How to Protect Breakthrough Innovation: Three Reasons to Involve the Business Early
by Pamela Soin and Austin Locke

During Kalypso’s 2015 Innovation Officer Retreat, Chief Innovation Officers (CINOs) 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

In part 1 of this series on How to Protect Breakthrough Innovation, we covered how defining an innovation strategy can help protect an organization’s most valuable innovations. Here, we discuss why it is essential to involve the day-to-day business as early as possible in what the breakthrough team is working on.

Recently, one of my family members underwent organ transplantation surgery to replace a heart valve. The circumstances that surround the process of taking an organ from one human, or even an animal, and transplanting that organ inside another person’s body are nothing short of miraculous. One of the most curious facets of this type of surgery is that the human body will often recognize the new organ as a foreign substance and attempt to destroy it, even though the new organ is there to sustain life. The body’s built in defense, the immune system, is essential to destroy bacteria, viruses, and many other diseases. But during these types of life-saving surgeries, the immune system might reject and destroy the new, life-saving organ if left unchecked.

Breakthrough innovations are, by nature, new and foreign to a business. Organizations are not designed for innovation. Once mature, companies have evolved to execute ongoing operations with maximum efficiency and minimum disruption. Like our bodies, they have been trained through experience to attack and eliminate disturbances that could interrupt the day-to-day operations that keep them alive. This is why breakthrough innovations should be developed by dedicated breakthrough teams.

The breakthrough team does things differently than the rest of the business. It is not focused on daily operations; the breakthrough team is encouraged to move off the beaten path and act creatively. However, the breakthrough team must not exclude or disrespect the day-to-day business that has given it life. In fact, the breakthrough team must involve the business very early in its work for at least three reasons:

Reason #1 - Fulfill a Customer Need

The day-to-day business interacts frequently with customers, providing a direct link to real-time customer needs. Many times, the breakthrough team isolates itself and invests months of time and effort developing a novel product or service, only to find out that the business’ current or potential customers have no need for it. Involve the day-to-day business early in the development of breakthrough innovations to be sure the team is fulfilling a real customer need.

Reason #2 - Facilitate Commercialization

At some point in the new product development process, a breakthrough innovation will be ready to scale. The breakthrough team will not commercialize the product itself; it will rely on the day-to-day business to execute. If the business is unaware of breakthrough projects, there can be significant commercialization delays. In many of industries where time to market (TTM) is critical, the business cannot afford to be late to market with breakthrough innovations. Perhaps more importantly, the breakthrough team will probably only have funding for early development, and the business has the funds to actually commercialize an innovation. The business will probably be far more interested in funding the breakthrough innovations that it has been highly involved in.

Reason #3 - Generate Support and Excitement

When the business is suddenly exposed to a new project, especially during later product development stages, its first reaction will likely be to reject it. Like our bodies, the day-to-day business is skeptical, sometimes even hostile, to anything that could interrupt normal operations. Innovation leaders and breakthrough teams often feel like their own company is a bigger enemy than their competitors. These feelings and negative reactions to new initiatives can be improved by involving the business early in the breakthrough team’s efforts. In many cases, early involvement of the business generates extra support and excitement. The breakthrough team’s work is exciting, novel, and unique; sharing it with the day-to-day business early on will promote support for breakthrough innovations.
Conclusion

It is essential for organizations to involve the day-to-day business early on in the efforts of the breakthrough team. Early involvement protects breakthrough innovations by ensuring that they fulfill customer needs, are quickly and effectively commercialized, and receive adequate support. In Part 3 of this series, we’ll discuss why organizations should designate a sponsor to support the biggest breakthrough innovations.

More Reading

How to Protect Breakthrough Innovation: Define an Innovation Strategy

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