Innovation Officer Responsibility #8: Nurture Culture

by Bill Poston

The Chief Innovation Officer must look beyond strategy and process to create and nurture a culture conducive to innovation. This can be a tremendous challenge in large, established enterprises that have been focused on efficiency for decades. Nurturing a culture of innovation means redefining success for those that work in the functions supporting innovation. It doesn't mean changing the entire company.

The mantra “innovation is everyone’s job” is bunk. Most people in large organizations are there to efficiently execute the core business and generate the earnings that provide us the capacity to invest in innovation. The Chief Innovation Officer should focus on the culture within their area of influence.

The culture question is often posed in terms of the organization’s tolerance for risk. The implication is that we must get comfortable with failure if we are to succeed in innovation. I do not believe in this line of thinking. Yes, there is risk in any innovative endeavor, but it is our job to manage it, not celebrate it. When an initiative fails to deliver against expectations, it is our job to ensure the organization learns something from the experience.

Ultimately, an innovative culture is a learning culture. One that tolerates risk and failure only for what it can teach us. We should maintain high standards for performance and hold people accountable for delivering results or clearly articulating learnings from failure. Let’s save the celebrations for success.

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