

Three Strategies Fuel Innovation Success

Innovation, creativity and leadership are three of the most written-about topics in the business community. In fact a quick review of one online bookseller shows that they currently have over 150,000 titles on these subjects. Are they just buzzwords or do they play an important role in the success and sustainability of a business?

The answer is yes to both questions. While they are current buzzwords, they also must be part of a business' strategic plan in order for that company to be successful and enjoy sustainability.

Innovation and creativity are crucial components of a contemporary leader's unspoken responsibilities. Without them you cannot solve problems, get ahead of the game, handle emergency communication catastrophes and stay ahead of the competition. One could even argue that without innovation, your business will not be viable in five years.

Engaged Employees are the Fertile Foundation for Innovation

Innovation has many definitions, some too brief and not allowing for the expansiveness of the concept. One of the best definitions of innovation comes from a response Steve Jobs, co-founder and past CEO of Apple, gave to a reporter when asked about the market research for their products. He said: "People don't know what they want until you show them." This is a perfect example of innovation – filling a need before anyone else knows there is a demand, creating a demand for something unheard of or finding a solution in advance of a problem.

It takes a connected workforce community, an engaged team, to innovate. It is not just the responsibility of the leader. It takes wise leaders who know their strengths and weaknesses if they are the ones that should be at the forefront of innovation. If it is not a strong suit then delegate the management or moderating of the innovation program to someone who can run with the ball and score big or hire someone from the outside. In fact, the act of innovation should be considered a game and there should be rules of engagement to meet with success and complete buy-in.

Innovation 101

There are three keys to innovation but before getting started it is important to note that many members of the workforce will be good innovators if given the chance — but not necessarily in *all* categories of innovation. You may be looking for a solution to something some will not be interested in or care about. Others may not wish to be

embarrassed if their idea is not chosen. For them, create a way to participate without the embarrassment factor such as an idea or innovation drop box in lunch rooms or on internal social communications systems. The door should be thrown wide open with an invitation for all to participate until you find out who are the best innovators and will play the game according to the rules.

Speaking of rules, it is important to set the rules of engagement first. This will vary depending upon your group and subject but the basic tenants are:

- You are beginning with a blank canvas and no idea is off the table
- Every idea is accepted without judgment
- Everyone is encouraged to advance ideas
- No one wins and no one loses
- Not all ideas will be used
- Everyone agrees to buy-in when the session is over – this is when the moderator has absolute control and bring an end to the rules of engagement for this session

If anyone cannot abide by these rules then they should excuse themselves, or be excused from participating. Let the games begin.

Innovation begins with tension. There will be all kinds of interaction between participants and each will have their own ideas on how to solve a problem, create a new product or deal with an emergency. There should be a healthy tension within the group to keep the flow of creativity and idea generation expanding. Ideas should be posted on the walls or on a big screen by someone assigned to make the new ideas visually accessible to all. It is in the process of the idea generation that new ideas will flow causing an explosion of new ideas built upon the existing. At this stage everyone should feel like they are winning the game but be reminded that others will also be evaluating the ideas for feasibility.

Innovation must include flexibility. All participants must understand that there is an ebb and flow to innovating and creativity. Some may not say a word or have an idea throughout the entire process and come up with something as they are walking out the door. Others may have dozens of ideas from the moment you begin till the very end. All however must be flexible enough to allow every idea to come to the floor without question, derision or comment. It is up to the moderator to keep the ideas flowing and the emotions in check.

Innovation draws conclusions through collaboration. Sometimes in such sessions someone will hit a home run and everyone will instantly recognize the idea as a big win.

Other times, you will see two or three individual camps forming around different ideas they wish to see succeed. It is key for the moderator to get a firm grip of the session at this point so collaboration occurs not conflict. The group should become cohesive around one or two really good ideas that can then be reviewed by an appropriate oversight team from production, communications or IT etc.

At this point, the group should be thanked for their participation in your group creativity and innovation session and asked if they would like to be included in another one in the future. A nice touch would be to celebrate their innovation with an unexpected treat such as fresh cookies and coffee or iced tea. It is through recognition and celebration that they will value innovation and be more aware of the opportunities to do so.

The steps are simple, get started and stay in control. Guarantee your success and sustainability by always being ahead of the consumers' wants and competitors' ideas.

© Pat Heydlauff, all rights reserved 2014

Pat Heydlauff, a "flow of focus" expert, speaker and consultant designs workplace environments that fuel the flow of focus, maximizes productivity and yields future sustainability. She is author of the forthcoming book, **Focus • Connect • Regenerate** *7 Ways to Lead and Fuel Sustainability* and published books, *Feng Shui, So Easy a Child Can Do It, The Way We Go, Your Roadmap to a Better Future* and *Selling Your Home with a Competitive Edge*. Contact her at 561-744-2666 or www.engagetolead.com.