



By Brad Beiermann Ph.D.

Organizational Innovation: Your Needle In The Haystack?

Getting ideas visible at the top in the large corporations can be a serious challenge for those in the lower ranks. Visibility, or the lack of, is often the make-or-break ingredient needed to get an idea sponsored. Notice, we are using the word “sponsored” rather than “heard”. What’s the difference? Plenty. We are going to take a brief look at how an idea can get sponsored within an organization.

In companies with tens of thousands of employees, there are often plenty of resources with extraordinary ideas and innovative thinking. Look no further than the automotive business in Detroit to see such examples (despite their market troubles). Companies such as Ford have thousands of employees working on the next generation of automotive products. Yet, the company suffers ups and downs in its product lineup with consumers. As an innovation manager, the job is to eliminate the downs and keep the product lineup fresh and exciting. How do fresh compelling ideas make it to market in such a large organization? The answer is simple: The ideas often don’t make it to market. An entire book could be written about the blockage within the organization. In spite of this hypothetical book, there is a common blockage that occurs in most organizations of any size. It does not get much airplay as the blockage is often misdiagnosed for a simple lack of communication. Alas, there is something else occurring.

For a moment, consider innovation as a needle in a haystack. The fresh idea is the needle while the haystack represents the rest of the organization. The person(s) needing to find the needle in the haystack is senior management. Figuratively, customers are in need of the needle. How does this needle get found by senior management? If the organization is big, the haystack is large and makes the search more difficult. Clearly, a strong magnet would be a big help in finding the needle. Unfortunately, a fresh idea (aka. needle) does not come with a strong magnet. Somebody needs to get a magnet into management’s hands, or the idea will never be found and funded. The first step is to let management know there is a needle within the haystack. Most organizations believe communication within the organization will get the needle found. Not true! Putting a sign in front of a haystack that says, “There is a needle in here” will not bring forth the needle. Only a magnet will attract the needle. The magnet is emotions. It is contagious excitement that causes attraction. Contagious excitement around an idea is the key element often missing. Why? Most idea generators, science types, and innovators are not masters of marketing and story telling. They usually need assistance to make this skill come alive. Who can provide this support? The same group searching for the needle: Senior Management.

I recall assisting a client to remove their blockage, and find the needle. On the first day I met with the product development team. The product development team members said, “We have shown the ideas, and they solve our customer’s problems. Management knows about our ideas and solutions. For whatever reason, everything seems to be falling on deaf ears.” Later that same day, a senior executive pulled me aside and said, “Currently, none of the ideas I’m seeing or hearing are getting me fired up. Certainly nothing, I would want to risk spending money on. I want things that will generate some excitement for customers.” Clearly, there was not a communication issue going on within the organization. Everybody I met seemed to know about a new idea as soon as it bubbled. The ideas sounded like solid solutions for their market. The investments needed to productize the ideas were within corporate reach. The product development group was excited about their ideas. They had the energy. What was missing? Only one thing: A magnet. Their energies and emotions were not contagious. As they spoke about their innovation, they talked in terms of facts...boring facts! As the old saying in sales goes...Facts only tell, but stories sell. Their management was not sold on the ideas. They had no magnet with their ideas.

Here is a quick demonstration of a magnet...

Which cooking instruction gets the most attention in a Cajun dish?

1. Add a pinch of hot red pepper.
- or,
2. BANG!

The correct answer is number two. Those of you familiar with Emeril Agassi surely recognize cooking instruction number two. Emeril Agassi is a cook. He learned how to hand out magnets with each new creative dish he cooked. That’s what got his recipes into the spotlight. The innovative organization is no different. It is important to remember that people’s emotions get them to take action. Merely presenting an idea, or talking about it will not yield the energy needed to make the idea come alive and hit the market. Many folks in product development and IT have often felt their senior management is not willing to spend a penny on anything. Including the innovation needed to get the company to the next level. In some cases this may be true, but the majority of the time there is a willingness to spend on new growth. Take a look at what the CEO is driving or the house they live in. Do they gravitate towards the latest hot rod Mercedes coupe or do they drive a used Kia? Do they take residence in a stunning +5000 sq ft homestead or shack up in a cracker box home build in 1902? The folks down at the Mercedes dealership and luxury estate realtors know how to get these senior executives to part with their money. What’s the point being made here? They know how to make a magnet work and get these executives to buy. They create excitement in others. They draw emotions out of people and get them to take action with their wallets. Getting an innovative idea sold for corporate funding is no different.

A successful innovation process includes the process of selling the ideas fostered. The target audiences are the potential sponsors within the organization. A sound investment would be to invest in marketing skills for development groups and think tanks. At first this seems counter to the responsibilities held by innovators such as engineers,

accountants, software developers and IT in general. In the long run, having innovators that can sell their ideas up the chain, and create contagious excitement will pay off in big dividends.

Brad Beiermann is the co-founder and president of Cimstrat Inc., a consulting firm focused on innovation management and marketing for S&P 500 firms. He has over eighteen years experience as a business leader, author, speaker and entrepreneur. Beiermann holds a doctorate degree in Management Information Systems along with an emphasis on web based marketing. www.cimstratcorp.com.