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Innovation movement reaches critical mass

By Robert Tucker

2004 was a tipping point for the Global Innovation Movement. It was the year innovation went mainstream as a specific, manageable process and discipline of organizations wanting to survive longer than the “tipping point” expression is bound to.

What happened in 2004? It was as if CEOs were jolted to “do something about innovation” en masse. I suspect they’d heard the expression, “we’ve got a process for everything else, why not innovation” one too many times and decided to finally make a move. Suffice to say that last year record numbers of companies took first steps to improve the innovation process within their firms.

I readily admit to having only anecdotal evidence to back up my assertion. The Innovation Movement is nowhere near as big as TQM was in the explosive year of 1988 say, nor is it as popular as Six Sigma became after Jack Welch latched onto it.

But if my conversations with executives, plus my own speaking/consulting schedule are any guide, it’s going that way and fast. Last year I traveled well over 150,000 miles, to Asia, South America, Europe and so many times back and forth across North America that some of the gate agents know me by name. I facilitated in-company innovation workshops, keynoted technology conferences and trade association meetings, addressed Nokia’s Asia-Pacific CEO Summit at Bali, Indonesia, hosted a talk show of innovation practitioners, and my team and I assisted over 20 companies in helping them design systematic, state-of-the-art approaches to deliver profitable growth.

I want every one of these initiatives to succeed. The benefits this discipline can deliver to the top and bottom line are limitless. Yet our solution isn’t easy and never will be to pull off. Because you’re reading this newsletter, there’s a good chance you’re a champion of change in your organization. You are putting yourself out there trying to get people to do things they’ve got a million excuses not to do. And now comes the hard part: implementation. So here are some critical questions to guide you and your team to success in 2005.

1. Are you thinking big enough about innovation?

“The Procter & Gamble of five years ago depended on 8000 scientists and engineers for the vast majority of innovation,” CEO A.G. Lafley told Fortune recently. “The P&G we’re trying to unleash today asks all 100,000-plus of us to be innovators. We actively solicit good ideas and if the concept is promising, we put it into development.”



Lafley is on to something, which may be why P&G is innovating up a storm since he took over in 2001. But many firms (and too many sponsors) settle for half-way measures. They dip a toe in the innovation pond, but don't dive in and get wet. Big mistake. Piecemeal tweaks of the new product development process and other half-hearted changes have little chance of moving the growth needle or affecting the culture. They will fizz out faster than a can of soda pop. You'll never have greater openness to Lafley-style innovation than at the start of your journey, so aim high now.

2. Have you identified the real enemies of innovation in your organization?

MIT's Nicholas Negroponte once observed, "incrementalism is the enemy of innovation." My experience is that innovation has more than a few enemies when you really get around to it. A risk adverse culture, lack of time, and lack of people with the skills to champion new ideas to success are a few that come to mind.

Lately I've seen examples of a powerful stealth enemy: political gamesmanship. In one recent case, responsibility for innovation got deftly shifted to the product development unit, such that those in charge of operations and manufacturing could discredit NPD for not hitting their numbers. Making political hay out of a rival's "failure" is another all-too-common occurrence. Don't let this enemy of innovation torpedo your success.

3. How can you become an innovation learning organization?

Even in the best companies, managers have difficulty getting their arms around this emergent field of management. Few studied innovation in school, yet their position in the company requires mastery in order to make good decisions. While innovation methods are evolving rapidly today, few organizations have an effective system for disseminating best practices to the people who can apply them to the work they do. In all the companies I've studied and worked with, few if any have taken up the educational challenge. Why not create an educational system yourself, rather than waiting for another company to lead the way?

4. How will you address the cultural issues in your company?

Too many companies are dominated by their technical cultures, to their detriment. Too many people with good ideas are reluctant to go against their established (but largely unspoken) technical pecking order. Often extremely bright chemical or electrical engineers who have played crucial roles in developing the company's core technologies and patents, they can impede the company's ability to change course and invent the next wave of prosperity.

The reason has to do with our way of looking at the world. It has to do with paradigms, the window by which we filter reality to fit our preconceived biases. We see the world through the lens that brought us success in the past. If a company is dominated by its technical poobahs, it may have trouble developing a learner's mindset with regard to new markets, new possibilities, new value propositions. It will have trouble listening to new, less powerful voices on the fringes. The focus will be inward, rather than outward. New market exploration and marketing activities in general will be looked upon as less attractive work for less-talented folks. Indeed, market-building activities themselves, so essential to innovation success, will often be relegated to technical people, who lack the experience, passion and training to identify new customer groups, champion new applications, and create new markets.

5. How will people be held accountable for innovation results?

What I hear all too often in my work with companies is this: Innovation may be a nice priority for the folks at the top to talk about, but back at the bench, back at the computer, or back at the job site where I work, innovation is not on the radar. It's not in my job description. It's not

on my manager's agenda. So the typical employee and even the typical mid-level manager asks: "Why should I stick my neck out, especially in these times of layoffs and uncertainty, to submit my ideas, much less to take action to try to see them get implemented?"

Not holding people accountable for innovation results is a major reason innovation initiatives fail. When risk-taking behavior is frowned upon, most of us focus on getting today's work done and nothing more. When the punishment for being even remotely associated with a "failure" can be fatal to one's status or career advancement or job in the company, guess what behavior you can count on from people? If you were an employee in a company with this set of unwritten, unspoken "rules" which course of action would you follow?

If innovation is to become an effective tool for driving profitable growth in your company in 2005 and beyond, addressing these five issues is of critical importance.

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