



business tips, innovation, leadership

Leaders should avoid being architects of decay

January 30, 2019

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Leaders must avoid being architects of decay by being champions of innovation, according to professor Gary Martin, CEO of the Australian Institute of Management in Western Australia. >

Arguably the most pressing concern for leaders of today's organisations is how to remain highly competitive in an environment of constant, uninterrupted change. The modern organisation recognises that remaining competitive and staying ahead of the pack is highly dependent on a business's capacity to innovate time and time again.

For without new sources of value – whether this is defined in terms of quantity of revenue or quality of life –, most organisations eventually wither or die. The world around them changes and competitors emerge to provide the same offerings more effectively or efficiently.

Despite repeated calls for increased innovation, many organisations continue to lack innovation leadership or the process of creating direction, alignment and commitment to designing and utilising something new that adds value.

What makes a successful business leader

Business leaders who are champions of innovation build an organisation's capacity to innovate – to tap the fresh value-creating ideas of employees and those of partners, customers, suppliers and other parties who sit beyond their own organisational boundaries. They encourage their people so that individuals and teams are willing to question the status quo and take the risks that are associated with designing new products and services.

Innovation champions resource research and development effectively, form cross-functional innovation teams and provide a work environment which attracts and retains talent, and their focus moves beyond the typical product and service orientation. Their quest extends to innovation in business processes, distribution, value chains and the type of business models used.

Although any modern organisation worth its salt recognises the importance of championing innovation, on a global scale, innovation remains more of a buzzword than reality as far as most businesses are concerned.

So where are the innovation leaders?

Innovation takes place when the conditions are right, so it is worthwhile thinking through some of the reasons why some organisations are bereft of innovation leadership. Topping the list of reasons is the very fact the concept of innovation remains generally not well understood by many leaders and managers.

Some, for example, use the words 'creativity' and 'innovation' to mean the same things. Yet creativity is all about coming up with ideas while innovation occurs in the business by bringing those ideas to life. And there is a good dose of truth in the fact that businesses stifle innovation by taking a highly risk-averse approach.

Think, for example, about some of the everyday language that managers and leaders use when a new idea begins its journey from the lower to the upper echelons of an organisation. How often you hear phrases such as "what a great idea but it's simply too ambitious", "that's someone else's responsibility", "it can't be done here", "we can't take that chance" or "it's against company policy".

While senior leaders might encourage employees to 'filter up' new ideas, some of those ideas never arrive. Worse, those that do are often totally de-risked and lack creativity, which results in solutions that are weak, limited in scope and impotent.

In short, a risk-averse culture along with a top-heavy organisation will always extinguish opportunities to innovate. Not surprisingly, the role of middle-level managers in terms of the promotion of and support for innovation should not be underestimated.

The role of middle-level managers

Just like senior leaders need to champion innovation, so too do middle-level managers and supervisors. Insecure, untrained middle-level managers can not only prevent ideas moving upwards in an organisation, but assassinate attempts at innovation right from the get-go.

They might do this:

- through poor communication and shutting down conversations;
- by creating artificial barriers and through being over-controlling;
- and by rewarding uniformity and punishing employees who take risks which don't end up bearing fruit.

If innovation is to succeed in any organisation, middle-level managers must be facilitators of innovation. Putting in place middle-level managers with the right mindset and a facilitative style will play an important role in the extent to which any organisation can innovate.

Think also about the fact that some organisations have a relentless focus on the short term. If innovation is to be truly championed, leaders must embrace a long-term strategic perspective and overcome the perils associated with short-term thinking.

Innovation and big-picture thinking are inextricably linked in such a way that when organisations fail to pause and ponder their future, they end up killing off the chance for any innovation. Leaders who fail to champion innovation are architects of decay.

Without the presence of innovation leadership, an organisation will be forced to tread water as its competitors overtake and snare customers and market share. But when innovation leadership is present, organisations rise to the challenges of tomorrow, seek out new opportunities and manage to scale new heights.

Professor Gary Martin FAIM FACE is the CEO of the Australian Institute of Management in Western Australia (AIM WA). A 2018 LinkedInTopVoice, Gary is a thought leader on business management, leadership and workplace learning, regularly publishing articles in magazines, newspapers and social media platforms. As an international keynote speaker, Gary has shared his views and ideas on how to build better workplaces, focussing on a broad range of topics including innovation, ageism, workplace bullying, and the rise of emotional intelligence.