

How to... spark innovation in your organization

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Every HR executives would love to play a major role in making their company more innovative. They understand that innovative firms call the shots in their industry – the Nokias, 3Ms, and Sonys of the world that produce a steady stream of new hit products or services and that being able to take some legitimate credit for this would clearly elevate the stature of the HR function.

To date, HR managers seem typically resigned to playing a modest or non-existent role in their organization's pursuit of innovation, confined by three main barriers:

- They don't work especially closely with the functions typically seen to be in the front line of innovation (R&D and Marketing)
- They can seldom change the personalities of risk-averse and often unimaginative senior managers who control so many innovation-related budgets
- Their administrative duties crowd-out the time to contemplate and introduce new ideas – even for their own department.

Yet our experience at Synecticsworld in helping companies become more innovative tells us this doesn't have to be the case. Some HR managers have managed to pull some key 'levers' to raise innovation in their organization:

Developing the creative and innovative skills of individuals and teams

Teaching practices that promote fertile meetings – the 'birthplace' or 'burial ground' for many great ideas

Adjusting the hiring parameters of the firm so as to stop screening-out the mavericks and entrepreneurs – whose quirks often close-the-gates against their joining

Developing Creativity Skills

At the root of all innovation is the seed of new ideas. The most innovative organizations are those that plant the most seeds and know how to select and harvest the promising ones. But the 'seeds' of big ideas come from people, and unfortunately most companies don't create the right environment for such people. HR can't directly

spark other managers to come up with great ideas for new products/services, new distribution processes, marketing campaigns or imaginative cost saving ideas.

What HR can do is give those managers the systematic skills by which they can generate and follow through on breakthrough concepts – both in seclusion and in meetings. Such skills include:

- Working in teams in ways that enhance rather than shoot down ideas
- Tapping into one's imagination through such devices as making uninhibited wishes
- Taking excursions to change the status quo
- Using "yes, but" moments to identify and answer stumbling blocks

Generally turning nascent ideas into powerful solutions

One of our clients, the HR manager of an R&D unit of a multinational consumer products giant, did this with great success. Four years ago, he initiated an extensive training program that taught several hundred managers how to become better problem-solvers – both in running departmental teams and collaborating in cross-functional groups. This unit had been marked by a lack of delivering innovation, by divisiveness, indecision and stale ideas. Meetings were typically long, contentious and inconclusive. If these meetings had been hospitals and ideas their patients, the mortality rate would be shocking!

The training increased the creative capacities of these people by enhancing what we have found to be the four building blocks of creativity:

- Motivation
- Curiosity and fear
- Breaking of connections
- Evaluation

What the HR manager wanted to specifically improve among the unit included:

- Personal creativity
- Ability to deal positively with other people's skills
- Ability to recognize as much as develop break-through ideas
- Improve the unit's systematic problem-solving skills
- Share new processes, behaviors and a new 'language'

He recognized that a very different course would be needed in relation to what the unit had previously experienced.

Innovation Courses

Depending upon specific needs, courses need to be tailored accordingly; however, common to most are:

- Team Dynamics – via coaching and observing one’s actions via video playback, discussing what behaviors are needed at individual and team levels to make innovation happen
- Idea generation – learning skills and techniques to access one’s own innate creativity by thinking through often fanciful outcomes
- Idea development – how to take an appealing but, as yet, still impractical idea and learn ways to systematically transform it to build-in feasibility
- Problem solving – such as the use of the Synecticsworld ‘9-step’ process for innovative problem-solving at both a team and individual level
- Facilitation – the very real differences between ‘brainstorming’ which can produce countless wacky but impractical, undeliverable ideas and ‘facilitation’ which can help sort and filter ideas, achieving buy-in from the people who then have it in their power to fast-track an outcome which they feel they have helped create
- Immediate application – using the course to work-up ideas which can be applied back in one’s place of work, thus effectively ‘bridging’ the course experience with the reality of what-to-do-on-Monday-morning!

Feedback from someone on a course summed it up, “from one Synecticsworld creativity session, where scientists from diverse and unrelated areas were let loose on a problem, it was possible to escape from the ‘box’ and unleash real and commercially viable step change technologies.”

Another noted, “Scientists are often great cynics, pouring cold water onto new ideas. Using Synecticsworld techniques has transformed what were often ineffective and frustrating team meetings into really productive sessions.”

The courses put them in touch with that which deeply motivated them in their work – only one of which was money. They also learned how to tap into the boundless curiosity they all once had as children. Such curiosity is critical to getting people to speculate about the improbable, which is often necessary to developing big ideas.

In addition, the courses taught the managers how to recognize the mental ruts they had fallen into about practices in their company and its industry – i.e. ‘... the way business has to be done.’ Many of these practices were no longer valid. Yet they had

become dogma. Re-examining the logic behind these precepts was critical. This is about breaking and making connections, as we refer to it. Lastly, they were taught to avoid coming to quick judgments about new ideas, since many breakthrough ideas initially have problematic aspects to them that later can be worked out.

Soon after the training was completed, the HR manager noticed that managers with improved problem-solving skills were able to convene meetings at the drop-of-a-hat and get new ideas created and agreed, critical projects accomplished and key decisions made. The ultimate impact was that managers created much better ideas and implemented them far faster. Productivity shot up in a matter of weeks after the training concluded.

Changing Hiring Practices

If meetings don't screen out potentially beneficial big ideas, then hiring practices will and this is clearly at the HR door to get right. Innovative companies are full of two types of people: mavericks and entrepreneurs. They're similar but not quite the same thing. Big companies often exclude both types - or discover their 'mistake' after they've been hired and push them out later.

Mavericks want to come up with ideas and be recognized for them, but they don't want to execute. They just want to keep inventing new ones and be recognized for them. On the other hand, entrepreneurs want to pick-up ideas, run with them and receive compensation for the wealth they create. The recognition they crave comes in the form of money and autonomy.

Traditionally, Unilever makes a practice of hiring some mavericks and entrepreneurs. Although they are still a small part of the work force, these people come to work with wild ideas that break the 'mould'. While they often aren't good communicators, these people and their ideas are often protected by the company's diverse culture and constructive meeting etiquette. There are plenty of others in Unilever who will pay attention to them.

Unilever's embrace of individual and team creativity has helped generate substantial payback in the form of innovation.

Many large organizations' recruiting practices consciously or unconsciously screen out mavericks and entrepreneurs. Both types don't like to follow procedures. They often seem to daydream. They truly are 'corporate dreamers' - but they have their place and

good HR practice needs to recognize this. They come to work brimming with new ideas and expect that at least some will be adopted.

HR executives who want to foster breakthrough creativity and innovation can play a major role by widening the hiring screen to allow mavericks and entrepreneurs through. Of course, the challenge then is to recognize what turns them on and keep providing it!

Conclusion

Certainly, HR managers alone can't make their organizations innovative. The CEO and other senior executives ultimately will determine whether the environment for individuals, meetings and hiring practices are conducive to systemic creativity and innovation. Only these executives can make the necessary changes in attitudes toward risk that are required for innovation to flourish. Nonetheless, HR has a bigger role in making this happen than it often realizes.