

How to drive innovation

by Gianni Anchois

If your intent is to drive innovation, make sure you get the right people onboard.

Don't be fooled: processes only cannot drive or even foster innovation. Innovation is a people business.

What do you mean by innovation?

Innovation is different from creativity. A lot of creative people is not innovative at all, they just spin and re-spin old consolidated and proven concepts. They might provoke tough reactions and even cause disconcert at times, but that's mostly a gimmick they use.

Real innovators are in for big changes, not short sighted fashionable "new" things. They see things we cannot see. They imagine a better future and, sometimes, chart the course to get us there.

Most sources would tell you that innovation starts with recruiting the right people. Actually, I think it starts even before recruiting. You need to have 100% clarity of what sort of innovation you would like to drive before you can hire the right talent.

Are you keen on incremental innovation, or small continuous improvements to your current portfolio of services and products? Or would you rather focus on long shot innovation, where you project your sight far into the future - say five years ahead - and try to imagine what sort of needs your client will have by then?

Radical innovation is not for everybody.

Or maybe it's disruptive innovation you want to pursue, where you ignore what your clients are asking for and just focus on developing the next insanely great product nobody knew they would ever need (warning: this is the hardest!).

Once you've chosen your innovation flavour, you can start recruiting.

Clearly this cannot be your vanilla flavoured recruiting. Forget about skills, track record, even personal recommendations. You need people who live and breath innovation. Someone who cannot just settle for how things are done today.

Possibly a contrarian with a tendency of doubting everything and of tweaking the perspective from which to look at things. Someone not afraid of taking risks, of failing. A misfit, probably. Someone with a rich personal cultural background, who's lived abroad, speaks three or four languages fluently and is familiar with the way of doing business in Europe, Asia, Africa and America.

What? You say that a candidate with that sort of profile would be expensive and hard to manage? Bingo! I thought you knew that the old management style simple cannot drive innovation in the 21st century and beyond.

If you expect punctuality, conformity, modesty, even political correctness from your innovation drivers, than you are in trouble. And be ready to push back on your HR department. They don't know much about innovation anyway...

Leave the team alone.

Now that you've got your small team of innovators onboard, leave them alone.

Sure, provide just a little bit of orientation and mild directional assessment on the expected way of proceeding, but just don't interfere with them. Train the team, if needed, on the very basic things they absolutely have to know to operate in your company, but no more than that.

I know you've been told that training and retraining employees is important. Well, in this case it isn't.

Discussions will happen, but the team members will sort it out among themselves. Don't worry if the teamwork doesn't really happen, historically most innovators work alone. Keep your eyes on the target and be patient.

Rather than training the innovators, you should actually train the rest of the company about the importance of what they are doing and how everybody can help in creating a fertile environment for innovation to percolate through your company ranks.

Avoid at all costs undermining the effort you've made. So be strong and prepare to fight for them. Don't put pressure or expect quick results, but be there to counsel, help, debate, cajole and generally steer the boat.

Pass the pizza. You're going to be fine.

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