



Successfully Leading Innovation in an Organization

Viewu Dei-Tutu
Regent University
Roundtable: Transformative Innovation

Abstract

Innovation is the fuel that keeps an organization running in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment. Therefore, it is imperative that organizations fully understand the concept of innovation and learn how to allocate resources to maximize its benefits. This paper looks at the importance of innovation in today's highly competitive and unpredictable global economy and how organizations can leverage it. It highlights the importance of an organization's culture and focuses on the role its leadership can play in the innovation process. For an organization to be at the forefront of innovation, it is necessary that its leaders fully understand their role in the process. This paper outlines the characteristics of an innovative leader in an organization. It further discusses the key attributes a leader must consistently exhibit for all stakeholders to actively participate in the ideation and development of new products and services. With an innovation mindset, an organization's leadership can effectively promote innovation internally and make the organization relevant, competitive, and profitable in its marketplace.

Keywords: Innovate, Leadership, Culture

The term innovation is often used loosely in today's business world. Many organizations prioritize the hype of innovation over its primary purpose, which is to INNOVATE. In today's "hyper-competitive global economy, companies must innovate broadly or consistently, or they are gone" (Oster, 2011, p. 27). This pressure has forced organizations to find innovative ways to sustain growth and competitiveness. Innovation, if not managed carefully, can deviate from its original purpose. It is important for an organization to tread the path of innovation with caution to ensure that it stays on track and achieves its intended objectives.

For an organization to succeed, it must have leaders with an innovative mindset who can successfully spearhead innovation. These leaders must foster a learning environment that promotes creativity, encourages employees to innovate, and equips them with the required tools and resources.

Innovation

Innovation is not a new phenomenon but has existed since the creation of man. God is the master artist, inventor, and creator of beauty and He has placed within man the capacity to understand, grasp, reflect, and arrange within a totality the thoughts expressed in creation (Kuyper, 2011, pp. 41-42). The possibility of innovation permeates through the lives of all individuals, and they have the opportunity to try new things or do things differently (Miller & Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2013).

Elements of innovation are reflected throughout history. At every point in time, there have been great innovators who have transformed their world. Some of these include King Solomon, Joseph, Jesus Christ, Archimedes, Thomas Edison, Nikola Tesla, Bill Gates, Dr. Patricia Bath, Jeff Bezos, Sheila Lirio Marcelo, and Elon Musk.

Innovation within an organization is defined as “the creative development of a specific product, service, idea, environment or process with the fundamental goals of pleasing customers and extracting value from its commercialization” (Oster, 2011, p. 16). It is a mindset that looks beyond the present into the future (Gliddon, 2006). “Any organization that fails to create the markets of the future, will find itself on a treadmill, trying to keep one step ahead of the steadily declining margins and profits of yesterday’s businesses” (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, p. 5).

Innovation is initiated when an organization identifies a missing piece in its network that produces value for customers and the organization (Oster, 2011). Successful innovation requires choosing and preparing the right environment and team to execute the innovation. An organization that innovates must consistently listen, stay open, collaborate, embrace failure as part of the process, and use every avenue possible to constantly communicate its vision and strategies to its members (Kotter, 1996).

The innovation discussion is incomplete without addressing the significant role of an organization’s leadership in the process. For innovation to be successful, an organization’s leadership must play a pivotal role in the design, operation, and culture of innovation (Davila et al., 2013).

Culture is the unspoken norms and assumptions that exist within an organization (Schein, 2010). An organization’s culture is what defines its identity, determines the way it operates, and drives its success (Lowe, 2018). “Culture is the cross-cutting element that threads its way across innovation” (Davila et al., 2013, p. 261) within the

organization. For innovation to thrive in an organization, its leaders must promote a culture that enables and encourages creativity and innovation among employees.

The success of an organization's innovation culture significantly depends on how well its leadership manages it. An innovation culture cultivates a mindset that allows employees to see things from different perspectives and boosts their confidence to innovate. To create an innovative organization, it is essential for leadership to have a mindset that embraces innovation. This mindset must be visible at all levels and must include the beliefs, expectations, and sense of purpose of those in the organization (Hoque, 2014). This mindset should "create the right metrics and rewards for innovation" (Davila et al., 2013, p. 7), while accommodating failures.

Challenges of Managing Innovation Within an Organization

To effectively spearhead innovation, a leader must understand the dynamics of innovation and must be involved in the process. Innovators are risk takers, willing to step out of their comfort zone, and may sometimes overstretch the budget and allocated resources. Effective leadership requires empathizing with innovators; however, it also demands the ability to recognize when a venture is no longer sustainable and when to stop it.

Navigating the innovation process can be challenging and daunting for innovators. Some of the challenges that innovators often face and must overcome include bringing ideas to life, having access to an environment that promotes innovation, overcoming resistance, executing the idea, and persuading others to buy into their vision (Berkun, 2010, p. 103). Leaders who fully understand the purpose of innovation must help their teams navigate these challenges.

Life of Ideas

Ideas thrive in teams that innovate. These ideas and creative energy remain idle until they are channeled into a product or service for willing customers. Leaders must, therefore, attend to the life of ideas for all stakeholders by investing time and resources to nurture ideas, creating the environment for them to thrive, and supporting the idea development, delivery, and recycling to make room for new ones (Berkun, 2010, pp. 103-104).

Environment

Innovation flourishes in environments that encourage the growth of good ideas, and it is important for leadership to create an environment for talented people to do their best work (Berkun, 2010, p. 105). An innovative climate cultivates engagement and

enthusiasm, challenges people to take risks within a safe environment, fosters learning, and encourages independent thinking (Rao & Weintraub, 2013).

Protection

Innovation often comes with some level of resistance; leaders must provide the necessary protection for their teams. A pushback in defense of the team by the leader could be the breakthrough story for the organization as in the case of Toshiba's team lead Tetsuya Mizoguchi. Toshiba's first laptop was rejected by corporate leaders; however, Tetsuya "fought to keep the project alive until he won executive support" (Berkun, 2010, p. 106). This innovation turned out to be a huge success for Toshiba.

Execution

To become an innovation, a concept must move from ideation to the final end-user product. Execution is the process of moving an idea from conception into realization. Leaders "must balance the team on the edge of ideals that drove the effort through the early stages and the necessary constraints of schedules and budgets to finish" (Berkun, 2010, p. 108).

Persuasion

One major challenge innovators face is persuading others to buy into their vision. "Persuasion fuels innovation at all levels and every successful innovation depends on getting people to believe in things that have not been done before" (Berkun, 2010, p. 109). It is the responsibility of innovators to convince upper management that their projects are feasible and worth the investment. This is needed to start a project, recruit the best team, secure resources, and compel investors or customers to buy once there is a product to sell (Berkun, 2010, p. 109). Leaders are successful when they can convince others to become part of the innovation process.

The Role of Leadership in Innovation

The role of leadership is to have a vision for the direction of the organization they lead. An organization's leadership must stay focused on its original mission and vision by having a clear direction on how to lead (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Leaders must understand the culture and dynamics of the organizations they lead to effectively steer the organization in the right direction (Schein, 2010). They must empower followers by delegating responsibilities and provide challenging opportunities for them to increase their area of competence (Gentry et al., 2014). Leadership can directly influence employee performance by motivating them to exert extra effort to improve performance (Schwartz, 2013).

The primary assignment of an organization's leadership is to become the innovation architect by providing the blueprint for innovation (Miller & Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2013). It must define the innovation strategy and encourage value creation. "Leadership must provide guidance on the types of innovation the organization should seek, where to explore for ideas, how to create great value, and most important, what a great innovation looks like" (Davila et al., 2013, p. xxxv).

Innovative leaders spend time understanding the innovation process and find ways to embed it into their organizational culture. They create the right environment based on trust, empower "employees to engage in key innovation behaviors as part of their daily work" (Miller & Wedell-Wedellsborg, 2013, p. 4), provide required resources, and allow employees to experiment and fail without fear of being punished.

Until the leadership of an organization understands the inevitable challenges of innovation, it is doomed before it starts (Davila et al., 2013). Leaders must therefore lead their organizations by example. The leadership message becomes more credible to employees when leaders act on their words. This inspires and increases commitment to the innovation process.

An organization's leadership, especially its CEO's leadership, is key in creating and sustaining innovation. A significant responsibility of CEOs is to make innovation part of the organization's culture, and they must encourage other leaders to engage in the innovation process. Leadership's words and actions send a signal to employees that they either support or are indifferent to innovation. When organizational priorities are clear and specific, employees know precisely what should receive their focus and resources (Oster, 2011).

Characteristics and Attributes of Innovation Leaders

Leading an innovation comes with some challenges. It is important for leaders to be aware of what it entails and prepare for it. To become a powerful leader of innovation, leaders must develop their thinking and commit to the process fully. To succeed, they must exhibit or strive to attain the following attributes outlined.

Influence

Leadership is about influencing people to achieve organizational goals. According to Doss (2015), successful leaders of innovation create value and innovation within an organization by being role models for behavior, thinking, and accountability. These leaders "cultivate a state of being that is innovation, rather than a set of commands about innovation" (Doss, 2015, 1: Don't *do*. Influence).

Selfless

These leaders are selfless and do what it takes to bring change and improvement. They are committed to their team and are motivated to focus on the welfare of others and their organizations, rather than what they can directly benefit from. They are constantly concerned about the growth, success, and fulfillment of others in their organization.

Risk Taker

The call of a leader is to drive positive change in the organization. Effective leaders of innovation are willing to take personal risks that will benefit all stakeholders (Doss, 2015). They understand that innovation involves taking risks and are willing to push themselves and their team out of their comfort zone, even in the face of the unknown.

Share Knowledge

A major aspect of innovation is the availability of information. Effective leaders foster knowledge sharing through team collaboration, recognizing that a shared pool of knowledge inspires greater contributions from employees. Innovation leaders search for ways to open information flows that would bring individuals and groups together to share and optimize knowledge (Doss, 2015).

Excellent Strategic Vision

The most effective innovation leaders “exert strong leadership on the innovation strategy and portfolio decisions and integrate innovation into the company’s basic business mentality” (Davila et al., 2013, p. 7). They have a vision of the future and work toward its execution (Zenger & Folkman, 2014). True leaders of innovation must be in the present and be about the future (Doss, 2015).

Customer Focused

Innovative leaders try to understand the needs of the customer by looking at things from their perspective. They network and collaborate with clients and ask incessant questions about their needs and wants (Zenger & Folkman, 2014). These leaders always innovate with the customer’s needs in mind.

Create an Environment of Reciprocal Trust

Innovation can be risky. Not all innovative ideas are successful. Innovative leaders create relaxing and collaborative relationships with their team of innovators. These leaders are easily accessible, have empathy, and are not too harsh on those who make genuine mistakes. This builds trust and makes the team more confident knowing that

their leader would protect them and not throw them under the bus if something went wrong (Zenger, & Folkman, 2014). It also creates room for more creativity and innovation.

Integrity

They focus on doing the right thing for the project, their team, customers, vendors, and the organization. They do not cut corners but rather ensure things are done with integrity.

Promote a Culture of Upward Communication

Innovative leaders “recognize that the fundamental building block of innovation is a network of people and knowledge inside and outside the company” (Davila et al., 2013, p. 7). They acknowledge that the best and most innovative ideas can be found at the lowest level of the organization and therefore create a culture that uncorks good ideas from the first level of the organization (Zenger & Folkman, 2014). They are optimistic, full of energy, and willing to accept and explore new ideas from others.

Persuasive

Successful leaders are highly effective in getting others to accept good ideas. They do not push or force their ideas on others; instead, they present ideas with enthusiasm and conviction and can persuade all stakeholders to willingly follow (Zenger & Folkman, 2014). They set realistic goals but also encourage creativity by allowing their team to think outside of the box.

Transparent

These leaders are upfront in their communication and often provide honest feedback. Subordinates are assured that they can always count on straight answers from their leader. This helps minimize the number of overambitious projects that employees come up with.

Inspire and Motivate Through Action

For innovation to exist, people have to feel inspired and motivated. The innovative leader does not just give instructions and commands but is deeply involved in the innovation process, which provides a sense of purpose and meaning to all parties. They try to participate in all meetings, share ideas, and take on some tasks when possible.

Ability to Deal With Resistance to Innovation

Innovation often leads to changes in an organization and can trigger some level of resistance from employees. A leader must identify and address any employees who resist change (innovation antibodies) at an early stage. To mitigate innovation antibodies that constantly resist change, leadership must send a clear message to all that it supports innovation and depends on it to meet business goals (Davila et al., 2013). Getting all employees to embrace and effectively execute innovation requires active and insightful leadership, an organization attuned to the needs of innovators capable of learning and improving, and a culture that favors valuable change (Davila et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Innovation is a necessity in the current highly competitive and complex business world. Organizations are constantly looking for ways to stay ahead of their competitors and are willing to spend finances and resources to innovate. The success of any innovation falls greatly on an organization's leadership. For innovation to succeed, the organization must create a culture and environment that nurtures it. This is possible when its leadership develops an innovative mindset. This mindset must be consistent across all levels of management in the organization. Once management is on board, subordinates will catch on.

For leaders to lead innovation and satisfy all stakeholders, they must have the characteristics and attributes discussed. The leader must create an environment that nurtures innovation and be an advocate of innovation to stakeholders both internally and externally.

Leaders must continually find innovative and effective ways to solve problems. They must find creative ways to mitigate innovation killers without sidelining them. Leaders must cultivate a culture that is receptive to new ideas and allows the capability and courage to change, explore, and innovate while creating a stable environment to deliver those innovations. To be effective, leaders must be willing to learn from others. They must continually explore new opportunities that promote successful innovation.

About the Author

Viewu Dei-Tutu (DSL) is a change leader with a background in strategic leadership, business analysis, and change management. She is an analytical and innovative leader with an ability to drive change by identifying business needs and applying effective solutions.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:
viewdei@mail.regent.edu

References

- Berkun, S. (2010). *The myths of innovation*. O'Reilly Media.
- Davila, T., Epstein, M., & Shelton, R. (2013). *Making innovation work. How to manage it, measure it and profit from it*. Pearson Education Inc.
- Doss, H. (2015, September 16). *Five character traits of innovation leaders*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/henrydoss/2015/09/16/five-character-traits-of-innovation-leaders/#6560b26d76e6>
- Gentry, W. A., Eckert, R. H., Stawiski, S. A., & Zhao, S. (2014). *The challenges leaders face around the world more similar than different*. <http://www.ccl.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ChallengesLeadersFace.pdf>
- Gliddon, D. G. (2006). *Forecasting a competency model for innovation leaders using a modified Delphi technique*. https://etda.libraries.psu.edu/files/final_submissions/1385
- Hamel, G., & Prahalad, C. K. (1994). *Competing for the future*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Hoque, F. (2014, June 4). *How to create culture of innovation in the workplace*.
<https://www.fastcompany.com/3031092/how-to-create-a-culture-of-innovation-in-the-workplace>.
- Kotter, J. P. (1996). *Leading change*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2012). *The leadership challenge: How to make extraordinary things happen in organizations*. Jossey-Bass.
- Kuyper, A. (2011). *Wisdom & wonder: Common grace in science & art*. Christian's Library Press.
- Lowe, K. (2018, June 28). *The importance of culture in organizations*.
<https://smallbusiness.chron.com/importance-culture-organizations-22203.html>
- Miller, P., & Wedell-Wedellsborg, T. (2013). *Innovation as usual: How to help your people bring great ideas to life*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Oster, G. (2011). *The light prize: Perspectives on Christian innovation*. Positive Signs Media.
- Rao, J., & Weintraub, J. (2013, March 19). *How innovative is your company's culture?*
<http://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-innovative-is-your-companys-culture/>

Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Schwartz, M. L. (2013). *An investigation to determine the effectiveness of motivating strategies leaders might employ to increase followers' effort in the workplace* (Publication No. 2013. 3589631) [Doctoral dissertation, Lawrence Technological University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Zenger, J., & Folkman, J. (2014, December 15). *Research: 10 traits of innovative leaders*. <https://hbr.org/2014/12/research-10-traits-of-innovative-leaders>