How to Protect Breakthrough Innovation: Designate a Sponsor

by Austin Locke and Pamela Soin

During Kalypso’s 2015 Innovation Officer Retreat, Chief Innovation Officers (ClnOs) identified the five most effective ways to protect breakthrough innovation:

1. Define an innovation strategy
2. Involve the business early in what the breakthrough team is doing
3. Designate a sponsor (board) to promote the biggest breakthroughs
4. Employ competitive analysis to monitor the portfolio’s mix
5. Utilize a portfolio strategist to understand the impact of breakthrough innovations

We’ve already covered the first two ways to protect innovation. If you missed it, you can find the links above. Here, we discuss why it’s important to designate a sponsor to promote the biggest breakthroughs.

Designate a Sponsor (Board) to Promote the Biggest Breakthroughs

I started in consulting as a summer intern during business school. My first assignment was to support Pamela Soin on a portfolio management project at a large consumer products company. In addition to our client service work, Pamela had the idea to host an internal portfolio management “boot camp” with 20+ practitioners from across the firm. Naturally, as the intern, a great deal of the planning work fell on my shoulders.

Almost immediately I began sending out invitations and agendas for the event, requesting RSVPs from would-be participants. A few weeks later Pamela asked about the expected attendance at the event. “I’m not really sure. No one has replied to me yet,” I explained. Pamela quickly contacted the invitees, informing them that they “needed to respond to her intern.” Within 24 hours, nearly everyone had sent their response. Apparently the voice of a Senior Manager was heard and understood more clearly than the intern’s.

We often find a similar situation occurs when projects move through the pipeline without strong sponsorship. For big ideas, especially if they are incubated and handed off to another group, it is essential to have the idea championed by an influential individual (or board) so that people clearly understand that the innovation is essential to the success of the business. Day-to-day business operations are often not focused on new innovations or strategic moves; they’re concerned with delivering annual operating plans and hitting short term goals. This can cause breakthrough ideas to receive less than adequate attention if a strong sponsor isn’t constantly reminding the business why the new innovation is so important.

Organizations that innovate well have good portfolio capabilities that rank and prioritize projects. This information can be used by the champion to ensure the organization understands a breakthrough innovation is a priority. A sponsor’s duties also include helping the business fund a breakthrough idea if and when it’s needed. With that said, project sponsors must also be prepared to remove a project from the pipeline if it is not hitting its critical success criteria.

Assigning an influential project sponsor will ensure breakthrough innovations are protected inside the organization. The sponsor should be prepared to assist with funding and resources, promote the project’s importance, stay close to the project through gate decision making, and make tough calls if the project doesn’t hit success criteria. Oh, and just make sure your project sponsor isn’t an intern.

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