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Pave the Way for Innovation

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Everyone can agree that organizational innovation is a valuable asset that's necessary to compete in today's hyper-competitive business environment. There are a lot of management theories about how you can create an innovative workforce or project team, but it's as simple as setting the right expectations, removing obstacles and having a little patience.

Set the Expectation for Innovation

Leaders that challenge the organization and make it known that they expect new ideas will get new ideas. Setting this expectation, however, means that you need to give those new ideas full consideration when you receive them.

A lot of companies prematurely discount ideas or are too busy to properly evaluate them. This communicates that ideas are not valued, and eventually the organization as whole not only stops submitting new ideas, but stops thinking of them altogether.

If your organization wants new ideas, you should set this expectation in writing. For example, you can require everyone to submit one new idea annually as part of their employee performance plans. Or, as a project leader, you can set this expectation with your team.

These ideas can be for new opportunities for your organization, or to improve an existing facet. For example, people see problems in their organizations all the time, both inside and outside of their job description. This requirement causes them to not just see the problems, though, but to investigate at least one and propose a viable solution.

Whether it is in your formal job description or not, though, you should take this requirement as your own personal challenge.

Remove the Obstacles that Prevent Innovation

The number one obstacle to innovation is overworking people. When people are overworked, not only does their productivity decline and their mistakes increase, but they become reactive thinkers versus reflective thinkers—simply trying to stay afloat, rather than thinking clearly and creatively to solve problems.

Innovation cannot be forced into a compressed amount of time. You must allocate time for incubation, or the development and planning of ideas. This works best when problems and challenges are defined with clarity, and this clarity often does not exist when your team is in a constant "fire-fighting" environment.

The second obstacle that prevents innovation is bureaucracy. The more management levels required for approval of a new idea, the greater the likelihood that it won't happen.

Even though some management structures appear to be flat, when you start to factor in steering committees and boards, the number of approval layers can be surprisingly high. The biggest negative consequence of this is when people stop submitting ideas out of frustration.

You can whine about bureaucracy, or you can take action. One proven method is to collect data that documents its impact, such as lost time or lost opportunities due to delayed decisions. Over time this data becomes a stronger and stronger impetus for change that reduces or eliminates bureaucracy.

Once the expectation for innovation has been set and obstacles have been removed, the last ingredient is patience. Just like the farmer has set the conditions that foster a successful crop, leaders set the conditions to facilitate innovation with these two steps. When you do, innovation will happen naturally and automatically—and when it does, you will not be able to stop it.

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