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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

Innovation continues to be a primary challenge of leadership. For many leaders, part of this challenge is finding out who are the innovators within my organization and how can I get them to come forth to share their creative criticism and ideation. This newsletter offers seven ideas for finding the innovators in your organization and leveraging their innovativeness.

Innovators - I Know You Are Out There, But Where Do I Find You?

If asked the question "where in your organization will I find your innovators?" how would you respond? Would it be that you do not know (and would probably like to know) or that they can be found in the R&D, marketing, and advertising departments? Whatever the response, as a leader you don't want to ghettoize innovation or ignore it - you want everyone in your organization producing novel and useful ideas that lead to practical solutions. Unfortunately, anecdotal evidence suggests that most people aren't anywhere near realizing their creative potential, in part because they're operating in environments that impede thinking and acting creatively. The secret lies in how a leader makes room for innovative people and ideas, in no matter what setting, and how they create an environment for openness and acceptance of creative criticism and ideation.

Innovative people come in all shapes and sizes and fields; part of finding innovators lies in knowing what they look like. Innovators tend to stand out from the rest of us; their contributions tend to affect large groups and move organizations toward something better. You can usually find innovators outside of or away from the organization working in all kinds of places, i.e. cafes, in airports, at home. They often have odd reporting relationships, but somehow can instinctively insert themselves into organizations and/or projects wherever they are needed. Today, innovative people more often work on "hot" teams - a group infused with purpose and personality - versus operating as a lone genius. Finally, innovators can find work almost anywhere, and will often gauge the quality of their leaders as a way of deciding where they will contribute. Hence, the challenge for a leader is to not only find those individuals within their organization who have innovative tendencies but to work with them to bring their special and creative gifts to bear on the organization. Here are seven ideas to get you started.

Ideas to Help You Find Your Innovators and Leverage Their Innovativeness:

1. ***Make sure your climate is conducive to innovation.*** Does your organization inspire or stifle creative criticism and ideation? If the answer is stifle, it doesn't matter what you do, your innovators will stay in hiding. You might not be able to change your whole organization but you can make a difference with your own team and/or department towards creating a creative environment where innovators will feel welcomed and will flourish. For more on this topic, pick up a copy of "*Leading for Innovation and Organizing For Results*", edited by Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, & Iain Sommerville, Jossey-Bass, 2002.
2. ***Innovators need access to senior leaders.*** A leader needs to let it be known that relationships with innovative people are important to him or her, and that innovative people are the heart of the organization. Be public about the importance of innovation and creativity in your organization, and that your door is always open to hear different perspectives and ideas.
3. ***Tap into the ideas of younger generations.*** Studies on generational differences tell us that the X-ers (1960-1980) and the Nexters (1980+) tend to challenge risk and are creative. Unfortunately, although we bring in young people out of university or college into the organization for their fresh ideas and innovative thinking, their ideas are often stifled or not heard. Leaders need to help older staff members to not fear innovation in the younger generations and to be open to and inclusive of all ideas. Second, start involving our younger employees more by inviting them to share their ideas and opinions in as many forums as possible.
4. ***Meaning engages people's creativity.*** If we want people to be innovative, we must discover what is important to them, and engage them in meaningful issues. How does a leader do this? By noticing what people talk about and where they spend their energy - by listening and observing. In a group setting, listen actively for diversity rather than agreement and leverage this to come up with new ideas and directions.
5. ***Reward innovation when you see it.*** Many leaders say they want creative ideas and suggestions, only to ignore or even punish them. Remember, people respond to what you do, not what you say, so if you want innovation, you must concretely and visibly reward it. Innovators will come forward when they see that their creative ideas are valued and acknowledged.
6. ***Use stupidity to provoke innovative thinking.*** Deliberately make stupid statements (provocations) in your meetings, in which something we take for granted about a situation is not true, to shock people's minds out of existing ways of thinking, then suspend judgment, and use the statement as the starting point for generating ideas. Then watch who in the room responds. Provocation is a lateral thinking technique, developed by Edward de Bono, which helps to generate original starting points for creative thinking.
7. ***Develop an Innovators Circle.*** Invite people to meet regularly with you to share their unique perspectives and ideas and to create new ways of thinking about organizational problems and issues. Make it informal, i.e. hold it in a lounge type environment or electronically.

What's the Bottom line

Finding the innovators in your organization is not an easy task. The secret lies in how a leader makes room for innovative ideas and people, in no matter what setting, and how they create an environment for openness and acceptance of creative criticism and ideation.

This month's newsletter is dedicated to Steven Poole, CIO, IMTB, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, whose curiosity in this topic provoked me into writing this newsletter article.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.

If you would like more information about the ideas and topics listed in this issue, contact Judy Laws, Ph.D. at jlaws@foursightconsulting.com.

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