adaptable, flexible and constantly evolving; and value debriefing in order to improve their people, processes, products and environments to find out, 1) What went well, 2) what didn't, and 3) how might it be improved?

Finally, leading an innovative team is a paradoxical challenge. The team needs time to create and destroy, needs freedom from risks, freedom to break with procedures and rules. At the same time the team needs to work efficiently toward a goal within the organizations traditional framework; budget, culture, etc. A good team leader needs to be able to encourage both divergence - exploration and originality, and convergence- direct processes toward performing the task. He or she needs to frame the problem as clearly as possible, but refraining from indicating a preferred solution, providing the team freedom and control to complete the task.

What's the Bottom line

At the heart of innovative organizations are innovative teams. When the right people are brought together, matched to projects, challenged, and given a chance to blossom an organization will see amazing results. There's nothing like an innovative team to get the job done.

This newsletter was adapted from: Bob Eckert & Jonathan Vehar's Book, *More Lightning, Less Thunder: How to Energize Innovative Teams*. Santa Monica, CA: New & Improved, 2000; and Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap's book, *When Sparks Fly: Igniting Creativity in Groups*. Boston, Ma: Harvard Business School Press, 1999.



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