

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By JUSTIN DRAEGER

The secret sauce of innovation

EUREKA!" exclaimed an exuberant (and naked) Archimedes in the streets of Sicily after he figured out how to measure volume while stepping into a bath. And so the myth was born that innovation develops from a single flash of brilliance.



It continues to be perpetuated today. But as experts will attest, innovation doesn't materialize from nothingness. "Thorough study" and "systematic solutions" may be less glamorous than the Archimedes story, but they are more accurate. Campus leaders will have a better chance of helping their staff reach that "eureka" moment by understanding the conditions that foster innovation or enable it to occur.

Recognizing innovation when it occurs

Many people view organizations with departmental silos as detrimental to innovation and collaboration. But some-

times such a structure can foster innovation, according to Scott Berkun, author of *The Myths of Innovation*. "Perhaps you think of institutions of higher education as bureaucratic machines that are directed at different goals," says Berkun.

Some areas of the college focus on teaching, others on curriculum and still others on research. Berkun says that these silos almost always guarantee that innovation is happening somewhere on campus. "Pick the most bureaucratic university, and some area of that university is successfully innovating something," says Berkun. "College presidents should be finding those innovations and replicating them."

Innovation comes from tweaks to existing services or methods. If the admissions department has successfully implemented a communications innovation, might a similar one work in the development or alumni offices? In such a case, the idea is not to reinvent the wheel. A college leader should recognize and replicate such innovation.

Creativity or innovation?

Instructing a group to sit down and "be creative" isn't just silly. It can be destructive while it creates animosity between employees and management. Berkun says that employees can "smell" an initiative that's intended to increase their

creativity from miles away, and it's usually counterproductive. A new initiative tells employees that they haven't been very creative in the past. It also creates pressure to be instantly creative. Pressure rarely stimulates creative thought.

Creativity is overrated says Wayne Lotherington, author of four books on the topic, including *The Innovation Pipeline*. Lotherington says that when people think innovation, they automatically think creativity. But there's a big difference.

Coming up with new ideas is creativity. Putting new ideas into practice is innovation. The innovator must thoroughly understand the problem or situation, and then systematically test all the solutions, creative or otherwise.

"I could give you a little speech on creativity within a corporate culture, but let's get practical," says Lotherington. He is certain that campus managers, department heads and provosts can work best within their own spheres of influence, which is rarely campus-wide. He suggests that workable ideas should be implemented on a limited, trial basis. Managers can monitor them and quantify the results to determine success and the likelihood of successful implementation on a larger scale.

Berkun says, "Innovation means that you have a goal, and that you'll learn from your mistakes."

Provide cover and resources

People have creative ideas all the time. "It's a product of being a conscious human being," says Berkun. "Privately they will have new

ideas, but they might not share them.” Do employees feel they have the freedom and protection to make mistakes? Nobody hits a homerun on every pitch.

Do managers reward creativity or shut it down? Do they criticize or praise new ideas?

Good leaders understand that innovation often requires additional resources. Budgetary increases and additional time, leeway and compensation will almost always be necessary components of a new initiative. “If I’m held to the same resource levels, but asked to improve in significant ways, I’m being set up to fail,” explains Berkun.

Know when to pull the plug

Leaders should do everything possible to remove blockages in their organization’s innovative pipeline, says Lotherington. A good leader will take stock of the problems that limit creativity and innovation. When there are too few ideas, promote more creativity. When too few ideas are coming to fruition, address the time or resource issues involved.

It’s also important to know when to kill a project. Monitor Economics 101. You may have to cut and run when time and resources are being spent on an idea that is going nowhere. However, the go/no-go decision could also involve opportunity cost. Each dollar of time effort spent on a bad idea may be compounded if it can be spent on a better idea.

So how do you know when to pull the plug? Berkun says managers should look first at the goal and second at the project leadership. If the goal is unattainable it may need some ratcheting. Increasing student capacity by 15 percent by the next academic year may need adjustment to three years in annual increments of five percent.

Regarding project leadership, Berkun advises that restructuring a team can cause turbulence, but it may stimulate new thinking that gets a catatonic idea back onto the fast track.

When a goal seems unattainable and the project leadership or group is underperforming, it may be time to scrap the project entirely. Berkun adds one caveat to that advice: “Even if a goal

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seems unattainable, and even if the right people can’t be found for the team, if the required innovation is central to a school’s mission, re-tool it and continue no matter what.” ■



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