TO INNOVATE OR INVENT

Making projects happen

By Professor Corey Billington. (March, 2007)
Many managers and leaders are struggling to move from strategy to execution and for some reason, it’s not happening. But what are the typical obstacles that individuals and companies are facing which stop them making the project happening?

It all starts with the wrong approach coupled with inappropriate structures backing it up. An important part of this is defining how much of one’s time should be spent innovating and how much actually inventing.

While innovating is about finding working answers or working business processes in other domains, and adapting them to your use, inventing is about forming hypotheses. The latter involves making deductions, testing, refining and then perfecting the process. Both have very different uses and are successful in different contexts.

Business process innovation is based on three principles - knowledge brokering (using old ideas in new ways), rapid prototyping, and collective intelligence. Rapid prototyping forces the team to come up with something within a deadline and is essential to unlocking the process of innovation, but essentially, it all boils down to lateral thinking - breaking the problem down to a very simple basis and thinking out-of-the-box.

Business process innovation is not, however, only for the very creative. Anybody can be creative enough to do business process innovation. The trick is in the process that is used.

Unlocking that creative genius in there

The first step is about defining the problem. After this comes rapid prototyping. Coupled with collective intelligence, rapid portotyping’s motto,”to fail often but to succeed sooner”, is one of the key methodologies here. The trick is to use collective intelligence and diversity in a constructive, efficient manner, and partner it with knowledge brokering and rapid prototyping, or possibly a number of other existing methods.

At the end of the day, companies’ business processes tend to be very similar - far more similar than the products they produce. A good example of this is that most firms have SAP problems. The question is whether one should try to solve this by hypothesis and hiring consultants or should one try to find someone that has had the same problem and might be able to share what they did to solve it? A strong network is very important for finding the right knowledge brokers to address problems.
Fair representation

Another important element is ensuring that all stakeholders are in some way or form represented on the team re-designing the business process. This has a very powerful effect, because each team member comes with a different viewpoint. Viewpoints are aired and viewed and common ground is found where the team can work together. It’s about making diversity perform during design rather than slowing things down during implementation.

One needs to quickly organize the collective intelligence of a group, and identify the design features that should be kept and the ones that should be reworked.

This is applicable to any industry for any process that itself is not too well evolved. In other words, when a process is immature, it is often more efficient to find a solution than to develop one. When a process itself is lower than sixty percentile – it is possible to bring in knowledge brokers from other industries, and leverage the process work that they do there, and bring that process design back into one’s own industry, simply choosing the parts which are applicable to the problem in hand.

There is no end to the examples where one can bring in analogous problem situations from other industries. What is amazing, however, is when a team moves from thinking “What could a doctor ever teach me about private banking?” to “This guy has some techniques that we could maybe adopt in private banking that will work with our clients”.

Getting a Boost ...

IMD runs a week long Booster Program designed to help students move from strategy to execution. Experience from the Boosters has shown that the first step to building commitment is to get the sponsor on board and get him or her to transmit the expectation that by the end of the week there is going to be a great innovative design. It is a “learn by doing” approach in which deliverables are negotiated at the beginning.

As participants go through the Booster process and see the success that they can generate through the actual process of knowledge brokering and then designing and rapid prototyping, the energy quickly starts to mount. In turn, as the energy mounts, the team pulls together.
The Booster Program is not just about boosting a project – but about boosting people’s confidence as well, because they realize that what seemed like an impossible task on Monday has actually been achieved by Friday, with new techniques being acquired along the way. The key skill is the ability to be able to modify lateral connections to suit one’s own business purpose.

Professor Billington Co-Directs The Booster Program at IMD. He also teaches on the Managing Corporate Resources program, the Program for Executive Development, as well as the Managing the Extended Supply Chain Orchestrating Winning Performance programs.
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