

Idea Champions

There are many creative people yet few innovators. Creativity is thinking up new things, innovation is doing new things. Ideas remain useless unless somebody takes responsibility for converting it from words to action. Innovators have the knowledge, energy, daring, and lasting power to implement ideas.

You can improve the innovative abilities of employees by letting them work in various areas. The more they know about the different aspects of your organization the better their ideas. They will be able to take in different viewpoints and considerations in whether something might work or not. They would also see how their work contributes to the final product and learn the value of their duties.

In their book, *In Search of Excellence*, Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman, Jr., conducted an analysis of 20 years performance of a dozen or so major U.S. and Japanese companies. This in-depth study included 24 major business initiatives, such as GE's unsuccessful foray into computers and its success in engineered plastics and aircraft engines. In 15 of the 24 successful cases, 14 involved a clear champion, while three of the nine failures had champions. The Japanese had six out of six successes with a champion and three out of four failures had none.

Breakthrough ideas can lie dormant for years, sometimes forever, if no one assumes the responsibility of taking action. Their proof is in their implementation.

Odds that an American believes they have a good idea for an invention: 1 in 3. – Akron Beacon Journal, 9/6/01.

Most corporations fail to tolerate the creative fanatic who has been the driving force behind most major innovations. Innovations, being far removed from the mainstream of the business, show little promise in the early stages of development. Moreover, the champion is obnoxious, impatient, egotistic, and perhaps a bit irrational in organizational terms. As a consequence, he is not hired. If hired, he is not promoted or rewarded. He is regarded as "not a serious person," "embarrassing," or "disruptive." – James Brian Quinn

The new idea either finds a champion or dies...No ordinary involvement with a new idea provides the energy required to cope with the indifference and resistance that major technological change provokes...Champions of new inventions display persistence and courage of heroic quality – Edward Schon, MIT

A great thought will have opponents, which help the thinker fully explore the weaknesses and potential consequences of his thought. A totally committed person can withstand opposition to his thought.

The level of innovation lies in the history of the organizations support for the same, knowing that it is the means of success. Organization's that don't support their employees going out on a limb to support an idea, will find their ideas not going anywhere. In a system that supports innovators, they will do so despite the certainty of repeated failure.

I'm a regular source of suggestions/ideas for my organization, but find it nearly impossible to find someone to champion them for me. As a result, they generally lie dormant or denied. One time I put in a suggestion that after denied lay dormant for a couple of years before reviewed again. Supposedly, a machine was coming that would replace the need for my idea. The machine took more than two years to arrive. The savings that my idea offered in the interim went overlooked. Once my idea was in place, I received half of the usual award. I was happy that it was finally in place, but I also felt like it didn't receive the proper evaluation initially.

Reviewing previously submitted idea proposals/suggestions is an excellent idea. Look at each with an open mind and don't hesitate to follow up with the respective employee if you have questions or don't understand. The review process should include a member of management and an employee from the respective operation in question.

Organizations must work at removing the disincentives that exist for innovators, such as a culture of risk avoidance and a lack of rewards. A successful innovative process entails easy, informal communications with no barriers to talking to one another. There must also be a substantial tolerance for failure.

Successful, lasting, and repeatable innovation is possible when certain factors are present. These factors include simple in concept; easy to execute; yield quick results; reasonable implementation cost; broad appeal; and tied to multiple people or parties. Successful innovation demands specifically dedicated resources.

Ideas should be promptly reviewed, and if necessary, discussed with the employee to fully understand. Timeliness is critical to spurring additional ideas.

Despite the great odds against some things working, there is a high probability of something succeeding if you try many things. As James Brian Quinn put it, "Management must allow a sufficient number of projects with a long enough lead time for the characteristic 1:20 success ratio to have effect. Initially, entrepreneurial managers may need to undertake projects in somewhat lower risk ratios in order to build management confidence." More "at bats" is the only way of assuring more "hits."

Thomas Edison epitomized the power of the individual mind with 1,093 inventions. This the most patents held by a single inventor. Source: Houston Chronicle, 3/29/98.

Tips to being more innovative

- Develop awareness of yourself and external circumstances. Dare to re-evaluate every thought process you have. Exercise your mind by considering solutions after first discarding any assumptions/predisposed beliefs you may have.
- Consider problems as opportunities to put your creative juices to work.
- Accept different perspectives. Each of us has a context for our views and behavior. The more perspectives you consider, the more choices you will have about how to respond. Find a balance, neither clinging white-knuckled to your own views nor letting others define you and your behavior.
- Curiosity flows seamlessly from awareness, but only if you give yourself the freedom to risk and make mistakes.
- Routinely seek opinions from people who have no experience with the subject. These can be the most refreshing sources of new information, since they are not entrenched in assumptions and mindsets.
- Try new things. Even if they don't work out, you'll learn lessons to apply elsewhere.
- When you have a problem, work like a detective. Ask questions. Look at everything. Seek out experts for their views. Do your own research.
- Notice and eliminate assumptions. Sometimes they are wrong, yet we accept them as "fact."
- Fire your inner judge. Give ideas time to percolate before assessing them.
- "Browse" everywhere--at the library or newsstand, at friends' homes, even with the yellow pages. Explore new places and types of information. Take different routes.

About the Author

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