

# INNOVATING DESPITE RED TAPE

Henra Mayer

*Innovate or die...You have heard it somewhere, maybe even received some training on the topic, but you still do not know how to make innovation relevant to your own working environment. After all, the bureaucratic environment of public enterprises does not lend itself to innovation or entrepreneurship – it is something that can only be achieved by smaller, privately owned enterprises.....*

If the response above echoes your own sentiment, or is reminiscent of the attitude of top management in your organisation, the time has come to face the facts. Innovation is as much applicable to the public sector as it is to the private sector. Without innovation there can be no progress and no future. Everything changes constantly and the future might look a lot different from what you ever imagined.

So, what can you do to support innovation in the public sector? The following suggestions will be a good starting point:

## **Cut the Clutter**

Administration can easily become burdensome and repetitive. Do you really need every single form you complete, does it really have to be signed by more than one person and does it have to take a week or more to be approved? The administration behind a task often takes longer to complete than the task itself. Seriously question your paper trail and procedures, you will not only become more effective, but save time in the process as well. Remember the PFMA states that you have to be efficient and effective. Understand this and you have a mandate to cut the clutter.

## **Commit to Innovation**

Give innovation a place to go in your organisation. Talk is cheap and without visible commitment the message will not get across. An “innovation room or coffee bar” can stimulate the cross fertilisation of ideas and create open communication channels. Putting innovation on every meeting agenda or allocating a certain



Henra Mayer

percentage of time per week to innovation, will do wonders.

Further integration is made possible by creating an end-to-end innovation process. This should be backed-up by existing technologies and guide the innovation process from idea submission through to measurement and benchmarking. This process should be designed in such a way that no idea can be interfered with, before some degree of experimentation or evaluation has taken place.

## **Innovation is Everyone’s Job**

Contrary to popular belief, the best ideas do not necessarily come from the top. Breakthrough ideas often come from the people working with the problem, the ones closest to the customer and the product or service. Learn to listen to them. Involve everyone in the organisation.

## **Be Aware of Innovation Killers**

We often subconsciously create barriers to innovation in our own minds. By simply being aware of our own thinking and actions, we can

start to eliminate strong barriers. Some examples of killer innovation attitudes are:

- *Fear of Ridicule*

“Only crazy people that dress funny can be good innovators. If I keep on suggesting crazy ideas I will be branded as odd.....”

- *Fear of Failure*

“If this does not work I will lose prestige, power and possibly my job!”. For innovation to flourish, failure must be accepted and calculated risks be encouraged.

- *Innovation Prejudice*

You get along with certain people or know that they normally do a good job, therefore you expect them to have good ideas, not really those you expect less of.

- *Habit*

Innovation has been educated out of us. We do not ask why anymore, we even believe that we cannot innovate. So why try? All of us can innovate and with some training and ideation techniques we can unlock a lot of potential.

- *Challenge the Status Quo*

We had no problem questioning rules and regulations or the way we did things as teenagers, but somehow we stopped doing that as adults. Especially in bigger and more established institutions. Very often outdated and burdensome procedures masquerade as rigid dogma, just because it is the *way we do things around here*.

## Incentivise Innovation Efforts

For a lot of people there are not enough hours in a day and to ask them to find time to innovate on

top of it, may seem crazy. Apart from creating the space for innovation and allowing time for it, as discussed above, incentivising innovation will help to encourage innovative behaviour. This can include both monetary and non-monetary rewards, it can include interesting training opportunities or the use of the company’s “frequent flyer miles”, the possibilities are endless and should be a lot of fun.

## Allocate Responsibility and Train Innovation Teams

Although innovation must be driven from the top and be owned by management, someone in the organisation must take responsibility for driving it. If it is not managed proactively, chances are it will slowly fade away. Training also makes a valuable contribution in creating awareness and know-how. Team work further strengthens innovation efforts and provides a strong foundation for future success.

## Stop Looking for Excuses

Excuses are plentiful, especially when facing something as uncomfortable as changing from the norm, but just by demystifying innovation and putting it into context for your own organisation, the battle is half-way won.

The above suggestions are hardly exhaustive but when taken to heart could make a big difference in making innovation happen. Even in the public sector. The necessity for innovation in all forms cannot be over emphasised and unfortunately the “head in the sand” approach will result in nothing more than the same old things! [G]

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS ARTICLE

Henra Mayer has a Masters in Business Leadership (MBL) which she passed with distinction. She has a background in journalism and sales account management and is passionate about innovation management. Henra is currently employed as

Innovation Manager by The Da Vinci Institute for the Management of Technology and Innovation. She is also studying towards a Doctorate in Business Leadership.

For more interaction on this subject, please visit our website on [www.gmdp.gpg.gov.za](http://www.gmdp.gpg.gov.za) and click on the discussion forum link.