

Understanding innovation, mind *and* heart

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Have you ever tried to sell a particularly imaginative, creative or innovative idea into or inside a large organisation? What was the reaction, was it,

- (a) "Oh, that's fantastic. We have never done it like that before but would be delighted to try it out!"
- (b) "This is a really fantastic idea, but I am not sure we are quite ready for that. Perhaps if we tune it down a bit? "
- (c) "Ah, but we have never done it like that; it will not work, otherwise our competitors would have done it all ready. I am sure you can do something a bit less risky."

Are options (b) and (c) the ones you are most likely to encounter? Ah well, many highly creative people dealing with or are working inside large organisations experience just the same.

Innovation is firmly on the agenda of organisations, large or small, public or private. A global survey of over 1,400 executives and senior managers conducted by management consultancy McKinsey in September 2007 found that, "some 70% of corporate leaders say innovation is among their top three priorities for driving growth." While this is great news reality seems to lag behind the desired state of affairs; the survey also found that just over a quarter of executives felt that innovation had become part of "everything their organisation does".¹

So on the one hand we have an expressed desire for innovation, but on the other hand we find that innovation has not really become part of the fabric, at least in the majority of organisations.

I believe that this is due to the fact that leaders of organisations have understood the necessity of innovation with their heads. They understand that innovative organisations are commercially more successful, and benefit from better stock market performance. But while the importance of innovation is understood somehow many of these organisational leaders fail to truly understand and embrace innovation – with all its messiness and risk – in their hearts.

To create truly innovative organisation requires more than putting processes and structures into place. It requires a significant shift in values and behaviours: from risk aversion and avoiding uncertainty to embracing ambiguity and much experimentation; from 'hiding failures under the carpet' to exposing them for extraction of maximum learning; from being a lone worrier to becoming a versed team player; from surrounding oneself with likeminded people to embracing diversity, despite the difficulties caused by potential misunderstanding and conflict.

In short, it requires changes in values, behaviours and the 'way we do things around here', i.e. culture. [Anyone who is into new-years-resolutions knows how hard this is – even if you want to!]

Of course there are some organisations that embark whole-heartedly on the journey to creating an organisation where you can find 'innovation from everyone, everywhere'. Examples are not only young companies such as Google, but also long established ones, such as Procter & Gamble and Whirlpool.

¹ Source: How companies approach innovation: A McKinsey global survey; The McKinsey Quarterly, Autumn 2007

Procter & Gamble took some serious steps to creating a more innovative culture. One step was to bring in those who are pre-destined to be creative and innovation: designers. They also created a role at board level to act as bridge between designers and the rest of the organisation. Procter & Gamble has also stirred things by setting an ambitious target that 50% of ideas have to come from outside the organisation [also putting structures, processes and people in place to enable and facilitate this].

About Whirlpool, in fact, the quote 'innovation from everyone, everywhere' stems from Paul Whitwam, Whirlpool's former CEO. Whitman arrived with this statement in the office one day in September 1999, and followed this through embarking on what turned out to be a 4-year journey to make innovation one of the organisation's core competencies.

In the two examples above the understanding that creating an innovative organisation requires cultural change started at the very top.

So give up on those organisations where the deeper understanding for what is required to create an innovative organisation does not exist? No way! We are already half way there: the need for innovation is understood. Now all that is required is to communicate what it actually requires, beyond processes and structures, to create an innovative organisation. It needs a sense of ownership that starts at the top, and passion to see it through and sustain it.

This is quite difficult to achieve through explanations, books, or even case studies. We have had case studies and books on successful innovative organisations for a long time.

I believe that what is required is a way to enable leaders to *feel* innovation. It starts at the individual level. What does it feel like to be in an innovative environment? What does it feel like to create one? What kinds of behaviours are required, and are my own current behaviours conducive to innovation?

And I do believe that the creative industries have it in them to help managers in this 'experiential affair'. They can achieve this by working *with them* instead of *for them*.

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