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HOW TO STRUCTURE INNOVATIVE THINKING WITHIN YOUR TEAM: IT WON'T HAPPEN SPONTANEOUSLY!

Anyone who has driven an automobile over ninety miles per hour can appreciate that driver peripheral vision deteriorates as speed increases. This is a metaphor that might describe your business: as your team becomes stressed and overworked, peripheral vision deteriorates.

The deterioration of peripheral vision means the reduction of innovative ideas and the triumph of adaptive thinking. Kraft Macaroni and Cheese is an easy-to-fix lunch or dinner. Kraft put the same ingredients into a new cardboard box and rebranded Kraft Macaroni and Cheese as a breakfast food (Wida, 2020).

We would call it an adaptive idea but not an innovative one.

Today we will discuss the management of adaptive and innovative ideas in in-person and virtual team settings. Our basic theme is that unless you structure time to focus on innovation, you will be surrounded by adaptive ideas.

What Gets Verbalized in Team Meetings?

The purpose of team brainstorming is to openly discuss all types of ideas at first. At a later stage, the team will sort out ideas. During brainstorming, however, there may be ideas that team members will decide not to share with colleagues. What are those ideas not shared?

This was the focus of Stanford University psychologist Justin Berg's research. (2019). Berg conducted five experiments in which participants

tackled novel technology projects. These projects included devising an innovative piece of fitness equipment or a mechanism to keep people from falling asleep in self-driving cars. Participants were asked to produce three initial solutions and then rank those solutions from most to least promising. Berg then asked a group of experts to rate participants' ideas.

Berg found that when participants spent little time developing their ideas, their predicted rankings were statistically like the rankings of experts. In other words, going with your gut feel may be a clever idea.

When participants spent more time fleshing out their ideas, however, the idea that ranked second-best often finished highest among the experts.

Adaptive versus Innovative Ideas.

In business settings, Berg found that adaptive ideas tended to be the most verbalized. Adaptive ideas are often minor variations of proven ideas. Introducing Macaroni and Cheese as a breakfast food is a classic adaptive idea.

Adaptive ideas have virtues that are more apparent. It is easy to visualize the concrete steps necessary for completion.

Adaptive ideas fit well within a stable industry. But what if the industry is going through a period of instability and constant change?

Adaptive ideas require limited creativity. Innovative ideas are more conceptual. Implementation steps are more difficult to articulate. Innovative ideas may or may not be as obviously beneficial. An example of an innovative idea was Netflix' decision to abandon its core distribution channel of providing DVDs by mail. It would pioneer creation of technology to download movies directly into subscribers' computers.

During this time, Blockbuster was developing adaptive techniques to get more customers into its retail stores.

The important implication of Berg's research is that employees may keep quiet about innovative because they know adaptive Ideas will find greater initial appreciation. But company survival may require innovative thinking.

Implications:

The SVP of Global Digital Marketing at a Fortune 1000 company gave these reactions to the research findings:

"There is a place for both adaptive and innovative ideas. We recently implemented ideas for virtual customer engagement. It is an adaptive Idea that only permits us to live to fight another day. But that is all it is.

"We need more innovative ideas to be sustainable and scalable towards our digital omnichannel transformation."

Suggestions:

When engaging in brainstorming, ask participants to produce BOTH adaptive and creative ideas. Do not pit one against the other. Put them into separate categories.

Select the best idea from each category. Move first in getting funds for the adaptive idea, since it will be the easiest to sell up the corporate hierarchy. While you implement the adaptive idea, have the team spend time fleshing out the best innovative idea.

If you do not structure this in your meetings, it will not happen spontaneously.

Conclusions

Leadership coach and Board Chair John Ela stresses that both adaptive and innovative ideas deserve respect (2020). When asking your team to brainstorm, the team may be biased toward generating adaptive ideas while remaining silent about innovative thoughts. Ask team members to submit both types of ideas but place them in separate categories.

When conducting team meetings online, it is important that the leader structure discussions by first focusing on adaptive and then focusing on innovative. The framework of online conversations tends to make it difficult for why team members to contradict the loudest voices. Do not place your trust in online team dynamics. Place your trust in structure.

Thinking out of the box may be required for long-term organizational survival, yet there are so many financial and emotional pressures to focus on next quarter.”

References

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