March Madness: Teams That Win in Innovation

by Jamie Lahiere

The excitement of March Madness sparks a certain fire in my belly to write about the optimal structure of innovation teams.

Innovation is inherently cross-functional and requires transformational leadership across multiple roles. Working across business units, functions, and geographies is critical to successful innovation projects because it intentionally breaks down organizational silos that hinder collaboration, creativity, and diversity of perspective. Inc. Magazine highlights the benefits of working across business units saying, “Bringing people together from different disciplines can improve problem solving and lead to more thorough decision making.”

In the spirit of March Madness, let’s think about innovation teams in these terms: The Chief Innovation Officer is the coach who gets the funding, formulates strategy, and creates capability building roadmaps, and the business unit leads are the star players who execute the project and drive home the results. One characteristic of a well-designed team is the presence of an expert in every position. In business, this means a successful innovation team spans organizational boundaries and accounts for every necessary function, thus improving coordination and integration.

Cross-functional teams are composed of members who may have competing loyalties and obligations within their sub-units, and are usually temporary teams organized for one important purpose. This puts a considerable amount of pressure on the innovation team to reduce the production cycle time in new product development. Effective communication is often reported as the number one barrier to cross-functional team effectiveness, which hammers home the importance of establishing a strong “coach” with exemplary communication skills. Without adequate communication in place, the team will never stand a chance to advance to the “championship game.”

No matter what size, type, industry, or location of a company, every organization requires that people work together. It's the Chief Innovation Officer's responsibility to make sure that those teams are structured in the right way to fuel successful execution. Innovation is a deliberate departure from the past; by challenging organizational silos and applying cross-functional team structures, companies everywhere can drive better results from innovation initiatives.

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