



Are you disabling Innovation?

“One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.” André Gide

And therein lies the rub. All innovation is risky, with no guarantees of success. Risk averse people, and even risk-tolerant people operating within a risk-averse organisation, will not risk innovating.

To understand the paradox that is involved in enabling innovation, it may be helpful to define a few terms. There is, for example, the little matter of imagination, and there is also creativity. One dictionary definition of imagination is ‘The creative ability of the mind’. But the same dictionary also offers a definition of creativity as ‘inventive or imaginative’. Not a lot of help there! Let’s try another: innovating is ‘to make changes; to introduce new ideas or methods’.

Now we can see the difference. To innovate is to **DO SOMETHING DIFFERENT**. And this is where the risk comes in. Thinking up new ways of doing things is totally safe. Imagining, thinking creatively – however it is put - is a safe thing to do. Essentially, it all happens in the human brain, and, even when the ideas are shared with others, the worst that can happen is that there is a disagreement about the validity of the idea. But when we **DO** something different, there is the inevitable risk of less than perfect success – that is highly visible to all around at the time.

What not to do

Try the exhortation method. Telling people that they must innovate is about as much use as telling the nearest pig to start flying. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, have a whole-brain that actually works. We all, therefore, have the potential to dream up new ways of doing things – and to enjoy the success involved when they work – if we ever get that far.

Try to incentivise people to innovate. If the people in question are either risk-averse or working in a risk-averse, blame culture they are not likely to respond. If they perceive that reward for a successful idea might damage their work relationships, especially if there are cohesive work groups in place, then that is just another reason for hunkering down, and ignoring the possible reward.

Create task forces and other types of formal groupings, with a brief to share knowledge and ideas, to drive innovation. Giving each such group a specific problem to resolve might help, and may even lead to a non-innovative solution, but the innovation will only occur if the context is supportive and, even then, will only flow if the interactions in the group are appropriate.

One conclusion is that innovation cannot be commanded; neither can it be managed – at least through conventional methods. It can only be enabled.

A different approach

Confucius said “First people you can trust, and then trust them”.

Start with the idea that people actually like to succeed, and that they are more than capable of imagining new ways of doing things. In which case, the key question is why they are not already doing it. Consider the fact that the conditions in which innovation flourish are very well known. Here is a typical list of innovation enablers, with their associated disablers, adapted from the work of Goran Ekvall:

Characteristic	Innovation enablers	Innovation disablers
1 Challenge	Always trying to raise the bar	Trying to maintain the status quo
2 Freedom	Able to push out the job boundaries	Sticking within the rules
3 Idea time	Always time to stop and reflect	Too busy surviving to think
4 Idea support	Sharing knowledge and resources across boundaries	Having to go it alone
5 Trust and openness	Positive deviance / constructive dissent	Keeping a low profile
6 Playfulness and humour	Fun through shared problem solving	Problems, bloody problems – the dreary merry go round
7 Conflict resolution	Open confrontation of the issues	Interneccine warfare – confrontation between people, of the people
8 Dialogue / debate	Sharing views and ideas about the issues	Scoring points – creating winners and losers
9 Risk taking	A source of excitement and learning	Dangerous territory to be avoided
10 Dynamism	An eventful, ever-changing environment	Just 'more of the same as'

So, if all of this is very well researched and known, how is it that innovation remains a challenge for many organisations? Two thoughts:

The first is that we tend focus on the needed innovation itself, instead of the conditions which allow (enable) it to happen. Applying formal management methods to an output of organisational culture and dynamics is not the way to go.

Second, do you know which of the two lists above is a better description of your organisation, from the experiences and perspectives of your employees? More specifically, as neither list is ever a perfect description of any organisation, which are the particular characteristics of your organisation that enable or disable innovation? Again, as there is no such thing as a perfectly homogeneous organisation – micro cultures abound – what are the patterns across the organisation of enabling and disabling characteristics?

All sound complex? That is probably because it is. Which leads to the third thought. If creating the conditions in which innovation can flourish is the way to go, what is it that needs to change? How can we find out? One thing **not** to do is a formal staff survey – they have little, if any, value. Rather, go talk with people, and listen to them, in their own time and place. Ask them questions prompted by the table above, and get their sense of what the issues are. And then ask them what it is that needs to change, and how to do it. Best of all, enlist their help. Who knows, they might just come up with one or two innovations – but don't expect a neat and tidy change process!

“One of the advantages of being disorderly is that one is constantly making exciting discoveries.” A A Milne