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Tapping into Employee Creativity

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Innovation is the lifeblood of survival in business, yet it is oftentimes one of the hardest things for companies to achieve. We see it all the time -- a company takes great pains to amass the industry's top talent, only to reap lackluster results from its all-star team.

For HR leaders who have the resources to hire the best in the business, it can be incredibly frustrating watching teams that look so good on paper fail to justify the time and expense of putting them together.

And if these teams can flop, imagine the struggles of HR departments that are under pressure to foster innovation from its base of workers while budgets get cut and employee pools shrink due to cost-cutting measures and layoffs driven by the sluggish economy.

Add to the mix, people of many different backgrounds and cultures in an increasingly diverse and globalized workforce being asked to work together, and transformational change can set up additional barriers when talented people do not understand each other.

The good news for HR executives is that there is a way to coax teams into feeding off each other and drive ideas that ultimately transform company products, services, processes and cultures. Even better, their companies likely already have the right people under their noses.

Innovation is in every company's DNA; they just need innovation teams -- groups committed to innovation that recognize the strengths, limitations and natural biases of its members and others, and accept these differences in order to achieve together.

Misconceptions about Innovation

To understand how HR departments should facilitate the creation of innovative teams, it is good to first examine the misconceptions that can lead people astray.

In many cases, organizations have too narrow a view of innovation. They mistakenly think innovation is the creation of ideas. Although idea generation is certainly a critical part of the process, innovation is the actual implementation of ideas.

In other words, HR leaders and managers need to know how to move ideas from creation to execution.

There is also a prevailing mind-set that people are either born "creative types" or are just simply not as naturally inventive as others. While it is true that there are people for whom tapping into and expressing their creativity is very easy, everyone has something to contribute to innovation.

HR has a role to play in finding the right niche for each person.

A related fallacy is the notion that inventions, ideas and new designs are the product of a single genius in a lab or dark room (a la Thomas Edison) who can simply make magic.

In today's business world, however, game-changing electronic devices, automobiles, manufacturing-process alterations, marketing campaigns, real-estate-development projects and just about any other products or services are developed and executed by teams, which of course further puts the onus on HR to build and support the right group.

Understanding Innovation

To truly grasp innovation and discover how every individual can bring something to the innovation table, it is important to know the four main categories of ideas:

* **Efficiency** -- Efficiency ideas entail doing things the right way. These under-the-radar developments are less obvious to the outside world and bring incremental change. Continuous improvement processes are good examples of Efficiency ideas being used to improve a situation.

While visiting The Tech Museum in San Jose, Calif., recently, I noticed in the innovation challenge area for children, they had introduced large screens behind each activity on which other children were both explaining the activity and the science behind it. This is an Efficiency idea in practice.

* **Refining** -- Refining ideas are about doing something better and often making life easier. Where Efficiency ideas are more about an end result, Refining ideas focus on the process. Pillsbury's Simply brand of Cookie Dough, in which the number of ingredients are cut in half and exclude artificial colors and flavors exemplifies Refining, as does In 'N' Out Burger's simple three-item fast-food menu that limits its offerings solely to tried-and-true, highly profitable products.

* **Adopting** -- Adopting ideas occur when a company imports an initiative, typically from another sector, to solve a challenge or create a new product.

Optical products company Zeiss, Inc. recently melded several technologies to create a new line of glasses that plug into a DVD or Blu-ray player and allow the wearer to see visual effects on the screen to create a movie-theater-like experience.

SAS Scandinavian Airlines sent ground and cabin crews to a Formula 1 garage to see how they turned a car around in eight seconds -- not so they could learn how to turn a plane around in that time, but rather to see what they could learn that could be applied to the airline industry.

* **Different** -- Different ideas are the rare projects that no one else has thought of before and have few, if any, predecessors or roots to trace. These ideas often meet resistance, especially in organizations with "not-invented-here" syndrome.

The mp3 player presented an entirely new mode of consuming music, and to some degree, Apple's idea to market the device as sexy and cool, are innovations that redefined a whole industry.

Other examples of Different ideas are as grand as the Internet or as small as Hahn's marketing of yogurt cream cheese.

Personality Type and Innovation

Here is where the rubber meets the road. People with different personality-type preferences excel at identifying different classes of problems, and each of the employees on your staff and prospective employees outside of your organization are predisposed to envisioning and executing one or more of these categories of ideas.

These four idea categories are crucial to innovation -- and so is every person within an organization, provided they have opportunities and outlets for their natural innovative abilities.

Personality assessments play a critical role in providing insight into individual strengths, preferences and potential development areas.

Based on research that my colleague, Gareth Williams and I conducted into the relationship between innovation and personality type, we developed a new practical application of CPP, Inc.'s Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Using assessment tools, individuals are able to understand their innovation style -- and HR leaders have critical information about how innovation teams can successfully innovate.

With such knowledge, people can readily see why they are attracted to certain categories of ideas and why they typically act the way they do throughout the innovation process.

For example, people who have a tendency towards Sensing and Judging preferences (according to their MBTI profile) are typically attracted to Efficiency ideas and want to ensure the innovation is delivered.

Other personality types intuitively respond differently.

Some, for example, are attracted to Refining ideas and like to define the problem by clarifying issues from the outset of the project. Others are drawn to Adopting ideas, and they tend to concentrate on getting the group to act upon the right idea, while still others are attracted to Different ideas, enjoying the process of trying to discover alternative options.

The Innovation Process

Once HR understands the people with whom they have to work, the department must have the right process for utilizing its human capital. HR must convince C-level executives to go through four phases of the innovation process -- Define, Discover, Decide and Deliver -- and eschew any inclination to take shortcuts to get offerings to market quicker.

* **Define** -- Companies often place too much emphasis on thinking "outside of the box" and fail to do the critical legwork of "defining the box," or thoroughly assessing the true root problem. Skimp on the Define process and you may end up addressing a symptom rather than a root cause of a problem.

For example, a company that thinks it does not have a handle on its unique selling point may discover upon further examination that the real problem is that its sales team is not getting close enough to customers to understand their needs.

* **Discover** -- This is where out-of-the-box thinking can finally shine. Quantity breeds quality of ideas. Of 100 new ideas, only two or three might ever get implemented.

Whether the new menu of ideas includes using social media or attending new conferences, innovations can come from anyone and anywhere. Thus, getting people with different personality types to collaborate in the manner they are most effective is critical.

* **Decide** -- Once you have narrowed down the right ideas, it is time to choose the idea or ideas that will be acted on and put the organization's money behind them.

* **Deliver** -- The innovation process is only complete once an idea is brought to full implementation. This entails deciding what actions are necessary to make the idea bear fruit, and assigning these tasks to team members.

The biggest challenge for HR throughout this process is to maintain the short-term focused C-level executive's patience. And failure along the way is an endemic part of innovating -- "fail early, fail often, fail cheaply" is a mantra of many of today's most innovative companies. HR executives need to convince decision-makers not to pull the plug on projects after one misstep.

Applying Personality Type to Innovation

When HR professionals understand that employees may respond differently to the innovation process, they can provide critical guidance to teams, such as:

* Ensuring team leaders are aware they should allow the team to reach a consensus on the the specific issues that need to be analyzed and solved.

* Ensuring the ideas of all team members -- which should include those with different personality profiles -- are solicited as to ways to address the issue(s).

* Ensuring team leaders and members are aware that energy levels will wane and rise during the innovation process.

* Ensuring team members know there will be junctures that may be difficult or boring -- but not all team members will respond the same way at the same time. Team members should look to their colleagues who enjoy those phases to see what they can learn.

Working recently with a financial-services organization, one group -- tasked with the problem of how to encourage younger people to save -- had three of the four innovation styles on the team.

This group struggled in the early part of the innovation process: There was a feeling that one person was holding the process up unnecessarily because that individual insisted on spending more time defining the problem in detail than the rest of the group wanted.

The rest of the group's personality profiles indicated they were the types that wanted to get to the Deliver phase sooner, and this indeed turned out to be the case.

Awareness of their different innovation styles increased their tolerance of each other and reminded them to ask questions that would raise issues people with other innovation styles might want to discuss.

This group took a little longer than groups in which the majority had the same innovation style, but their ultimate output was well thought out and their idea was one of only two that ultimately made it to market.

By grasping the innovation strengths of existing and potential employees, companies ensure they make the most of their workforce. More importantly, they tap into their innovation DNA and realize their full potential.