

Mistakes innovation leaders make



Henra Mayer
Director of RIIS

Many executives have jumped on the innovation band-wagon with high expectations, only to be scorned by huge investments in technology and apart from confused and irritated staff, have no results to show for it. A project that in retrospect seems to have been a huge mistake.

Managing innovation in the organisational environment is a challenging task and one that often fails. It is not a magic-pill or instant cure for the organisation's problems. However it is not rocket science either. Innovation is the platform to create a core capability, a culture of future scenario planning and a healthy, dynamic environment that breeds success and excellent service delivery. Successful innovation implementation can be accomplished once important aspects and structures to support it, has been addressed and institutionalised.

However, even the best innovation management system will fail if it is not managed effectively by the leaders of the organisation. Every organisation is different, operating in different environments and therefore the management of innovation will be applied in the context pertaining to the specific organisation. Very often though, innovation initiatives fail for the same reason that change initiatives do and very frequently the most important factor preventing sustainable innovation success can be laid in front of the door of the organisation's leaders.

Our experience in the field has emphasised the importance of the leader's actions to help sustain innovation. We have learnt that the mistakes innovation leaders make often are universal and that it shares certain characteristics. By being aware of these innovation killers and planning to overcome similar hurdles, your attempts at innovation stand a better chance of survival than most. Some of the most common mistakes innovation leaders make are:

Short term focus

This is the worst mistake of all and one that is often made first. Rome was not built in a day and an innovation capability is not created overnight. It is a long term process. Like any change intervention, innovation plans need to be drafted, impact assessed, risks mitigated, resistance overcome and culture addressed. Surely not something that can be accomplished with speed. A business case needs to be developed for innovation. What exactly does it mean for the organisation, how much will it impact the bottom-line? As a leader or an innovation manager you need to show them the money! With a little research and well designed parameters, a quantitative figure demonstrating the impact innovation can have on profitability even the harshest critic can be silenced. Then of course, innovation is not for the faint hearted. Resilience and passion will serve the innovation manager well. It's no easy job, but can be accomplished through collaboration and coalition building. Get the organisational heavy-weights on your side as soon as possible.

What does innovation mean anyway?

How can you expect employees to be innovative if they do not know what innovation means for the organisation or for themselves? How will innovation impact on me, in front of my desk, my actions, my customers? The organisation needs to know exactly what their reason is for innovating, then define it, communicate it and make sure that it has personal meaning for every employee. It needs to be demystified. Innovation is everyone's business and communication in this regard cannot be overemphasised.

Broken communication

Talk about innovation at every opportunity, often and with passion. An e-mail sent by the CEO's PA once a month just simply does not cut it. E-mails are boring and bothersome anyway. Be creative! Build that business case for innovation. Make it concrete and show what

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is possible. Highlight the potential of innovation. Nothing can be more convincing than real life examples, facts and figures. Write up the success stories and share it. Create the sense of urgency for innovation even if it means the creation of a small crisis to drive the message home.

Bad examples

Innovation normally forms part of the organisation's core values, is hidden somewhere in the corporate strategy and that is unfortunately where it stays. If the message does eventually get down to employees, it is seen as just another fad management came up with at their strategic planning session. Leaders do not set the example or lead the way. They do not talk about the importance thereof or explain the rationale behind it. They get caught up in their own workload and innovation dies a quick, quiet death. They drive short term goals and soon shift their attention away from the achievement of innovation to the achievement of broader goals - as stipulated in the corporate business scorecard, not realising that innovation in itself will in the long term, support and stretch those goals in any event. If management is not serious about the implementation of innovation, why should the rest of the organisation bother?

Not making available the necessary resources

Even when the communication and planning has been done, without the necessary people, systems, structures and budget, innovation does not stand a chance. It does cost money and it does take time. If your business case has been carefully constructed, it will be more than enough to justify the related expenses. Again, expensive technologies or systems are often not necessary as most KM systems already embedded and functional in the organisation's technological infrastructure, should be easily adaptable or modified to accommodate an innovation platform. This is a function that can often be preformed by an internal IT team.

No listening and abusing veto powers

Innovation needs the space and culture to flourish. This implies trusting relationships and open channels. People need to be listened to and given the power to make decisions in their own areas of influence. Ideas need to flow from inception to implementation as soon as possible, without any one person using authority and power to interfere with idea implementation. The use of innovation decision committees is also ineffective and slow. The innovation system or process should incorporate the appropriate rules and regulations to encourage organisation-wide participation and acceptable outcomes.

Not managing the process and the system

Once a process for innovation has been designed it needs to be active and effective. People must get feedback on their submissions and the implementation of good ideas must take place. The process needs to be actively managed and updated. Allocate this responsibility clearly to a responsible individual, unit or team.

No measurement of progress

The old cliché still rings true. What gets measured gets done. Know what the impact is of your innovation drive. Do you see results and if you do, in which areas? What about the culture? Do people get the innovation message and what type of progress has been made? Measure your success quantitatively as well qualitatively; you will be amazed at the results. You will know where your strength and weaknesses lie and this will guide you in future planning efforts.

Not incentivising innovation efforts

People need to know what is in it for them. Innovation incentives should be structured according to the prevailing culture. You can incentivise in various ways, formally as well as informally, monetary or non-monetary. Remember to incentivise as soon as possible as

well. Instant reward for innovation efforts will immediately encourage innovative behaviour. Consider incorporating innovation into the corporate business scorecard and cascade it down to every level in the organisation. Innovation measures should also be included in the personal development plans as well as performance appraisals of every single employee. Successful innovation is, after all, everyone's business.

Not addressing culture or innovation training

Addressing the culture of the organisation is possibly the single most important aspect for ensuring innovation success. It is the employees, who are the closest to clients and products, that need to take the organisation forward into the future. Their understanding of the need for innovation is therefore crucial. Training in this regard is imperative; training on the internal arrangements for innovation enablement, the innovation process, criteria and pitfalls, the functioning of innovation teams, innovative thinking techniques and tools and much more. Accredited suppliers and professional input can assist to unlock the potential of the organisation as a whole.

Punishment of failure

When people are afraid of failure, innovation is stifled. Employees are often not allowed to make mistakes; it is associated with negativity and a written warning. Honest mistakes should be allowed and even encouraged. It should be seen as a sign of innovation and courage. When failure is used as opportunity for learning and sharing of lessons learnt, innovation - and therefore the whole organisation - wins.

Henra Mayer
Director
The Research Institute for Innovation
and Sustainability
henra@riis.co.za