

Can Innovation be taught?

An insight into training a tiger team

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Introduction

Breakthrough innovation is essential in the small technology industry, but often seen as a complex and daunting task in this highly regulated, increasingly cost-sensitive market. Today, new products likely meet twin challenges; they must prove real value in a cost-effective manner.

Nurturing and utilizing innovation is about understanding opportunity, being creative and ultimately delivering new products and services that grow a company's top line. This article is about the training a tiger-team to perform this task.

For the last five years or so, it has been very common to hear CEOs name 'innovation' as a top-of-mind priority for their companies. Numerous statistics generated by industry and technology management and innovation consultants establish the positive link between a company's ability to innovate and share holder return. Within the last three years, however, it has become clear that while many senior managers have acknowledged the innovation imperative, many organizations are struggling to actually raise their game. Many are asking, "Can innovation be taught?"



Answer – work with someone who has done it before; work with serial innovators. Tools and techniques can be shared which stimulate and direct creativity and prepare a team for the challenge of execution. And the mindset for navigating the unknown can be passed on. Innovation can be taught.

Here are four guidelines for training a tiger team to become innovators:

1. Form the right team

Innovation teams (hopefully comprised of a group of professionals from across an organization) need to possess several critical attributes to navigate the potential pit falls of an innovation challenge. First of these is domain expertise. Real skill – not merely passion - is the raw material with which to develop meaningful new insights into needs of customers, exploit the right technology and realize business opportunity. A good rule of thumb – if members of a new team haven't worked together before (because their skills sets are not regularly paired in the organization), it's a good start.

The second area to consider is thinking style. Create a team with both left-brain and right-brain thinkers. Some people relish facts, detail and planning (left) while others prefer to speculate on the future and feel their way through a task (right). Breakthrough work absolutely requires both these modes of thinking, and unbalanced teams run the risk of faltering on either the creative or analytical demands of the innovation challenge.

Third, innovation team members need to be resilient. They are going to create something that is wonderful, but which their organization is in all likelihood going to initially have grave doubts about and probably reject, exactly because it looks so different from “business-as-usual.”

2. Commandeer an innovation work space

The term ‘skunk works’ became popular in the early 1990’s. It was the name given to an autonomous project team tasked with blue-sky project work often with a good deal of secrecy thrown in. While the secrecy element is not advocated, to get a new group of people trained up in unfamiliar tools, approaches and attitudes one needs to take them out of their day-job environment.

3. Use the right innovation tools

The tools you will need fall into these categories:

Tools to develop understanding

Before starting to generate concepts, a team must become wise to the nature of the situation. If the consumer is at the heart of an issue, a team must gather data about their needs and understand how they think. For market share challenges, data on the activities of the competition is a must-have and for developing a new device, an exploration of technology will be needed.

Tools to release creativity

It has become something of a cliché to ask employees to cover a wall with sticky notes with their ideas. Much more can be achieved if idea and concept generation is properly framed and purposefully stimulated. Devices such as flash cards depicting analogies to your challenge from other industries can create links to the challenge and promote new thinking and ideas.

Tools to focus on, and deliver results

Assessing and evolving the best concepts is a frequent stumbling point in the innovation process. To mature ideas into investment-worthy propositions requires tools which morph the initial elements of an idea or solution into a rounded concept – even going so far as a first pass business model and plan. Tools that sharpen the propositions include having teams pitch their investment proposition to the CEO and board.

4. Make-ready to execute

A good way of thinking about a newly formed innovation team and effort is as a black box into which you pour difficult, often messy challenges and out of which inspiring propositions appear. If, however, the black box is not fully integrated into the business and supported by senior management, it is likely that resources will not be marshalled appropriately to execute on the project.

In parallel to effort aimed at generating the new breakthrough product, management must make ready to execute on any new proposition. Resource must now be newly allocated to the development of the new product and if the organisation does not plan for this demand, execution will stall badly whilst the CEO and business group managers stare one another down.

Despite these challenges, innovation remains a key to profitable growth and a hallmark of the medical sector's leading companies. For those that are willing to develop a new way of attacking product development, innovation tiger teams may be part of the solution. Certainly, these new types of group have a precedent of success when implemented well – and are testament to the fact that innovation can be taught.



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