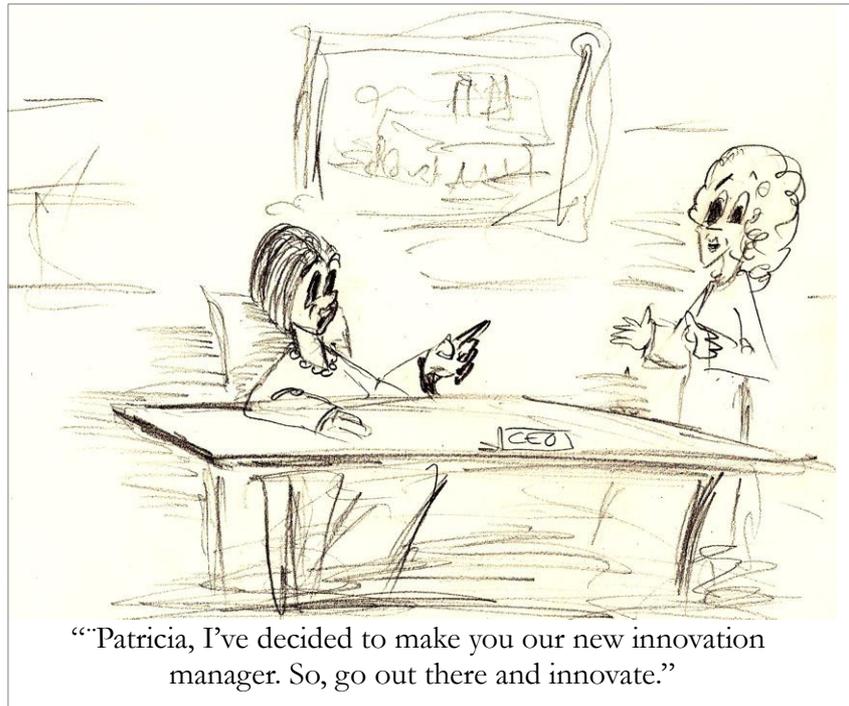Jeffrey Paul Baumgartner's

Seven Things the
Competent Innovation Manager Should Know

Seven Things the Competent Innovation Manager Should Know by Jeffrey Baumgartner
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"'Patricia, I've decided to make you our new innovation manager. So, go out there and innovate."

Seven Things the Competent Innovation Manager Should Know

If you have recently been promoted - or perhaps demoted - to the position of innovation manager, your first action has probably been to do a bit of research. In so doing, you may understandably have been overwhelmed by the amount of information on-line, in books and peddled by over-priced consultants. Worse, a lot of that information is contradictory, uses unintelligible jargon or requires you hire an over-priced consultant.

If you are feeling overwhelmed, don't panic! I am here to help! Here are seven basic things every innovation manager should know.

1. There's a Lot of Bullpoop Out There

This may seem obvious, but it is worth repeating: do not trust everything you read on the web, especially when it comes to innovation.

Unfortunately, as soon as innovation became a sexy business term, a lot of people promptly went out and printed up business cards declaring themselves innovation consultants. If they had stopped with printing cards, you would be safe. Sadly, a lot of them decided to start writing blogs full of bad information. Now, I do not believe they intend to misinform. Rather, they find writing about untested assumptions easier than reading up on the latest research into creativity and innovation and then working out the implications for businesses like yours. That's a pity, because a lot of research has been performed and written up in recent years – and a lot of it contradicts popular assumptions about creativity. (For example, did you know that people in general, do not like creative

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ideas?)

Unfortunately, it is hard to tell the nonsense from the good sense. That said, I do recommend that If a blog makes a blatant claim about innovation and does not substantiate it in any way, shape or form, assume the claim is unproven and possibly false. If you want to be sure, do a web search on the claim to see if others have made a similar claim and substantiated it both clinically and logically. If the claim is addressed in a research paper from reputable universities, that's a good sign.

2. The Difference Between Creativity and Innovation

Creativity is building ideas in your mind. Innovation is implementing those ideas in order to generate value.

Although the word "creativity" is becoming increasingly acceptable in business, it is still not as sexy as the word "innovation". This means that a lot of people use the word "innovation" when they really mean "creativity". This is unfortunate. It is important to understand the difference!

Creativity is the process of bringing together in your mind two or more existing notions in order to create an all new notion. Notions, in this definition, are little bits of information, opinion or feeling that you have stashed away in your mind. For instance, in 1997, a chap named Philippe Kahn combined in his mind the notions of a mobile telephone, a digital camera and sharing, which resulted in the creative vision of enabling a mobile phone to take digital images and then send those images to other phones. All of the notions he used in his idea were known at the time. However, bringing the notions together to create an all new notion was an act of creativity.

Business Innovation is the implementation of a creative vision in order to generate value, usually (but not always) in the form of increased income, reduced operational costs or a combination of both. While Mr Kahn's photographing phone vision remained in his head, it was a creative vision – but not an innovation. As it happens, Mr Kahn is more of a doer than a dreamer. He promptly set up a company, LightSurf Technologies, to develop software to enable mobile telephones to capture, annotate and share digital images. As a result, his creative vision became a real innovation.

To give an example of misuse of terms, many companies launch web sites that enable visitors to submit ideas. They call this process "open innovation". However, this is really an exercise in creativity, not innovation. It is only when those ideas are implemented that it can be called "innovation".

So, creativity is part of the innovation process. But it is not innovation in itself. If your company does a lot of things to promote creativity, but fails to do things to facilitate the implementation of creative visions –

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your company is not being innovative.

Don't get me wrong. Creativity is marvellous! You need creative thinking in order to have the visions that can become innovations. But, creativity alone is not innovation. It is simply, but wonderfully, creativity.

3. Keep Corporate Vision in Mind at All Times

Innovation should always be aligned with corporate vision. Otherwise, it is a waste of time and resoureces.

I hope and expect you are enthusiastic about your position and the opportunity to start a number of initiatives to drive innovation in your organisation. But as you consider each initiative, think also about your corporate vision; about the strategic goals of the company. Serious innovation should always drive your business in the direction of those goals. If you work for Rolls Royce Motor cars, an idea to replace the polished wood veneer interior trim with cheap plastics in order to save costs is simply not a good idea, not because the idea is intrinsically bad. Rather the idea is the opposite of Roll Royce's vision of making the ultimate, quality luxury car.

Often, you will find that if you set up suggestion software and invite ideas, you will get a lot of very good ideas that have nothing to do with your corporate vision or goals. Some ideas will probably have very little to do with your business at all! Dealing with these ideas is a waste of time. So, you should provide guidance in ideation activities to ensure that ideas, creative visions and innovation are in line with vision and take the organisation towards its goals.

That said, the stated vision and goals of many companies is vague. For example, the goal to "make the best products at the best prices" is so vague, it could probably be applied to about 90% of the businesses on the planet! Unfortunately, when the corporate goal is this vague, it is hard to define areas for innovation. This is why companies with vague visions tend not to be very innovative.

If your company's vision is vague and meaningless, you have two choices, you can either convince top management to clarify a vision -- which would be very good for the business -- or, if that's not viable, just ignore this step and do whatever the hell you want when it comes to innovation initiatives. It won't matter.

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4. The Biggest Challenge that You Probably Face is Implementation

If your organisation has lots of ideas, but little true innovation – you are not alone.

Very likely, your organisation has a lot of ideas sitting around and waiting for some attention. If you have any kind of suggestion scheme or idea management software system, you probably have a database full of unacted-upon ideas. If you have run brainstorms or other live ideation events, you probably have lists or Excel spreadsheets full of ideas. These databases and lists are probably growing.

If your organisation is like most, only a small number of those ideas have been implemented and ideas continue to come in faster than they can be dealt with.

If this is the case in your company, you need to do two things, one obvious and one not so obvious. The not so obvious thing to do is to stop capturing so many ideas! Otherwise, the idea backlog will only get worse. Moreover, if you are collecting ideas through idea management systems and brainstorms, most of those ideas are not mind-blowing, industry-changing, Nobel-prize-winning, disruptive, potential innovations. Rather, they are mostly incremental improvement ideas. We'll get back to them in a minute.

The second thing you need to do is to set up a strategy for implementing ideas. This is not easy. Implementing ideas requires time, budget and often management approval. In general, the more creative an idea is, the riskier it is. Improving a feature on an existing product is not particularly innovative, but it is safe. It does not require a massive investment and is unlikely to fail. Launching an all-new product, on the other hand, is fraught with risk. It will require sacks full of money to design, test and build. It will probably require new production facilities, new marketing approaches and training for your sales people. If it succeeds, everyone will be a winner. If it fails, lots of money will be lost and, in some businesses, people will lose their jobs.

There is no way that implementing highly creative ideas is going to be easy. But, don't panic. I've developed a method for drawing up realistic step-by-step action plans that increase the likelihood your idea will be implemented. This plan also takes into account risk.
(see http://www.jpb.com/creative/implement.php)

As for the incremental improvement ideas I mentioned earlier, I suggest you assign their implementation to the people who suggested them. This has two advantages. Firstly, giving colleagues responsibility to develop ideas is empowering. It demonstrates trust and gives those people an opportunity to shine. The second advantage is those ideas are no longer your problem!

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5. The Second Biggest Challenge is Building Creative Visions

When one of your colleagues has a big, bold creative vision, what does she do with it?

Let's get back to that pot (or database or Excel spreadsheet) of ideas your organisation likely has tucked away somewhere. As noted, those ideas are probably good, but not overly creative, Earth-shattering or incredible. That's because brainstorms, suggestion schemes and ideas campaigns are about capturing ideas. Ideas, by nature, are little, undeveloped things.

Breakthrough innovation, on the other hand, is the result of implementing a more complex creative vision which, by it's nature, is not something that just pops into someone's mind in order to be entered onto a form for the company idea management tool. Rather, it is something that one of your colleagues has been mulling over and developing in her mind, and probably on paper, for some time. When she feels confident enough to move forward, she will probably put it to her manager.

Alternatively, a creative vision may be developed by a small group of people, at the pub around the corner, initially as a joke. But as they play with the idea, over another drink, they begin to realise it has potential. If the idea still seems good the next morning, they may decide to develop it further. Again, because of the level of development they invest into the vision, they are unlikely to submit it to the company's suggestion software and instead, will probably propose it to a manager.

So, there are two things you need to do here. First, you need to encourage the development of creative visions into breakthrough innovations. This can be accomplished by giving colleagues space, freedom and encouragement to develop their visions. However, within that freedom, ensure that the concepts being developed fit the vision and strategy of the company. There is no point in encouraging a team to develop the perfect hamburger if your business is a national chain of vegetarian restaurants!

In order to innovate around specific situations, problems or goals, try methods like anticonventional thinking (ACT – see http://www.jpb.com/act) and inner mind thinking (a part of the ACT process) which are designed to develop sophisticated creative visions instead of lists of ideas.

The second thing you should do is create systems designed for the submission of creative visions. Some large companies, for instance, have entrepreneurial competitions where individuals or teams can submit business plans – which by definition are well developed creative visions. Winners are given investment and opportunity to develop their ideas. Having such competitions encourages people to think not merely about ideas, but about developing those ideas into something more impressive.

Having in-house venture capitalists or a skunk works to which employees

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can submit creative plans, is another way to encourage people to build their ideas into visions.

Providing a method for proposing creative visions is important. A lot of employees say that their number one hindrance to creativity is middle managers who kill ideas. If an individual or team puts a huge effort into developing a creative vision -- and that idea is killed by a jealous, risk-averse or creative-vision-impared middle manager, members of the team will understandably be disappointed and demotivated. At best, they'll give up on their vision and in future keep crazy ideas to themselves. At worst, they'll take their vision to a competitor – *en masse* – or set up their own company and become a competitor with a concept they originally wanted to give your company!

6. Brainstorming Does not Generate Truly Creative Ideas and It's Not Your Fault

Traditional brainstorming is a waste of time and resources. There are better ways to capture relevant, creative ideas.

You have almost certainly participated in brainstorms and may have run some as well. In doing so, you have doubtless observed that brainstorms can be jolly good fun, make you feel good and result in large numbers of ideas. However, if you reflect upon past brainstorms, you also probably realise that they are not very good at generating truly creative ideas and that your organisation seems seldom to implement ideas from brainstorms. You may even worry that this brainstorm failure was your fault.

It was not your fault! Brainstorming – at least the traditional kind in which you post a problem statement on a white board, ask participants to shout out ideas, prohibit the criticism of ideas, aim for lots and lots of ideas and somehow choose the "best" idea at the end – has been shown in numerous research studies to be bad at developing creative ideas.

Now, you may be wondering: if brainstorming is not effective, why is it still so widely used in business and why do so many facilitators swear by it? I believe there are two reasons, firstly a brainstorm generates a lot of ideas -- which gives the impression of being productive (ignoring the fact that if none of the ideas are ever implemented to generate value, the brainstorm is actually very non-productive). Secondly, a lot of facilitators and creativity consultants still use the method, and deny the research, because their livelihoods depend on facilitating brainstorms and, like many organisations, they are afraid to be innovative with their processes!

There are alternatives to brainstorming such as anticonventional thinking.

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7. The Importance of Communication

One of the lesser known innovation killers is lack of communication. Corporate suggestion schemes that invite people to submit ideas, but never report back to those people, tend to frustrate employees who soon assume management is not really interested in their suggestions.

Lack of stories, about people who build creative visions that are implemented to become profitable innovations, leave colleagues unaware that they too can propose creative visions and be involved in their realisation into innovations.

Lack of communication about how to propose ideas and creative visions discourages people from proposing those ideas and visions.

Lack of stories about innovation leaves your colleagues, clients and stakeholders unaware of what you are doing in terms of innovation.

Fortunately, there is a simple solution to all of these issues: communicate!

Be sure that whatever innovation initiative you plan also includes a communications component. Not only will that make it clear to all what is happening, but it provides evidence of the hard work and effort you are putting into your organisation's innovation initiative.

FURTHER READING

If you want to read more about creativity and innovation in business, please visit...

www.jpb.com/creative

...where you will find over 100 articles on all aspects of corporate innovation.

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SERVICES FOR INNOVATION MANAGERS

I help people and teams, in organisations like yours, to think more creatively and that helps your organisation innovate better. I have worked with businesses, governments and non-profits in Europe, North America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. These are the services I offer.

Workshops

I am best known for my anticonventional thinking (ACT) workshops which are dynamic, interactive and rich in group as well as individual exercises. By the end of the session, participants learn a powerful, new way to be creative and how to plan implementations of those creative ideas.

In addition, I can deliver interactive workshops on a variety of topics related to creativity and applied creativity.

Motivation Speaking

I deliver energetic, provocative and entertaining motivational talks on a range of topics related to creativity and innovation.

Facilitation

If you want to get the highest level of creativity and innovation from your team, let me facilitate an anticonventional thinking session with them. You will be amazed by the results.

Advising

I am available to advise on a limited number of projects or on a regular contingency basis.

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It all starts with an initial discussion. Get in touch and tell me what you need!

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