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Leadership
Newsletter

Leading Innovation: Creating an Environment Where Creativity, Invention, and Change Can Flourish

The difference between stagnant organizations and dynamic ones is clear. In dynamic organizations, ideas are readily surfaced, developed, and implemented—and leadership makes all the difference.

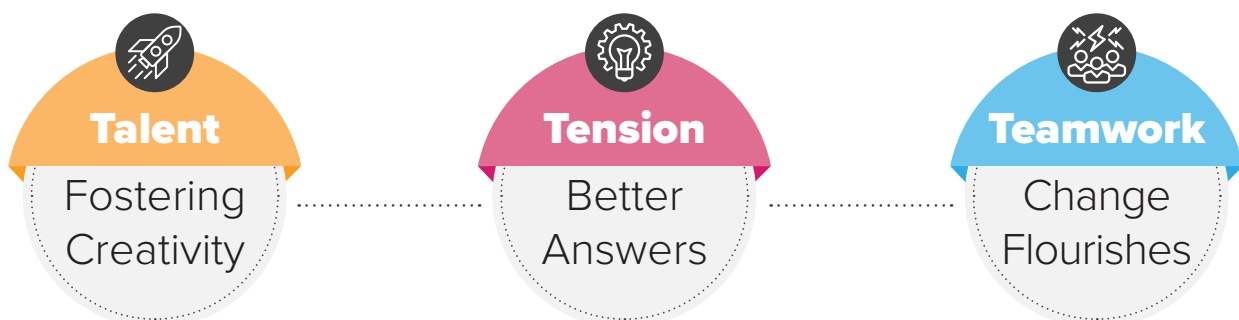
Innovation is a hot topic these days; however, before we explore the practices of leaders who excel at this critically important competency, we must dispel one myth: the myth of the lone genius.

Too often, we equate innovation to the efforts of solitary individuals toiling away in a garage or lab somewhere—individuals like Thomas Edison and Steve Jobs. It is true that these were brilliant men, but a detailed examination of their work reveals that all their major inventions were the product of collaboration; teamwork; and, most surprisingly, organization-wide efforts.

Accompanying the “lone genius myth” is the assumption that innovation is the near-exclusive role of designers, developers, engineers, and scientists and only applied to the creation of new products, services, and technologies. Progressive organizations are realizing that innovation is not just everyone’s business; it also can be applied to create significant value in all significant dimensions of an organization’s work—systems, processes, strategies, business models, leadership models, and anything that creates values (or needs to) and is subject to design.

All innovation starts with an idea, but nothing is more fragile. Often perceived as having flimsy rationale and poor implementation prospects, most ideas die in infancy. It’s easy to assume that new ideas are killed by the Neanderthals in the organization, but this is not true. If you are going to be a successful leader of innovation, you are not going to war with naysayers and pessimists; you are doing battle with the establishment: the approvals process, the management structure, the strategic plan, and the culture. Innovation means change, and all organizations left to their own devices will default to predictability, security, and normality—in short, the status quo.

So, what does this mean for you, the leader? The role of the innovation leader is to bring out the very best creative talents of others, inspire them to search for new and better answers, and create a team environment in which imagination and invention are the norm. Think of this as The Three T’s of Leadership: Talent (fostering creativity), Tension (better answers), and Teamwork (change flourishes).



John Gardner once said, “Talent is one thing; its triumphant expression is another.” Cultivating talent starts with the belief that creativity exists in all but is often suppressed by self-doubt, lack of confidence, and fear of failure.

Great leaders see their job as helping others identify and nurture their innovation talents and, in doing so, become virtuosos in their own right. Great innovation leaders invite and encourage their team members to bring their full suite of talents to their work.

Innovation leaders also introduce a healthy tension that motivates others to challenge assumptions, generate new possibilities, and embrace change as inevitable. This tension can take a variety of forms: a near-unachievable goal, a severe competitive threat, an extraordinary contribution, a canceled best-selling product, etc. The challenge for leaders is to inject pressure that produces positive results rather than anxiety and distress.

The ability to create and lead high-performing teams is a key requirement for all managers, and one of the most valuable outputs of these teams is innovation. Probably the most important measure of the innovation leader is his or her ability to create a playful, lively team environment rife with experimentation, creativity, and inventiveness.

The most innovative teams often appear to be at play rather than work. This is not a child’s version of play (though fun is often associated with innovation) but rather a more serious play.

Most dictionaries define the word “innovation” with phrases such as “the process of inventing something new.” In *The Leader’s Voice*, Clarke and Crossland provide a definition more relevant to leaders: “Innovation is creativity in its working clothes.” The role of the leader is to combine the power of teamwork with the fundamental human trait of creativity to generate something new. In closing, I encourage you to ask yourself these three questions:

1. *Am I helping others identify and use untapped talents?*
2. *Am I a force for renewal, transformation, and innovation?*
3. *Am I creating a culture of serious play on my team?*

“Every organization – not just businesses – needs one core competence: innovation. And every organization needs a way to record and appraise its innovative performance.”

—Peter Drucke



Source

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