Effective Management: Innovation through the use of Teamwork

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Management, leadership, employee empowerment and teamwork have each had its place in business closely examined (Gillespie, 2004). Innovation can be defined as a process of "envisioning and successfully implementing new ways of doing anything that adds value to an enterprise and its customers" (Sebell, 2004). Humans, as employees, have proven to bring to the drawing board an amazing potential for imagination, inspiration, creativity and innovation. If led successfully, these credits can blossom in the business world. However, poor management and poor interpersonal relationships can bring out the credits employees can also be known for: frustration, dissatisfaction, sensitivity, and motivational problems (Gillespie, 2004).

Mark Henry Sebell, CEO of Creative Realities Inc. in Boston Massachusetts, U.S.A., has pointed out in many of his classes on innovation the nine most important factors to successful innovation within a business (2004). These nine factors include: a case for action, strategic vision, innovation agenda, senior management involvement, decision-making model that fosters teamwork, multi-functional teams, open-minded exploration, willingness to take risks, and a well-defined, yet flexible, implementation process. As an innovation advisor, Sebell also clarifies the importance of the role that teams play in business (¶ 7).

Machiavelli once wrote "There is nothing more difficult to carry out, than to initiate a new order of things. The reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit by the new order" (Sebell, 2004). Strong communications between management and a

team's workforce will serve to inform teams of why innovation is necessary; without this knowledge, a business's battle for resources will always lose out to supports of older existing businesses.

Innovation can often be a journey into the unknown when regarding the business world. A shared, strategic vision must be inspiring to the teams working around the ideas they develop. This type of vision will allow the innovations to benefit the business--but only if the innovation helps to further the vision of the company. Direction for hitting "strategic innovation" on the nose is only provided if the team of innovators clearly understands and is able to share a company's visions and strategies (Sebell, 2004).

Also important to communicate on a team level is a fully aligned agenda for innovation. Having an agenda for team innovation will convey to the team where the business wants to go, what role the team will play in getting to the business's goals, and what level of innovation the business wishes to acquire. For example, if a company wishes to grow through a process of incremental changes, then risky, breakthrough opportunities will not be heavily supported (Sebell, 2004). A company striving to be a leader in innovation will conversely not be satisfied with incremental thinking (¶ 4).

Senior management must also remember not to sequester itself from the innovative processes and communications. Teams are much more successful when there is an active sponsorship present. The presence and involvement of management will also lend credibility to breakthrough innovations (Sebell, 2004). While incremental thinking for innovations can be successfully delegated

throughout members of a team, breakthrough innovations, those that require the largest risks and the most resources, must be shared among all levels of the team.

A decision-making model that differs from those already used by existing businesses and fosters teamwork is critical for successful innovative ventures. Innovation can be impeded by decision-making at the team level that is either autocratic or consensus-driven. To combat this hindrance, teams must seek out and embrace the diversity within the teams; this diversity will lead to divergent opinions that will open doors to newer ideas and more options. Only after listening to each idea carefully before making a final decision for the team can the innovation be truly well-rounded.

Multi-functional teams, accompanied by diversity of expertise, diverse thinking, and multi-functional resources are critical to innovation. People in all fields are stimulated by different thinking processes and expertise. Teams that are successful are composed of not only "relevant" differences, but also seemingly "irrelevant" differences. These differences can often bring new ideas and innovations to light.

The diversity among teams can also lead to new ideas not seen in the normal places. Einstein once said "If at first an idea doesn't seem totally absurd, there's no hope for it" (Sebell, 2004). New thinking by definition requires that people begin looking at ideas not tried. Team diversity can add several points of view to each idea no matter the apparent absurdity.

The use of teams can also serve as a support group for each of the members involved. Meetings provide participants on a project with a place in which they can each share his or her apprehensions about a project, ideas on how to strengthen a project's success, and can seek out supporting ideas. Seeking out conflicting ideas and challenges for solving them can be prove to be invaluable to team members.

Manz and Sims (2001) challenged business leaders to begin rethinking ideas about leadership and how it relates to management in the modern business world (Bunch, 2001). Innovation blooms in a dynamic business environment; one that is characterized by rapid technological growth, global competition, and deems necessary the meaningful mobilization of human effort. Several business leaders and advisors stress the importance of teamwork, conflict resolution, innovation, and social responsibility. In 2004, London Business School conducted a study of global business capabilities. During this study, more than 120 leaders in business emphasized the importance of looking for these key characteristics when looking for potential employees (Tyson, 2005).

Continued innovation and new organizational structures are also important to fostering a healthy team environment in businesses. There are several forms of new organizational structures that are believed to be the best for innovative growth in the 21st century, including: horizontal organization, project-based organization, and the networked organization. Each of these structures emphasizes teamwork as a critical focal point to the innovation and growth of a company to reach its goals (Bunch, 2001).

Teamwork in the business world involves empowering employees to help make the decisions best for the company. Self-leadership, as explained by Manz and Sims, requires teams and individuals to set their own goals, resolve their own conflicts, be self-observant and critical, and plan and implement their own operating procedures (Bunch, 2001). Teaching each member of a team these key points will help them come together and set new ideas forth--fostering innovation and further growth of the company.

With such a large number of companies turning to the use of teams for new ideas and a fresh look at things, little room for doubt exists in the importance of teams to a business. The old adage goes: "two heads are better than one." Teams offer businesses the opportunity to look at several options at one time and choose the one idea that best suits the needs and goals of the business. More ideas can be brought forth with varying points of view on each, and with the proper communication between all team members each idea can be examined thoroughly. Being able to volunteer for a team also allows each employee the opportunity to express him or ser self in a way that he or she might not feel comfortable telling a manager alone. Less pressure is placed on members of a team when working together to achieve a common goal than is placed on a single manager. Teams are better able to organize them selves in a fashion which will place responsibilities among the members to suit their individual areas of expertise, allowing for higher levels of efficiency.

This higher level of efficiency is necessary when following through with any level of innovation--whether done in increments or through high-risk

breakthroughs. While several minds may come together to come up with new ideas, an idea's conception is worthless if there is no plausible way to implement or carry it out. Teams bring to the board several ideas, but they also bring to light several methods and a diverse range of expertise to carry them out much more efficiently than one individual can.

To answer the question, "to what extent do teams play a role in innovation," is simple: teams are vital to innovation in today's business world. Teams serve as the cornerstones to developing innovative ideas and developing the plans to carry them out. Good communications and strong leadership and management skills can help teams grow so members can fulfil their own individual goals while striving together to achieve the goals of the company they are working for. This is truly a win-win situation for any business whether the business is new or already long established.

Businesses around the world each share a common purpose: to gain a customer. Customers are gained through competitive payment rates, innovation of products and services, advertising and marketing, and a strong customer service available to back up the business's claims. The use of teams is a growing resource businesses worldwide have been utilizing. Companies are using teams as an invaluable resource for brainstorming ideas that will lead the business into the next century of development and growth.

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