Highline Beta

Building Your Innovation Team to Thrive During Storms - and Beyond

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Featured in Pointers, an Innovation Leader Magazine

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Creating Strong Support Up & Down the Org Chart

EXPERT GUIDANCE ON INNOVATION STRATEGY

Building Your Innovation Team to Thrive During Storms—and Beyond

BY HUSSAM AYYAD, CHIEF ACCELERATOR OFFICER, **HIGHLINE BETA**

Clearly defining what makes innovation teams successful is an ever-evolving endeavor. COVID-19 emphasized the fundamental importance of rapid innovation to the future of our society, from health care to connectivity and next-generation eCommerce. It also added more complexity to what innovation means to different organizations and how innovation teams can be built and managed successfully, especially in changing work environments and settings—the latest being the (relatively new) work-from-home phenomenon.

We consistently get asked by clients and partners about the challenge of building and maintaining support for innovation teams; at first glance, this challenge seems to have an additional layer to navigate, now that remote or hybrid work is here to stay for various organizations. However, we believe that, in most cases, how work is conducted and delivered should not make a considerable difference in a team's performance, as long as you have strong leadership buy-in, a clear strategy, and well-communicated techniques in place.

How do you build and maintain strong support for innovation teams—from the front lines all the way up to the board of directors?

Regardless of the existing environment and culture an organization has, support for innovation teams is most influenced by top leadership support and buy-in.

Whether you are trying to obtain top leadership support for your initiatives, or you are the CEO sharing your vision with your board of directors on how to execute on your innovation goals, we believe that certain strategic and tactical techniques can help your efforts:

(Strategically) Create and Maintain...

1. Psychological Safety

Creating and maintaining psychological safety around innovation initiatives and efforts is paramount to boosting the motivation and engagement of your innovation teams at all levels.

Innovation as a practice inherently comes with higher uncertainty of success, as it heavily relies on experimentation and investigation into areas of opportunity that were not explored previously, or were explored under different market conditions.

Creating psychological safety starts by officially declaring to your teams (and continuously reiterating) that you are granting them the **freedom to fail** as they explore different ideas. We have seen it happen in different forms: from CEOs disseminating company-wide communications, to senior leadership promoting measures for encouraging employee experimentation through different incentives.

Creating psychological safety—especially in new working environments where in-person interactions are more limited, and many of the team members are in relative isolation during work hours—offers a much needed boost to your team members' confidence to think freely and express their ideas, and hence continue to engage.

2. Authentic Incentives

Time and time again, financial incentives and rewards get questioned on whether they motivate employee performance. As much as we would like to believe that financial incentives don't motivate, our experiments have shown otherwise. However, there are stronger motivators, such as achievement, advancement, and growth. Creating incentives that combine both financial and non-financial motivators can be very powerful.

As you strategically define your annual and quarterly goals, ingrain innovation-related goals as part of your organization's priorities and objectives.

No matter how "flat" or "horizontal" we believe some of our "new org structures" and teams have become, the reality is, with good leadership and management, clearly set organization-wide goals and objectives always cascade throughout the organization, starting with top leadership.

As support from the top trickles down to the rest of the organization, it will not only reassure your innovation team, but it will incentivize every employee to deeply think about and define how innovation (or supporting innovation) can help them achieve, advance and grow, and be financially rewarded.

3. Collaboration Groups Among Your Mid-level Executives

Regular collaboration between mid-level executives to share their teams' challenges and problem statements not only improves

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communication across your organization, but significantly raises the potential of collaboration and consolidation efforts to solve common challenges. This significantly helps your teams overcome a siloed work environment, and improves the likelihood of success of your internal and external innovation initiatives to tackle common (internally-validated) problems.

An actionable step in "creating and maintaining authentic incentives" is to make the demonstration of cross-team collaboration part of your performance evaluation criteria and reported KPIs to drive genuine activity across the collaboration groups. This will avoid the perception that these groups are optional/supplementary.

"Becoming truly innovative starts by overcoming the fear of failure."

Tactically…

1. Introduce your own leadership concepts that promote thoughtful risk-taking through day-to-day activities and expected behaviours

The Amazon leadership concept of "one-way and two-way doors" exemplifies how psychological safety can be created. The concept is used to describe the two types of decisions we make on a daily basis: "one-way door" decisions are consequential and irreversible, and "two-way door" decisions are changeable and reversible. The Amazon philosophy is that most decisions we make are two-way door decisions, and should be made faster and in small-groups to avoid **slowness**, **risk aversion**, **and failure to experiment sufficiently**. One-way door decisions, however, must be handled with a careful, deliberate, and consultative approach.

If such leadership concepts hardly apply to your business model, spend time reflecting on your processes. Becoming truly innovative starts by overcoming the fear of failure. Find ways

to address the stigma associated with failure to empower your employees. Do so by experimenting with new concepts, starting with your innovation team. Test their effectiveness and grow their adoption.

2. Empower innovation at every level and every team by providing practical and instantly-usable tools

Creating and maintaining "authentic incentives" can sound easier said than done. Providing practical tools to encourage action can empower your innovation teams to execute ideas.

Amazon's PRFAQ, a press release with FAQs, is a great example of a practical tool. The PRFAQ is used by any Amazon employee to suggest an innovative idea. The employee writes up a plan by working backwards from a hypothetical launch of that product, envisioning that it is already released. This tool helps the interested employee take a customer-centric approach by suggesting or building new products. This concept is now used by product teams across various organizations.

What tools do you think you can create to incentivize your team to get started and take action?

3. Recognize

Employee recognition fuels employee engagement and affirms the seriousness of your support of all the priorities, values, and behaviors advocated by your leadership.

What's your current mechanism for recognizing innovation-related initiatives or successes in your organization? Are you recognizing specific champions, teams, members, or staff in your company meetings, or in other methods of communication? Are you recognizing failed attempts at new initiatives in a positive way?

Are you aware of how your team members/leaders like to be recognized? Learn from them, show real empathy, make them feel valued, and then watch them innovate and thrive.

Learn more about Highline Beta at www.highlinebeta.com.