



Today's Innovative Leader: Model and Engineer of Innovative Culture

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly difficult for today's organization to succeed without a thorough innovation strategy. It has been said that today's business mantra is "innovate or die." While organizational leaders may feel the pressure to innovate, they may not have an understanding of the characteristics and skills necessary to make their organizations successful in the innovation process. This paper discusses the role of the leader as both the model for and the engineer of innovative organizational culture. Without the personal model and the engineer of culture, attempts at innovation will fall short. Today's leaders must employ the skills and characteristics to fulfill both of these important roles in their organizations to be successful in the innovation process.

Organizations that do not value innovation, making it a centerpiece of the organization's efforts, will experience significant struggle for survival in the future. Organizations must flex their creative muscle in order to continue to contend in the global market. To achieve successful innovation throughout the organization, leaders must exhibit the values of innovation themselves. They must also focus their efforts in engineering an organizational culture that is thoroughly innovative. There are a number of things that leaders can do to signal the importance of creativity and innovation in the organization. This paper discusses both the personal characteristics that leaders must model as well as the energies leaders must pursue in engineering organizational culture so as to secure an innovative blueprint for the future. Like an

engineer, today's organizational leader must create a culture formula for success so that their organization can thrive in innovation. Ultimately, leaders must embody innovation as well as engineer organizational culture to match that embodiment.

Innovative Leaders Embody Innovation

The role the leader plays in innovation is crucial if the organization is to be successful in today's competitive and innovative market. The model the leader sets for the organization cannot be underestimated. Practicing aspects of innovation in his work will impact followers more than any words communicated by the leader. The leader must embody innovation to set the tone for the organization.

This begins with an understanding of the values the innovative leader must espouse. According to Gary Oster, "[v]alues are antecedent to action and the fuel that powers innovators." As Rokeach makes it plain, values are "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct...is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct." It is necessary that today's leader values innovation in his thinking, beliefs, and action. The following values should be evidenced in the decision making and conduct of the leader.

Exhibit Curiosity

The innovative leader must have a healthy appetite for curiosity. Creative thinking requires a natural curiosity that is insatiable. Curiosity will push the individual to be creative rather than accepting the status quo as sufficient. This curiosity must impact decision making with a willingness to seek answers to problems that are not easily or readily found. Not only helpful in developing creativity, curiosity is a cross-cultural competency necessary for today's global environment. Creativity must span cultures. Curiosity will help the leader bridge the gap that exists between cultures.

Think Differently

Valuing creativity necessitates discovery of new ways of thinking creatively. Exercises can help the leader think differently so he can grow to be more creative. An initial step toward this goal is to take the time to think about the way one thinks. Similar to the concept of exercising a muscle for growth, one can exercise thinking to expand creativity. The key to stretch the leader's creativity is to find areas where one is curious and desirous to learn. As the leader looks at ideas and concepts from different perspectives while learning, the mind is stretched in creativity.

Take Risks

One necessary characteristic demonstrated in the innovative leader is risk-taking. Effective risk taking necessitates a willingness to fail. A willingness to fail is a prerequisite in innovation. By allowing risk-taking in personal innovative efforts, the leader models the

necessary values needed in the organization to do the same. This requires the leader display courage in the face of mounting pressure for efficiency and the negativity that often accompanies doing things differently in organizations. Innovative leaders cannot remain stuck in paradigms of thinking that have plagued organizational ineffectiveness. These paradigms in thinking must be addressed courageously. The boldness to question the paradigms of thinking in an organization can result in breakthrough innovation causing a paradigm shift.

Cross-Pollinate

The innovative leader exposes himself to new ideas, challenging the status quo consistently. One practical way to accomplish this is to cross-pollinate in other areas, markets, or positions. Innovative leaders get outside their organizations to see how others are accomplishing similar goals. Observation of other systems, policies, and values can awaken creativity within that is dormant. Building relationships with others who have different ideas can inspire creative thinking. According to Michalko, because our brains tend to follow the patterns of thinking previously developed, we are often “not even aware of the possibility of a better route.” Valuing such diversity helps create new ways of thinking that will yield innovative success in the future.

Lead as an Innovator

As already indicated, leaders are crucial to the innovation process. How they accomplish innovation in their organizations is highly dependent on their leadership style and willingness to incorporate innovation at every level of work in the organization. As Oster points out, “[s]uccessful innovation leadership requires the development, initiation, and management of comprehensive organizational innovation systems, including policies, procedures, and information mechanisms that promote and facilitate innovation within the organization.” According to Tony Davila, leaders must spend time and energy “defin(ing) the innovation strategy and link(ing) it to the business strategy” if the innovation process is to be successful. The leader must communicate how innovation strategy and business strategy align. Encouraging employees to understand how their innovative work contributes to the fulfillment of these strategies keeps the creative ideas flowing in the organization.

Leading as an innovator necessitates an understanding of the innovation process. Davila posits that “Innovation does not exist evenly everywhere in the company; it exists in hugely disproportionate quantities across the organization at any given time.” Cause It, a business consulting agency, opines that similar to the seasons of the year, healthy innovation also has four seasons operating in organizations today. Winter is for plowing and planting; spring is for planting seeds; summer is when innovation takes root; fall is when innovation is realized. Understanding the season the organization is experiencing is key to success. Timing matters in the innovation process. Organizations and people need time to recover and time to creatively advance to be effective. Effective innovative leaders are aware of this and seek the best time to both innovate and rest.

Successful innovative leaders have learned the art of matching the appropriate innovation to the company's position. Understanding the company's position will provide the insight needed for the leader to choose incremental, semi-radical, or radical innovation. Depending on the financial, cultural, and political position of the company, the leader can decide which innovation is best. In many cases, by making small changes in the innovation process, the organization can create small wins in innovation. By choosing an incremental innovation strategy, the leader can succeed in transforming the company ethos into a culture of innovation in methodical steps. Cumulatively, these steps will make a big difference for the organization and can help the bottom line significantly.

Many innovative leaders achieve great success. There is a real danger when the innovative organization experiences success. Davila suggests that it is important to be aware that "[T]he biggest threat to successful innovation is past success." Complacency and conservatism can both negatively impact the future of innovation in the organization, especially when it has achieved success in the past. To counteract such things, effective innovative leaders must keep pushing themselves and their companies forward. **Developing the habit of keeping an ear to the ground to understand the reality of yourself and the organization is a key practice if the leader is going to stay motivated to create a better tomorrow for the organization.**

Engineer an Innovative Organizational Culture

While it is difficult to receive full agreement on a definition of organizational culture, a consensus of researchers agrees that the culture of an organization represents the beliefs and values it holds. In order for an organizational culture to function properly, employees of the organization must agree with the culture and must operate by the internal rules espoused by such values and beliefs. Individuals must decide if personal values and beliefs are in alignment with that of the organization. If they are not, decisions must be made by individuals or management to address misalignment.

Organizational culture can be identified by observing artifacts, beliefs and values, and basic assumptions of the organization. Optimally, there is consistency between what is displayed as written values and what is practiced. Organizational leaders must detail values in writing and put them on display through a series of artifacts to reinforce the culture. Innovative leaders are engineers of organizational culture that highlight the value of innovation in light of today's globally complex market. Engineering an effective innovative culture pays dividends because innovation rarely occurs spontaneously. Through the efforts of engineering an innovative organizational culture, products and processes that will change the world can be created. This is because creativity happens best in collaborative environments that value individual and group contributions. The following list details necessary components of engineering an innovative organizational culture.

Reward risk taking and failure

Leaders who value innovation in the workplace focus their attention on creating organizational cultures that allow employees to consistently innovate in the work environment. One necessary foundation for a culture of innovation is a willingness of the organization to allow for failure. By encouraging employees to experiment and allowing them to fail in the process, the creativity of the organization increases while productivity can actually proliferate. Innovative leaders should recognize the contributions of employees that model the value of risk-taking and failure. That may sound counterintuitive, but without failure, our society would not have many of the innovations we take for granted today. Such bold moves require a view of history that places innovation built on the back of many failures. Recognitions of such rewards should be made publically in order to maximize the impact on the entire organization.

Hire the Right Team

Engineers of innovative organizational culture keep the culture in mind when they hire people into the organization. Screening applicants for culture fit is a priority in today's business world. The innovative leader purposely selects employees who do not think like the rest of the group. Hiring people who do not exactly fit but can contribute to creativity is a bold step innovative leaders make to express their desire for diversity of thought in the workplace. A mix of diverse thinking will contribute to greater innovation. Innovation is a team effort. Rarely do eureka moments happen. Knowing this, leaders have the responsibility to provide environments that encourage creativity and innovation. Filling the ranks with appropriate candidates is essential to accomplish this.

Create a "Co-Culture"

Collaboration is key in innovative cultures. Inspiring innovation means dreaming big. According to Davila, with a foundation laid for leading by example, "[t]he CEO needs to work on and in the innovation culture." Russo-Spena & Mele suggest that this requires the innovative leader to create a "co-culture" in the organization: "co-ideation, co-evaluation, co-design, co-test, and co-launch." Understanding that innovation is a collaborative process, the wise engineer of innovative culture insists on a "co-culture".

Remain Tenacious

Every organization experiences innovation antibodies. According to Davila, "[o]rganizational antibodies...kill off the innovations and often the structures, resources, and processes responsible for the innovation." It is the leader's responsibility to limit the effectiveness of antibodies. As much as leaders may want all naysayers to be put out of the organization, the truth is that naysayers are good for innovation because they point out flaws that others may not have seen. Leaders must remain tenacious in engineering an innovative culture. Allowing too much or too little criticism will yield negative consequences to achieving desired results.

The tendency to enjoy success and rest from innovation must be curtailed with the reality that, according to Kalb, “[i]nnovation cycles are becoming shorter.” Refusing to respond to today’s business environment is dangerous. Nolan proffers “[w]herever innovations come from, however, they are done, and in whatever part of the business they occur, companies need to continuously innovate or risk dying.” Whether it’s within efficiency efforts or to fight for outright survival, innovation must be strategically executed in today’s business environment. This is why tenacity in the pursuit of an innovative organizational culture is so important. Leaders who give up too quickly miss out on seeing the fruit of their labor as evidenced by innovation in the organization.

One way to insulate the organization from giving up too soon is to anticipate some of the downsides that occur because of the innovation. As Burkun so aptly noted, “all innovations have good and bad effects regardless of the intention of the innovator.” Anticipating the intended and unintended consequences of innovation can help the innovative leader be prepared for managing the downside of innovation. Limiting the surprise of unintended consequences can help bolster the tenacity of the organization’s efforts in innovation.

Conclusion

Today’s innovative leader faces a significant challenge. To effectively innovate in today’s global market, the leader must both embody the characteristics of innovation and engineer an organizational culture that is tenacious in its pursuit of innovation. Serving as the model for the organization, the innovative leader must exhibit curiosity, think differently, take risks, cross-pollinate, and lead innovatively. As an engineer of innovative organizational culture, the innovative leader must reward risk-taking and failure, hire the right team, create a “co-culture”, and remain tenacious in this pursuit. Making these items a priority in the leader’s daily work, he is likely to succeed in the endeavor of becoming an innovative leader.

About the Author

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