Improving Innovation Team Effectiveness

by Braden Kelley

I focus on the people side of innovation. This is what fascinates me. It is the area I think is most important to innovation success. I’ll leave the new product development side of innovation (the area of innovation that companies actually spend money on) to the design firms and the boutique innovation consultancies.

Why?

Because:

1. I always tend to be a little too early
2. When you dig a little deeper, innovation is all about the people, and the only sustainable competitive advantage comes from the investment you make not in your products, but in your people.

While the product and service sides of innovation may be hot today, the day is coming when an increasing number of individuals and companies will realize that a dollar invested properly in building a sustainable innovation culture and infrastructure will outperform a dollar spent on developing an innovative new product or service.

Why?

Well, for one thing, something like 90% of new products launched into the marketplace fail\(^1\).

Why?

For lots of reasons, most of which have to do with people, including:

- Not bothering to ask the people who might buy the product/service if they were willing to pay enough to justify the cost to develop, make, market, deliver and support the product or service
- Company assigned the wrong people to the project team to develop, make, market, deliver and support the product/service
- Underestimated resistance from government entities in allowing the new product or service to enter the market.

Hopefully I have convinced you that innovation is all about the people. Now I have to convince you that innovation is a team sport despite all the brilliant propaganda that we inflict upon ourselves to reinforce the myth of the lone genius, or the lone innovator.

When you dig deeper, it is understood that every lone genius or lone innovator either had a whole team of people working for them doing the real work, or were greatly influenced by their conversations with others — Albert Einstein, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Steve Jobs, etc. Pick your favorite, and I guarantee you that if you dig below the surface, the innovation your lone innovator is credited with, did not result solely from their thoughts or actions in isolation.

It is because innovation is a team sport, and not the result of the efforts of a lone genius, that I created The Nine Innovation Roles to highlight the fact that everyone has a role to play in innovation. Follow this link for a description of each of The Nine Innovation Roles (in English, Spanish, Swedish, or French) and loads of other free resources. Here is a quick list:

1. Revolutionary
2. Conscript
3. Connector
4. Artist
5. Customer Champion
6. Troubleshooter
7. Judge
8. Magic Maker
9. Evangelist
It is only when all nine roles are represented at the appropriate times throughout the innovation project lifecycle that any potential innovation project has a chance of succeeding. It is the collaboration and the combination of skills, knowledge, perspectives and abilities that each brings that leads to innovation success. No one person can do it all.

Just getting the right people together is not enough to guarantee success. You must also provide the team with unique and differentiated customer insights, together with other kinds of inspiration to get them pointed in the right direction. Even if you get the right people pulled together to form a well-balanced innovation team, and provide them with customer insights and inspiration, you still have to earn the right to unlock the innovation potential from this team. This can be done by:

- Demonstrating sustained commitment to innovation
- Creating a common language of innovation (including definition, vision, strategy, goals, etc.)
- Installing the right infrastructure to support innovation
- Building a more connected organization
- Working up through the different levels of The Innovator’s Framework

If you do all of these things, you’ll start to replace the fear of the unknown with curiosity and you’ll start to give people courage to act. And after all, inventors have great ideas, but innovators change the world.

Innovators not only feel the courage to act, but they feel compelled to act. Innovators will fight through any obstacle that stands in their way to see that the group’s solution is not just introduced, but widely adopted by the market. Successful innovators tend to be empowered with strong knowledge, skills, and abilities through:

- Invention
- Collaboration
- Entrepreneurship

Innovation is ultimately a partnership between the individual and the organization, so you can’t expect a team to make innovation happen by itself out of thin air. The organization has just as big of a role to play, and if the organization fails to play that role, then the team will be unable to innovate – or at least unable to innovate within the organization. If you truly have a team that feels compelled to act, then they will leave and create a startup to transform the useful seeds of invention into a widely-adopted solution valued above every existing alternative (including yours). Is that what you really want to happen?

Your goal is to create innovation inside the organization right?

Well then, just how far are you willing to go to improve your innovation teams’ effectiveness?

Sources:
1 Innovation Excellence – Top 10 Reasons Products Fail at Jobs-to-be-Done by Tony Ulwick
2 Stoking Your Innovation Bonfire by Braden Kelley

Originally published on August 12th, 2014

What’s your view? Add your question or comment
About the Author

Braden Kelley
bradenkelley@live.com

Braden is an innovation speaker, trainer, marketing strategist, and recognized thought leader. He has recently begun distributing Innovation eLearning and is the author of Stoking Your Innovation Bonfire from John Wiley & Sons. He tweets from @innovate.