A Critical Review of Top Tips for Innovation

We recently came across someone else's list of top 10 Tips for Innovation and decided to take a hard look at what they were saying. Particularly to understand whether this was a simplistic approach or had some real depth. Here's the initial list:

1. Encourage an Innovation Culture
2. Hire people with different perspectives
3. Lead by example
4. Have a process
5. Implement quickly
6. Reward employees
7. Create opportunities
8. Have a collaboration space
9. Offer training
10. Invest in resources

Encouraging an Innovation Culture

We're all in favour of this but the question is HOW? In our experience the biggest block is a top-down culture of direction and no amount of encouraging people to share ideas is going to have much effect unless and until the actions follow this through. By that we mean the senior people have to let go of the reins and resist the temptation to step in and direct. It's a lot harder than you might imagine and failing to walk the talk in this regard is probably the most common reason for Innovation being suppressed.

So to achieve this admirable aim, we suggest coaching for the senior team because to encourage change they first have to change. We would look at a number of areas:

- Influencing skills
- Management style
- Team dynamics
- Communications

Hiring for Different Perspectives

A noble intention and we recognise (and encourage our clients to recognise) that diverse teams produce results that are way better. On the other hand just what does this mean?

If there is a constant throughput of people then getting diversity is relatively easy as long as your selection processes build that into the skills requirement. This could be achieved through Job Profiling and looking for relevant attributes that might be missing across a team or group. However that begs a different question. A constant throughput of people may indicate a high turnover of staff - something that is generally thought not to be helpful and is certainly a drain on resource through costs of hiring and induction.

Further, on this point, for some organisations this never even enters the agenda. We've **never** come across the situation where a line manager is looking

Photo by Redd Angelo

for a recruit and is told by HR to include such diversity in the selection criteria. It simply doesn't happen and, more to the point, a single manager is not likely to be too aware of this. Instead their focus will be on filling a gap to keep their operation moving. So we must conclude that *Hiring for Different Perspectives* is great if you get it but in reality is whimsy.

Lead by Example

Here we think the tips are on firmer ground. Being open to suggestion and conducting the orchestra are true leadership skills. When you think of the attributes of a Chairman of the Board - that is what they are expected to do.

Photo by "My Life Through A Lens"

Now step down a level or two and feel the pressures of Operations, Finance and the rest. The extent to which even the Executive tier has been helped to develop these softer skills is open to debate. Do you actually have in place formal training for them to help? (This will differ from the other training - see below.) In fact what is really needed is some Executive Coaching to help the individuals understand themselves first. Only then can they lead by example because they will know what message that personal example is transmitting.

Have a Process

Presumably this means having a process to enable Innovation. Hmm.

The question that springs to mind is precisely what are you trying to achieve? Having a process for Innovation is pretty meaningless on its own. It would be rather like having a set of instructions for a games controller but not having the hardware.

Instead we think that you should encourage people to understand Creativity. To use frameworks and rigour in everything they do to ensure you are getting to the Right Problem(s) in the first instance. There is probably no single process that could be applied - there's far too much context that may interfere. So instead of process we would prefer **Culture**. A Culture of Innovation will take some time to nurture because it takes account of personal styles, context, performance management and a host of other things.

For instance, Performance Management is a frequent tool to improve productivity. On the other hand that may be a short-sighted approach if, by doing so, it precludes opportunity to reflect and play. The latter is important in allowing our brains to be more creative. So the Performance Management piece ought to include a requirement to evidence this activity. And that is counter-intuitive to many who would initially see such activity as non-producing.

Indeed, how do you nurture a Culture of Innovation? Well first of all try doing it in small spaces. Get the individuals who are involved to understand better how to go about it and then let them start to champion this across the organisation. Top down is NEVER innovative, no matter how well-intentioned. Just think for a moment - top down is the status quo, so

what's innovative about that? As leader, don't be the plant, be the nurseryman who has found seed growing. Clear away the smothering weeds and keep it nurtured until it blossoms or fruits. Only then can you really understand what has grown and whether it is worth replicating.

Implement Quickly

The idea of failing fast - thereby reducing the potential of tying up resources for a long time on unproductive activity - is well-established. On the other hand failing fast can induce people to charge ahead rather than properly identifying problems to begin with.

Our take on this is to invest **more time** in analysis to begin with. Actually getting a better handle on what you are trying to do may mean a more steady approach but the chances of that being the right one are much higher. Think of it this way, if 75% of projects fail to deliver properly (and in general that is the figure across the UK) then if you can get that rate down to 50% you've made 100% improvement in your resource outcomes. So which is better - failing 75% of the time and with frequent cycles or being more steady and getting a 50% hit rate?

Reward Employees

This seems to suggest that people need carrots dangling in front of them. We rather like the idea that work (if the individual is in control and is productive) can be its own reward. You only have to look at the work of Maslow and his *Hierarchy of Needs* to understand this. So what additional incentives might constitute reward?

Photo by Jordan Whitfield

Well let's turn this on its head for a moment. What **disincentives** should you avoid or take away? Think hard about what behaviours and responses from management or peers might be damping down on innovative souls. It's simple Force Field Analysis - take away the restraints and things will naturally move in the direction you want. More to the point it won't seem as though people **have to be motivated** to be innovative. Instead they will be Innovative and feel rewarded because they are succeeding at it.

That's not to say that you shouldn't acknowledge innovation in overt ways but that should not be the starting point of this.

Create Opportunities

Good idea. So what are they?

Well, removing constraints (see above) is actually doing just that. And once people get the feeling of being trusted to deliver for the organisation's benefit all sorts of ideas will spring forth. Why? Because the people will see and create the opportunities.

Now we're not saying you shouldn't have some more structured events or places to allow innovation to surface. After all the occasional away-day or informal sessions in the coffee lounge are also good things to have.

We like the idea of cross-functional teams. But be aware that you don't want to create resentment with the same people always being chosen to represent their department or those who are not involved feeling devalued. Instead this is one area where wide area working can actually be a benefit. If people naturally work in global teams across several sites using technology such as video-conferencing, then there is more chance of a mix of ideas, expertise and cultures. Now go find a way of doing that in the local branch.

Have a Collaboration Space

In large companies, with modern office layouts, this is not usually an issue. But what if that doesn't describe your business or organisation? We don't believe in promoting a simplistic idea - instead we work to help people understand what that means in context.

Collaboration isn't a Suggestion Box, although they occasionally throw up some great ideas. It means working together - not posting a memo to the management. In addition space doesn't necessarily have to be physical - it can be time to reflect and interact or an intranet discussion. There are many variations.

Photo by Elena Rabkina

One thing that is helpful is a **Showcase** to let other people see what you are doing. This runs counter to the frequent secrecy of departments or organisations who want to protect their own turf. So find ways to stop the turf wars. Silo mentality is a real threat and has caused some of the biggest corporate failures. It's an obvious example but if the Investment Banking arms of many of the big banks had bothered to think about the impact of what they were doing on their Retail counterparts, then maybe the crash of 2008 would have been averted or at least much reduced in impact.

So space means fewer walls. It doesn't necessarily mean an Innovation Lab.

Offer Training

We agree that training or lifelong learning is key to a successful existence. But when it comes to training for Innovation just what does that mean?

You might consider technical training and exposure to new technologies from elsewhere. On the other hand you can achieve that by going to the newsstand and buying a magazine for a completely different industry and looking to see what they are doing. There's nothing quite like working out how trends in horizontal drilling for oil or gas might be transferred into

pharmaceuticals. Is this training? Well maybe not but it is developmental and gets people out of their comfort zones. Groupthink (the way we always do things around here) is a menace and predominates in all teams that have been together undisturbed for more than six months.
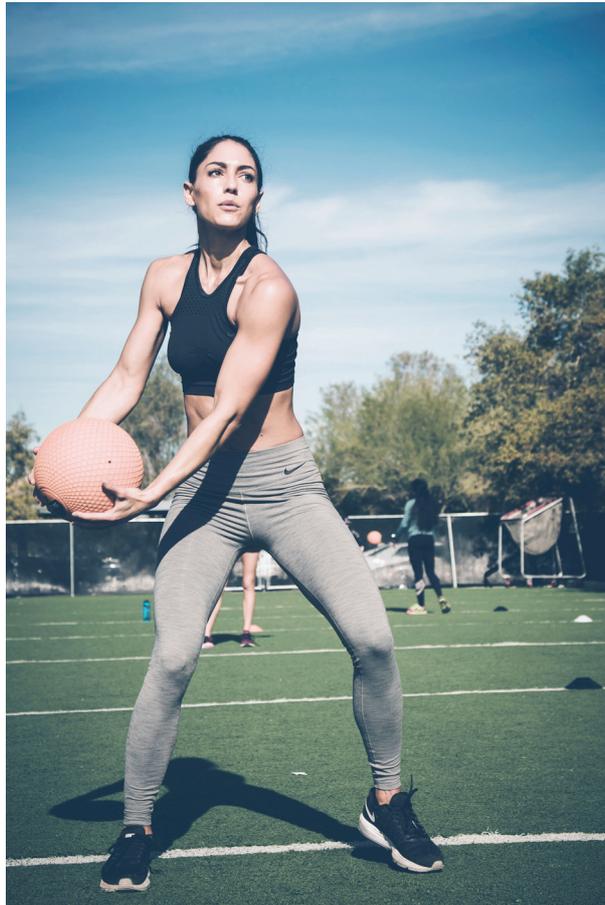

Photo by

You want people to be inspired. So do some research! Really. Go find out what inspires them - it may not be what you think so don't try and guess. The truly innovative executive knows they don't know the answers and uses frameworks and techniques to get them. This is no different. And guess what? Asking your people will have additional benefits - they see that asking is better than guessing and might just take that on board as well. And the more people start to question the more curious they become and they will actively look for sources. Just make sure they aren't all looking at the same blogs(!)

Invest in Resources

For resources, principally we mean people. They are your biggest resource when it comes to innovation. For people to be innovative they need the time and space and the lack of deterrence we've already referred to. The other thing you should consider is what percentage of your annual budget **ought** to be dedicated to moving things forward?

That doesn't mean discrete expenditures - it means everything that is being pointed towards Innovation. People's allocation of their time; amount of physical resources; training & development; and so on. If that doesn't already add up to 5% then you are in serious trouble. Ideally it ought to be >10% and for some organisations that isn't even the starting point.

Investing in resources should start with a sensible audit of what you are already doing or facilitating. Maybe that will require an external viewer to be objective about what is going on. Simply making a statement that you are going to invest or allocating a figure in the budget isn't going to change a thing.

Before you recoil in horror at ill-defined expense, just consider that by getting a more innovative culture working you are more likely to drive better outcomes. That's the ROI for the investment. So here's a metric that will give you some idea of the worth. Our principal Rob Wherrett has driven well over £2bn of value into organisations over the last 20 years. How? Simply by using creative processes and being prepared to do things differently. That equates to more than £384k every day, 5 days a week for 52 weeks of the year. Now what would you pay to get that kind of return?

The answer is helping you to define what sort of investment your organisation should be making in resources to support innovation. By all means hire us to help you get the structures right but the investment should ultimately be in your resources not paying for outside help. Any other organisation or consultants should be working to transfer the appropriate skills into your business, otherwise wave them goodbye.

For more information on Creativity Approaches and how you might improve your organisation's approach to Innovation email admin@executive-2020-coaching.com