

Innovation Training Needs A Rethink

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Innovation management needs specialised training and the current methods need a rethink



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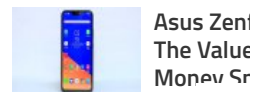
Business achieves success when a differentiated value proposition is offered to a select segment of customers using its own unique value chain for delivering the value. Strategy gurus call it competitive advantage to conquer the marketplace. Columbia Business School professor Rita McGrath has made a monumental contribution to the art and science of strategy with her frameworks on transient competitive advantage for the current times where "sustainable" competitive advantage is a myth. To grab the transient advantages available all over, innovation is key and this is not easy given India's propensity for copy and paste.

To deliver the strategy, companies need to understand their customer needs well. In order to hit pay dirt with a new offering (whether it is a product or service), it is critical to have end-user insights. However, not many companies are really that close to the end-user. Innovation or new product development is unlikely to happen without key insights. Examples galore for failed innovations sans insights and perhaps one reason why Indian companies resort to copy and paste what is successful elsewhere. Even Bollywood is no exception here.

Innovation management needs specialised training and the current methods need a rethink. Most innovation management training programmes miss the mark and fail to reap their desired end results of faster cycle times and increased new offerings effectiveness solely because of the lack of user understanding. When developing training programmes for internal new product participants, companies should use an "outside-in" approach to identify training needs and use this input to craft tailored training programmes. Internal research should answer the following questions:

- * What are the internally perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current innovation processes, approach and organisation structure?
- * What internal barriers affect innovation success and effectiveness?
- * Who, if anyone, would benefit from the training?
- * What perceived and real training needs exist?

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- * How can innovation training best bridge the differences, if any, between perceived and real training needs?
- * What format is most appropriate for innovation training (for example, on or off site, number of days, level and type of interaction)?
- * What methodologies are most effective in our culture: Medici Effect. Reverse Innovation or Disruptive Innovation?

To collect this information, conduct individual interviews (focus groups if yours is a big business group), attend innovation team and/or council meetings, and review relevant internal information including team meeting notes and new product process/performance documents. In addition to securing internal customer perceptions of training requirements, test-marketing the resulting programme with a pilot group of innovation participants can help gauge effectiveness, and fine-tune the programme before full scale roll-out.

Some clients believe that only team leaders need training. This is absolutely incorrect. New product development barriers cannot be overcome with team leader training alone. Broadly I have noticed three areas of barriers:

1. Team leader barriers: Sub-optimal communications, unrealistic expectations, and new people with little training/experience.
2. Team barriers: Inconsistent understanding of the new product development process, inconsistency among projects – no two projects conducted the same way, inadequate team motivation, and unclear expectations.
3. Interdepartmental barriers: Insufficient resources, low new-products visibility, and interdepartmental conflicts.

Within teams and across departments, communications and expectations need fortifying. One route to do this would be to train team leaders on project management and motivation skills. Another way is to help jumpstart a team with a two-day kick-off meeting. The most effective route we have seen is a six-month programme that works with innovation teams with new projects with multiple levels of handholding, and internal and external reviews.

The objectives of any training must be decided upon from the very beginning. It could be developing a team mission and team success criteria; establishing a common language among team members along with team norms, values and “ground rules”; building team spirit; increasing each team member’s (along with the team leader’s) ability to manage and motivate team members; clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each team member; and providing actionable and practical guidelines for managing new product development.

To identify workshop expectations and gain a better understanding of each participant’s frame of reference, all participants must be surveyed before the session to learn their experience in new product development and innovation. They should be probed on what they believe their roles are for the team and what they want to accomplish in the team workshop. Then use this input to fine-tune the workshop materials, but more importantly, to build ownership. Post-session reviews must be done to further refine additional-day sessions.

Such training sessions help innovation team members solidify their sense of commitment and belonging to the team instead of their respective departments. From the management’s perspective, team identity and cohesiveness are expected to reduce cycle time by pre-empting interdepartmental barriers and conflicts – the original goal of such training. As obvious as it sounds, few innovation heads follow a “customer-driven” process for developing and conducting internal training sessions. Yet, giving participants what they want is a great starting point for ensuring better ROI for the innovation training investment.

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The author is the Co-Founder and Chief Evangelist of Medici Institute, a non-profit organisation committed to driving mission-focused governments in India

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