



Innovation

Sr. Director of Marketing and Customer Care
for Gexa Energy

www.victorhoward.typepad.com

Leadership Qualities that Enable Innovation

The success of organizations that deliver innovation is highly dependent on the capabilities and qualities of the leader who is guiding the work of the organization. While there are many approaches to managing projects, among the leaders who deliver innovative change, there is a set of actions and qualities that helped them inspire, influence, and enable innovation. These common threads of leadership propel the development of innovations that deliver sustained value.

The purpose of this article is to present common qualities of successful innovation leadership and spur self examination to improve each of our own innovation leadership competencies.

What successful innovation leaders do...

"The job of a leader is to accomplish transformation of his organization."

- Dr. W. Edwards Deming. "The New Economics for Industry, Government, Education (1993)

"Management's job is to see the company not as it is...but as it can become."

- John Teets, Former Chairman, Greyhound Corp.

Accomplishing transformation is what leaders do. By definition, transformation is change. To stay competitive, this change often involves innovation – creating new value in untapped markets (see June 2008 column, "Business Innovations, A Balanced Approach"). I love the two quotes shown above. They remind me that we should be looking to the future, remembering the past, and acting in the present.

Whether it is for a whole company or for specific projects, I have observed three constants among leaders who successfully delivered innovation: Focus, Foundation, and Freedom.

Focus

The most effective organization leaders I have known establish a clear purpose and communicate that purpose to the organization. The best-of-the-best leaders establish a purpose that is inspirational, connecting emotionally with individuals and fostering commitment. People need to have the rally flag. What is the purpose they are working to achieve? Taking it to a program or project level, the purpose of the organization provides the initial screen through which ideas, options and alternatives can be assessed. Does the idea help us achieve the objective of the organization?

I have seen the following questions used to effectively develop focus:

1. Where are we going?
2. What are we trying to accomplish?

3. Who are we?/Will we serve?
4. How will we act?

Yes, these are very much like vision and mission, but those terms are very “corporate”. Not that vision and mission are inherently bad, but so often executives spend days (or weeks or months) crafting the exact language for these items only to have them sit in binders or get printed on a wall poster that nobody reads. It is easy to get caught up in the excitement of the exercise and forget about the importance of communicating to employees. Inspirational pragmatism trumps flair. The effective leader who inspires others keeps the message simple and easy to communicate.

The power of focus is in creating and communicating a clear and sharply defined purpose for work. An effectively defined and communicated purpose is positive, inspiring, and challenging. It provides a direction by which all others can rally, align resources, and screen ideas.

Foundation

The effective innovation leader ensures everyone can accomplish the work required to achieve the purpose of the organization or initiative. This is more than providing tools and resources, or operating as a point of escalation for problems. Providing a foundation that encourages innovation means providing an environment where everybody can gain.

Providing the foundation starts with an innovation leader having an appreciation of the system. What is the system? According to W. Edwards Deming, a system is the network of interdependent components that work together to try to accomplish the aim of the system. The system is not the organization chart or a project plan with detailed work breakdown structures. A system is composed of people, processes, technology, policies, tools, etc. This is a very basic description of a system. To learn more, I highly recommend reading Chapter 3 of *“The New Economics”* by W. Edwards Deming.

Innovation leaders are teachers. Leading innovation is not about managing project tasks, it is about teaching, counseling, and mentoring. Much of their time will be spent teaching people about the system and providing coaching on how people can work effectively in the system to achieve its purpose.

Innovation leaders show incredible aptitude to organize people and projects for success. Using a system view of the organization, they break barriers and eliminate the “This is mine, that is yours”, HR org chart mentality that permeates many of our organizations. They teach others to do the same. They understand the major project milestones that lead to success, but also understand the project will not execute linearly through each of the phases. They incorporate learning into the project and make adjustments along the way based on the knowledge developed. They incorporate testing into the project – not simply testing to evaluate whether or not requirements were met, but testing based on a hypothesis.

Freedom

Providing freedom comes naturally if a leader has established focus and foundation. Freedom gives people in the system the opportunity to deliver innovation. It provides the liberty for individuals in the system to explore, test, win, and fail.

This is much more than setting performance goals, assigning tasks, or managing a project plan. It is the art of thoughtful delegation that provides people responsibility for the work, accountability for the outcomes, and authority for the decisions. These three items are inseparable. Too often, leaders make the mistake of assigning work and accountability, but do not give up decision making. This leads to an environment where the worker “owns” the outcome; instead, by making the decisions, the leader has taken on all accountability and has reduced the joy that can be found in the work.

So, how is freedom displayed by the leader?

1. The leader establishes Focus and Foundation.
2. The leader spends time understanding the people working in the system and the diversity of skills, capabilities, and experiences each person brings to the system.
3. The leader chooses others to lead the system towards its aim, bestowing responsibility the work, accountability for the outcomes, and authority for the decision.
4. The leader shows the utmost confidence in the people entrusted with authority.
5. The leader provides feedback and coaching to help the system achieve its purpose.

The outcome of developing Freedom is an organization built around trust and support. The organization will develop courageous people who are free from fear of failure. Instead of placing blame, these organizations learn and improve. They assess the factor that led to failure, make adjustments, and keep moving forward.

Bottom line...

Organizations operating with a strong focus, solid foundation, and a high degree of freedom are organizations that face the future courageously. In my view of the world and through the leaders I have experienced, the greatest forward progress and innovative developments were enabled by leaders who understood the imperative need to establish focus and foundation, and had the self confidence to give up the exercising of authority to those people entrusted to accomplish the purpose of the organization.

These leaders are not common. The characteristics required of these leaders are not taught in the best-of-the-best business schools. These leaders are servant-leaders. These leaders understand that true greatness and leadership is the result of giving yourself in service to others.

Watch for the next installment of this article where we will explore some of the key elements and characteristics of servant-leadership. In the meantime, please feel free to comment on this article at www.victorhoward.typepad.com. Look for the post that starts with BPTrends.