Leading Innovation in Large Organizations: Should Rebels be in Charge?

by Amber Lyons and Sean Klein

We like rebels. Just think about how many movies have been made to portray rebels like Jessie James, Bonnie and Clyde and Baby Face? We like them in business too. We value them as entrepreneurs who defy traditional business rules, take uncalculated risks and design innovative products. They work in nontraditional environments, without bureaucracy or shareholders. Steve Jobs, Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg are a few great innovators that come to mind from the past few decades, and even though they may run the largest corporations of the world, they began as leaders of innovative startups.

The rebels of history and in business make good stories. But while rebel innovators make great leaders in small startups that focus on fewer products and maintain flat hierarchies that are “often only one or two layers deep – adaptive, and flexible,” not all rebel characteristics carry over to the innovation leader in a large company. (Spinelli, 2008) The innovation leader in a Fortune 500 company must have the skills necessary to work with leadership, policy and culture to influence existing business and not work against it. Here are some attributes we feel the innovation leader of a large business must have, that a rebel may not.

The individual leading innovation in a large company is responsible for developing a culture supportive of innovation. They are held accountable for delivering results from innovation. This position may be the Chief Innovation Officer or some role that reports directly to the CEO. It goes without saying that large companies must be operated differently than small ones.

The attributes of the individual needed for this role is not the typical startup innovator. The environment is too different, with a unique set of challenges and required skillsets. The most obvious difference between the large and small firm is the necessity for tighter controls on budget, processes, policies and leadership. The attributes necessary for the innovation leader in a large firm are distinctly different to those of the rebel innovator in a startup. Those differences must be acknowledged.

References:


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