

The Search for Innovation Leadership

By Jeff Gaspersz



What do we need to do to build the leaders that are equipped for the new innovation challenges?

In all the years I have been discussing innovation and creativity with managers in Master Classes, seminars and roundtable sessions, one observation keeps returning: almost all leaders agreed that they underutilized the creativity of their employees. They admitted that they could capture so many more fertile ideas in their company. The reasons they gave for failing to do so is because there is no time for it and there was no effective process to handle all those ideas. Furthermore, employees feared demotivation when ideas were rejected and, in addition to that, a core question arose: Is encouraging ideas really a core management task? Current business challenges demand enough of their attention.

So there is creative gold in companies, but leaders don't dig enough for it. I believe that stimulating and nurturing creativity will become one of the key tasks in leadership. In a complex and rapidly changing world, we urgently need our imagination to take us away from the familiar and to visualize new ways of reconception, reinvention and creation. With creative and breakthrough thinking we are able to disrupt the status quo to redefine our products and services and shape new business models. A new stream of incremental ideas can then feed the need for continuous improvement.

Creativity was selected as the most crucial factor for future success in the IBM 2010 Global CEO Study of 1500 CEOs in 60 countries and 33 sectors. As a leadership quality, creativity

scored even higher than integrity and global thinking. But it is not only the leaders of current companies who have to have the ability to express their creativity. The challenge the interviewed CEOs felt they faced was spreading a creative spirit to the entire organization. Here, we are touching on the essence of **innovation leadership**: its aim is not to create followers but to create more leaders. These leaders could be regular employees who feel deeply about contributing, sharing and collaborating creatively.

Alan Lafley, the successful former CEO of Procter & Gamble emphasized that innovation is everyone's job. We could say that the more people we exclude from the search for new opportunities, the weaker our innovative power will be. However, if we succeed in involving everyone and fostering an innovation mindset throughout the organization, we will build a sustainable competitive advantage that cannot be copied.

The next challenge in innovation leadership is to protect the valuable ideas from the bureaucratic and political counterforces that might kill them. Policies like the Shell GameChanger program are focusing on getting great ideas off the ground by recognizing and protecting them in an early phase. The leadership of Shell is very successful with it. Until now the GameChanger harvest contains more than 2000 selected ideas leading to around 200 commercial projects, helping the company realize its mission.

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The involved creative community can even be extended to customers. Dell (ideastorm.com) and Starbucks (MyStarbucksIdea.com) are among the companies that are crowdsourcing ideas from thousands of their clients. They have created a virtual space where ideas of customers can flow. Participants can promote or demote each other's ideas and discuss them. The company then shares which customer's ideas are acted upon. We can see that our creativity is used to deliver the better products and services we need. This motivates others to submit more ideas.

When leaders succeed in utilizing the creativity of employees or customers, they will generate a double harvest. They will receive a continuous flow of new ideas, but also a deep commitment of their community. When people submit ideas they are voluntarily offering their creativity to the organization. The more we recognize and reward these creative gifts, the more enthusiastic people will become to keep on giving.

The essence of innovation is connecting

Innovation leadership aims for connecting knowledge and ideas in the search for new valuable combinations. Companies such as IBM or Philips designed large-scale events for this intent. They focus the knowledge and creativity of large groups to discover new market opportunities. IBM developed the InnovationJam as a tool for massive online brainstorming. In one of these sessions more than 150,000 people from 104 countries and 67 companies were involved in searching for new opportunities. This resulted in the creation of 10 new businesses.

We might not be able to bring together so many people, but the key question remains: how can we connect the knowledge, commitment and creativity of employees in such a way that new windows of opportunity will open? What kind of infrastructure can we build to make this happen?

Sometimes we overlook the simple tools for this aim. In a recent innovation session a manager in an insurance company shared with us how the Twitter-like microblogging service Yammer has supported the corporate community in strengthening its innovation power. Employees were intensely sending each other short messages through Yammer, sharing their knowledge, ideas and innovation successes. The result was a growing awareness of the innovations that were being worked on, creating new possibilities for collaboration. His large company felt immediately smaller.

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In a government organization I worked with, employees were very enthusiastic about a simple program for knowledge sharing, launched by top management: the week of the exchange. For one week in the year employees arrange an internship in the team of another department. The result was a better understanding of each other's work and a cross-fertilization of insights. @Google Talks is another example of a small initiative with a deeper impact on the opportunity mindset. The program brings authors, musicians and innovators from all fields to the Google audience. New connections then occur between what is shared and their challenges at work.

When we are in a process of knowledge and idea sharing we benefit from newly acquired insights. The additional effect can be that we become more aware of the limits of our own perspectives. The diversity of insights and the contrasting viewpoints make us aware of our possibly rigid lenses with which we look at work processes, our competencies and at our business. There lies a deep wisdom in the observation that John Maynard Keynes made about this phenomenon: *The real difficulty in changing any enterprise lies not in developing new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones.* We are indeed often blinded by our

old ideas, and we need others to help us recognize the boundaries of our thinking. Effective innovation leadership shapes the space where we can question our own practices and challenge existing assumptions.

Building innovation leadership

We are urgently searching for creativity; to think up new effective actions for the sustainability of our planet, to stay successful as a company in times of crisis, to find new ways for steering our careers in a volatile corporate environment. We need leaders who will challenge our old ideas and make us curious for new, unconventional viewpoints. If we are striving for breakthrough innovations we need breakthrough leadership that can spark our imagination and intrapreneurship. But we also need leadership in ourselves that will not take it for granted that our unique creativity is pressed down by bureaucratic forces or uncooperative managers. Louis Pasteur said: *Chance favors the prepared mind.* We need to search for ways to prepare our minds to find new opportunities that help our company, our teams and ourselves. Leaders can facilitate that process.

I am working in a business school where we, along with other business schools, strive to build the leaders that are equipped for the new innovation challenges. It is my contention that the aim of our teaching must be to strengthen their integrative thinking so that they can find the new combinations, patterns and perspectives that are necessary for innovation breakthroughs. We also have to show them ways to catalyze the creativity in their corporate communities.

We can show our future leaders numerous best practices, but they will only discover their passion for it when they have discovered their own creative abilities. Therefore, we also have to make them familiar with creative techniques that will help them to look from different angles. Not just to offer them a new technique, but to awaken a spirit that they can use to inspire the creativity of their people.

We need strong innovation leaders who can inspire us to not just experience innovation as something very unique, reserved only for the creative talents in the innovation department. For me, an innovation leader is someone who challenges my creativity, who gives me a longing to experiment with my ideas and to search for colleagues to collaborate with in order to realize them. They will help me discover unconventional ways to think, act and deliver new value to my customers - then I will discover the innovation leader in myself!

About the author

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