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The Lonely Voice of Innovation



Sometimes I think we're alone. Sometimes I think we're not. In either case, the thought is staggering. -- R. Buckminster Fuller (1895 - 1983)

At times, the role of the innovation evangelist is a very, very lonely struggle. Everywhere you look, you can see the burning need for innovation. In the sphere of business, the impacts of intensifying global competition, economic uncertainty, pervasive commoditization, antiquation of intellectual assets, and the generational transformation of the workforce make the need for reliable, predictable innovation an all too painful reality. There is no surprise in the findings that over 70% of CEOs have innovation in the forefront of their agendas.

Yet, many of the innovation champions I talk to report that their advice on establishing a repeatable, sustainable innovation culture often falls on deaf ears. Many companies talk about innovation, but when it comes to execution are failing to make any measurable progress in developing innovation competence. Why is that? I think it was said best by a senior executive at EADS when he said to me, "No one wants innovation; they want the results of innovation."

In other words, much like the perennial dieter who is always complaining about those extra pounds but never makes the lifestyle changes to meet with success, many managers believe that simply talking about innovation will somehow bring about the results without actually making the investment of time and treasure in driving innovation. It is this sort of rationale that keeps many organizations mired in the murky wasteland of accidental innovation and sees them achieving poor return on their research and development investments.

Why do these managers persist with these self-defeating behaviors? Why don't they actually do something to change their results? Are they simply lazy? Are they stupid? This is a very complex question and one that has many different answers. But, in some cases it is simply that they don't have the mental model to envision the first step forward.

This is where many innovation evangelists fall down. Too often, we are so wrapped up in our own world of high performance innovation practice; we forget that many people don't have the frame of reference to get what we are describing. We need to slow down and articulate the message more clearly and use clear examples that demonstrate how sustainable innovation practice builds the company's value.

Some examples I have seen of how not to go about building convergence around innovation disciplines are:

- One expert innovation practitioner approached new groups of by simply stating he could solve any innovation challenge they had. While this may have been a true statement, it immediately put his audience on the defensive and engendered opposition.
- A respected TRIZ consultant would routinely berate designers that did not agree with his specific views on how systems should be modeled functionally. In one case, he stormed out of the room and suggested that the person with whom he was working clearly had not

- scientific background. The person was in fact a rocket scientist and is now a crackerjack innovation practitioner—really.
- And of course we have all seen the case of the innovation consultant who repeatedly and insistently badgers his client about looking for the next big thing when the client clearly has serious tactical concerns to get their arms around before they can begin to worry about such broad reaching initiatives.

In all of these examples, what is missing is connection – the connection with the company’s pain, the connection with the interest of importance, the connection with other person’s frame of reference that will allow them to be receptive to the benefits of innovation best practices.

When a company is worried about commoditization of their business because of aging intellectual property, the lights come on when I explain how specific companies in exactly the same circumstance have overcome that business challenge by embracing and applying sustainable innovation practices. When companies are concerned about the risks of new product introduction, they sit up and take note when I share with them how other companies have met with their most successful product launches when they employed the proper disciplines of innovation driven design. And of course, nothing breeds success like success. Management always gets excited when you can discuss the internal successes they have achieved with structured innovation practice.

This may sound obvious, but from the number of times I see innovation evangelists erecting barrier to innovation adoption, it is something we need to constantly remind ourselves about. If we remember to connect with our constituencies, we will not be alone.

We will not be alone because the value of sustainable innovation is undeniable. Recent surveys bear this out. Companies that are aggressive in their pursuit of sustainable, repeatable innovation practice have more aggressive revenue objectives, and they meet their revenue objectives more often than their competition. High performance Innovation companies are simply high performance companies.

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